

Empowering the next generation of actors through the creation of student-centred self-devised dramatic work

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Abstract

There has been a demise of many Australian theatre companies over the past 20 years, along with a decrease in long-form television series. As a result, there is less work available for graduating actors from conservatoires. In this precarious landscape, acting conservatoires need to appraise how actors are trained and assess how to better empower them as independent artists. One such approach is the development of devised theatre work within a conservatoire actor training structure. This article charts the development of a new devised work and the dynamics involved in theatre co-creation via student-centred collaboration. Our research examines the existing pedagogical practices in the current curriculum of the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and explores potential changes that may be implemented to the current curriculum. We suggest there is room to enhance the program, encourage resilience in the next generation of actors and contribute new approaches through the creation of devised work. The results of our study aim to encourage and foster agency for student actors, developing necessary skills for creating their own work and empowering their choices as artists.

Keywords

Devised Theatre; Conservatoire Actor Training; Co-creation; Student-centred Learning; Pedagogy

Introduction

The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is a school in Edith Cowan University that was established in 1980. WAAPA offered an Advanced Diploma in Actor Training until 2015. For acting graduates to be competitive in Australia and overseas, WAAPA introduced a Bachelor of Arts (Acting), based on their existing

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conservatoire model and in line with other Australian universities. This new degree ensured that students could go onto other higher education courses if they desired. In this article, we examine the implementation of devised theatre work within existing conservatoire actor training at WAAPA to determine how to better empower student actors as independent artists.

Research conducted through interviews with academics from The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), the Julliard School, New York University (NYU) Tisch School of Arts, Ryerson University, and the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) suggests that there are international exemplars in which devised theatre has enhanced conservatoire programs. Our research examines existing pedagogical practices in the acting course at WAAPA and explores possible curriculum changes through the creation of devised work to encourage resilience in the next generation of actors. To implement these changes at WAAPA, a pilot program was conducted in 2016 with the third-year acting cohort. Follow-up interviews conducted 12 months after graduation provide a rich archive from which to draw some initial conclusions.

We conducted our research in the context of a rapidly and dramatically changing performing arts industry in Australia that requires actors to create work in a challenging economic environment. Due to these changes, many theatre companies that provided employment for graduates have closed, including the Perth Theatre Company (WA), Deckchair Theatre (WA), the Hole-in-the-Wall Theatre (WA), the Performance Space (NSW) and Marian Street Theatre (NSW).

In response to the contraction in funded Australian theatre companies, an independent theatre arts sector has emerged with the rise of unfunded actors' collectives who seek project-by-project funding to survive, such as Red Line Productions (NSW), Hayloft Theatre Company (VIC), Red Stitch (VIC), Last Great Hunt (WA) and production houses like La Mama, (VIC), TheatreWorks, (VIC) and the Blue Room (WA). New performance opportunities have also presented themselves with successful fringe, cabaret and comedy festival circuits. One example, the Fringe World Festival in Perth was first held in 2012 and is now the third biggest fringe festival in the world, after the Adelaide and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals. Additionally, a surge in digital technology has heralded rapid growth in various screen delivery platforms, providing employment opportunities for motivated performers. It is easier for performers to begin their careers by creating their own screen work, such as web series, or entering short film festivals like Tropfest with the simplest of hand-held technologies and software programs. The advent of cable television networks such as HBO, Netflix, Stan and Foxtel, and the ease of sending self-tests to international entertainment organisations, has opened a lucrative employment market for actors. Work opportunities in the United States and Europe are significant options, should graduates have the skills to offer their work for consideration. High-profile trailblazers, including Hugh Jackman, Frances O'Connor, Tim Minchin, Eddie Perfect, Dacre Montgomery and Shalom Brune-Franklin—all WAAPA alumni—are examples for graduates who wish to try their luck overseas.

The changing face of the arts industry demands that WAAPA produces graduates with more than just acting skills. They must be exceptional, self-determined and

autonomous strategists with business and technology skills, as well as elite performers, if they are to stand any chance of attracting an A-list agent, gaining employment in the current climate or becoming artists capable of contributing to vibrant artistic communities. In this precarious landscape, acting conservatoires must appraise how actors are trained and assess how to better empower them as artists. We suggest that one such approach is the development of devised theatre work within a conservatoire actor training structure.

What is devised theatre?

A useful starting point for determining whether devised theatre should be an integral part of conservatoire actor training at WAAPA, is Oddey's claim that "a devised theatre product is a work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration" (1). According to Oddey, devised theatre provides an alternative to the more traditional form of playwright-director-theatre. Devised performance is a response and a reaction to the traditional mode of playwright-director relationship with text-based theatre, and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person's text under another person's direction. It involves a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing and reshaping individual contradictory experiences of the world (Oddey). Harvie and Lavender understand devising to be "a method of performance development that starts from an idea or concept rather than a play text; is from the start significantly open-minded about what its end-product will be; and uses improvisation—by performers, but also other creators, including writers, designers, directors and choreographers—as a key part of its process" (2). Collaborative performance is a recent shift in theatre-making orthodoxy and new methodologies have significantly affected theatre practice.

Companies such as The Wooster Group in the United States, Frantic Assembly in the United Kingdom and Legs on the Wall in Australia play with new and unique ways to create theatre that challenge the primacy of the written text so often used in mainstream theatre. These companies have evolved their devising processes that challenge the traditional model of theatre practice and the director's role. With devising methodologies such as Viewpoints, evolved by Anne Bogart of the SITI Company, the traditional role of the director is contested. Herrington claims that Bogart's devising process is entirely collaborative, suggesting that Bogart provides the concept of "birthing place" as a starting point for the devising process and then expects the actors to "open it up, restructure it and re-form it" ("Breathing" 139). Herrington argues that "when directors work with Viewpoints they relinquish some of the control it has taken directors a century to acquire. When actors become active participants in the overall creation of the show, power is redefined: the traditional director/actor hierarchy disappears" ("Directing" 156).

The effect that a devised theatre piece can have on an actor includes enabling a powerful commitment through performers working as co-creators rather than as actor or vessel for the director: "A performer/deviser has a personal input and commitment

to the making of the product from the start, which consequently means that the needs of the performer/deviser are recognized and therefore different from the actor in text-based theatre” (Oddey 11). Devising allows the collective creation of art—not the single vision of the playwright—thus, all makers in a creative project experience agency in their theatre practice (Haagensen p.68). To determine the validity of introducing a devised stream into the acting course at WAAPA, we felt it was important to benchmark with other leading international drama schools.

Andrew Lewis interviewed several highly regarded academics in the field of actor education—Peter Zazzali, Ali de Souza, Rebecca Guy, Scott Illingworth, Peggy Shannon and Stephanie Roberts—and asked them about the necessity for devised work within a conservatoire training structure. A common theme emerging from the interviews involved empowerment and self-motivation in finding work after acting.

Interviews with academics

According to Dr Peter Zazzali (Interview 1 March 2018), an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas Theatre Department, the key to creating devised work relies on students’ creative imaginations, which forces them to be entrepreneurial because they are not relying on an existing text. As a result, students must take initiative and develop and execute their own projects, not by simply learning a part, but by taking on the various roles of writer, director and producer. By doing this, they learn varied approaches to making theatre, which provides a greater sense of ownership over their theatrical experience and career. It empowers them to be an artist with agency, “rather than a commercial entity for material consumption; an actor who sits around waiting for the phone to ring” (Zazzali, Interview 1 March 2018).

Ali de Souza, Senior Acting Lecturer at RCS, acknowledged that devising is a vital part of the actors’ training at RCS. According to de Souza:

Devising is a unit threaded through an otherwise conservatoire BA, which begins in first year with a student-led project called Auto-cours, which is French, meaning ‘self-study’, where the students use learned physical techniques to explore observed environments purely through the body, and with the use of music, sound, light and objects. They work in small groups of about 5/6 actors and are mentored, but not directed. The actors choose the topic themselves ... The second half of second year is devoted entirely to creating new work. The actors again work on short (10-minute) self-led projects called Enquete (French, meaning ‘investigation’), again in small groups, and these can have a vocal element ... They are then given a series of week-long workshops on devising, verbatim theatre, mask, scriptwriting, research and development and physical theatre—all with the aim of enabling the actors to see their art through various styles and techniques. The actors then form small groups depending on their areas of interest and pitch an idea for pieces of performance which form our On The Verge Festival of new work in June. The actors can choose to write, direct or devise, or simply act if that is what they want to do ... It is not

enough anymore to simply train the actor who will just act in shows and on screen. Many of our actors do indeed go on to being successful jobbing actors working regularly in film, TV and stage. But many go on to create companies, devise shows and look at theatre in new ways. (Interview 6 April 2018)

It is apparent that Zazzali (Interview 1 March 2018) and de Souza (Interview 6 April 2018) are experienced actor–educators who view devised work as important for the development of student actors and believe that it should be integrated into their training. Alternatively, Rebecca Guy, a Senior Lecturer in Acting from Juilliard, did not deny the importance of devising, but stated that their actor training does not encompass devised work. As Guy saw it:

There’s an opportunity to do self-motivated work at Juilliard. [It] can be devised work, but most of the independent projects that are approved for students to do are usually works where students are acting and producing and/or directing established plays. There’s not an organised and official self-devised work track in the training program at all ... There’s no thinking that is opposed to the idea of self-devised work. It just hasn’t worked its way into the training track here ... I think the overall overarching goal in 25 words or less is to, by the time a student graduates from here, they’re going to be able to do whatever kind of work, performance work, whatever kind of theatre, film work, camera work, self-devised work, any kind of style, any story they want to tell, to tell it really well. (Interview 12 January 2018)

NYU has a different approach to devising work than Juilliard. While devising is not woven into the curriculum at NYU, the university dedicates one slot to student-driven work in the middle of the third year of their four-year training. Scott Illingworth (Interview 14 January 2018), a Lecturer in Acting at NYU, explains that they have a slot called “Free Play”, in which the students share leadership, create teams and take over two performance spaces, producing a week-long festival of original works. NYU do not formally teach devising in their curriculum; however, the students apply a set of tools, exercises or games that they think are generative, or they work with a staff member who serves as a mentor on the project. The students are often surprised by what they create and the local artistic community regularly come to see Free Play because of the personal expression in the work. Several of these projects have taken students down interesting paths and launched graduates’ acting careers.

While there is only the one opportunity of self-devised student-driven work at NYU, it is apparent from talking to Illingworth (Interview 14 January 2018) that the Free Play experience allows the student actors to express their individual creativity, rather than making them interpreters of pre-existing works in a traditional theatre structure with a director and text.

In contrast to the training at NYU, Dr Peggy Shannon from Ryerson University believes that it is important for student actors to learn devising throughout their training. She suggests that the intersection between theatrical forms and finding new ways of telling

stories goes back to the Ancient Greeks. The students have devising units during each year of their training, called Creative Performance. Shannon feels that it is important that student actors contribute intellectually and artistically, so they develop a devising performance vocabulary. Student actors at Ryerson University undertake three to four hours of devising practice each week and they are taught how to improvise, devise and cluster their learning around themes. The devising culminates in public performances in their fourth year, when they run a curated festival over two weeks of their own work, called *New Voices*. The students write, perform, direct and produce these pieces that become calling cards to the industry, with agents and artistic directors attending this event (Interview 30 November 2017).

Professor Stephanie Roberts from UMKC explains that they also have a self-devised component in their actor training. They use Auto-cours, which is a foundational program in generative ensemble performance. Weekly investigations into the elements of theatricality may include group presentations, feedback, discussion, weekly assignments and in-class explorations. The course investigates the topic of collaborating within an ensemble. Technique and skills develop through the experience and the students reflect on the process. Students are provided with a theme for weekly devising assignments and work together in groups. They meet on their own, develop a short theatrical presentation and then perform it for classmates and faculty. The students explore several structures for devising and are given short group assignments. These can include documentary theatre, hero's journey, autobiographical writings or myths. The final project is a site-specific outdoor piece. They also conduct epic storytelling, in which they create a devised piece based on current issues. Many of the students expand these works when they graduate (Interview 13 April 2018).

It is apparent from the interviews of academics from the actor training institutions that each value devising in different ways. The units of study are unique; however, there is an awareness that devising should play an important role in actor training. To assess the potential benefits of implementing devising processes for actors within the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at WAAPA, a project was created, titled *The Beat Generation*. *The Beat Generation* sought to use devising techniques and processes to create a public performance.

WAAPA pedagogy

The current Bachelor of Arts (Acting) degree course at WAAPA is a complex program that integrates three foundational strands of actor training—voice, movement and acting, and these skills are scaffolded over the duration of the students' training. The conservatoire program is guided by a philosophy of discovery, application and embodiment. In the second semester of the third year, a pilot project was introduced, titled *The Beat Generation* (Lewis). It was a devised promenade performance conducted at the Fremantle Arts Centre. According to Zampatti, “in a week that *The Beat Generation's* greatest and most famous heir won the Nobel Prize for literature, it's good to be reminded of their legacy. And how lucky are we to have WAAPA to do the reminding” (p.89). Cox described the show as:

Designed and styled to give the audience the vibe of the era (late 1940s/early 1950s America), rather than to tell a specific story, the audience was guided between 10 intimate scenes. From Kate Betcher's spoken stream of consciousness to Kieran Clancy-Lowe's mesmerizing portrayal of a failed poet addicted to the hunt, again and again the piece returns to the work of Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac. Indeed, the highlight was—Al and Jack—where Rory O'Keeffe and Giuseppe Rotondella compete and obsess over their writing ... A concept piece made possible by using a host of performers, the show makes a point of highlighting the gross mistreatment of women in the 'Era of the Housewife,' and Miranda Aitken's turn as an unstable, asylum-bound Sylvia Plath stands out (1).

The aim of the pilot curriculum incursion was to investigate how possible pedagogical shifts in student actor training can enable student actors to experience working as participants in a co-creation process. The project was devised by the performers and facilitated and directed by this article's first author, Andrew Lewis. *The Beat Generation* examined the co-authoring aspects of a final third year production, just prior to their graduating showcase (Lewis). Interviews were conducted with the actors in the middle and at the end of the production, with follow-up interviews conducted one year later. In this article, we explore the graduates' reflections one year after the performance when we asked the question, "Did you find *The Beat Generation* a useful experience?"

Interviews one year later

Several graduates commented about the skills they developed devising their own work—Emma O'Sullivan, Kieran Clancey-Lowe, Anna Apps, Brittany Santariga, Miranda Aitken and Giuseppe Rotondella. Some graduates went on to create their own work based on their experience with the devised project—O'Sullivan, Santariga and Rory O'Keeffe. Others commented that the project should have been introduced to the curriculum earlier, or integrated throughout the degree—Apps, Kate Betcher and Sophia Forrest. A few found the collaborative aspect of the project frustrating or counterproductive—George Pullar, Alex Daley and Megan Smart.

O'Sullivan said:

*I had an opportunity to create whatever it was I had always wanted to do in theatre. There was no space for excuses, money was not scarce, the show was publicised for me, there was plenty of time, and plenty of resources and I was definitely not short of belief in my own skill ... An extremely valuable skill I learned from *The Beat Generation* experience was having to be creative on demand, which I used to write another one woman show for Jack Rabbit Theatre Company last September, while also re-rehearsing and performing my first one woman show for its third run at a fringe festival in Sydney. That was a skill that I didn't even know I had learned from *The Beat Generation* until I had to use it. It proved*

extremely valuable for me because I found myself back in the situation where I had the licence to create something I had always wanted to perform, but also had to constantly meet the creative requirement of the three artistic directors of the company, and the tastes of the director. These turned out to be extremely useful parameters in which I could work and made the job easier. (Interview 15 February 2018)

Clancey-Lowe found the experience invaluable because:

It gave me the confidence in my own work that I needed to continue creating material for the public. I also found that without the confines of a script, I could finally fully explore my craft. I took advantage of the opportunity to build something and succeeded ... It increased my confidence and understanding of use of story arc and space. The process freed me up from a script and gave me near absolute creative control. I developed production skills, spatial awareness and how to develop the show each night around the audience. (Interview 7 February 2018)

Like Clancey-Lowe, Will McNeill gained the confidence:

To try new ideas and develop my own work ... Although there is work, there are periods that can be very slow ... Improvising and playing with a self-devised text was extremely useful and I use it a lot with creating performance pieces currently. As well as just putting my head down and doing it, rather than relying on others, I find it easier now to just try different ideas and see how they go ... Being able to create one's own work is more and more important in today's industry. (Interview 12 March 2018)

Apps reflected:

*Being in the "industry" now, I can see that having skills to develop your own work, and believing in your ability to produce your own work is very important ... I learned that it is important to create **lots** of material and then peel it back to the 'best'/most effective material ... I found the experience to be **very beneficial** because most performers will need to have the confidence and ability to create their own material out in the 'real' world. (Interview 7 February 2018)*

Pullar thought that:

The only way to create a solid show from scratch is by creating as much material as you can in the early stages of rehearsal and being fearlessly open to as much as possible. In devised theatre, you're not given a framework or map to build on; you have to create it yourself and then go back and carve out the specifics. (Interview 6 February 2018)

Daley believed that the project:

Forced me to actually put work I had written in front of people and open it up to critique and compromise. This is something I had avoided in the past and hindered my overall writing ability. The collaborative nature of the project also meant learning to work with others and compromising personal ideas and visions for the piece. (Interview 4 February 2018)

While not challenged by the subject matter, Daley did learn patience and “how to compromise and not let it affect your ego”. He would not “approach working with 18 other directors again”; however, he “truly did enjoy getting to perform a scene that I created the concept for. There is a certain ownership of the performance I’d never experienced before. It definitely inspired me to continue with my writing”.

Santariga recently collaborated with a group of ex-WAAPA students on developing a play. She states:

We used a space at the Merrigong theatre for a week to workshop ideas one of us had for a play. It was really great just to get up and have a play together, much like we did with The Beat Generation. It’s so important that we learn how to do this for when we enter the industry. Unfortunately, as we leave these institutions, it’s really hard to get work. The theatre companies in cities like Sydney reuse the same actors and put on shows that we have all seen time and time again. Some of the best shows I’ve seen this year have been my friends shows that they have written and directed together. This is where we find new, exciting, relevant content. So, it’s important that we have skills that help us make this. (Interview 25 March 2018)

Smart’s experience was less positive:

I think the exercise was too grand a scale with 20 students (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) and no clear leadership positions. There was no cohesion to the vision and few were willing to compromise their own to suit the groups better. There were too many chefs in the kitchen. It felt like a mess throughout the whole process ... My takeaway from the experience was be careful who you work with. (Interview 1 March 2018)

Joel Davies had a mixed response to the project:

Although I did not like doing The Beat Generation, there were still a few positives to take away from the exercise. I liked performing something that wasn’t directed; I liked working in a small group; and I liked the freedom of doing what I wanted. (Interview 17 March 2018)

Betcher’s opinion was that:

It didn’t help me in the industry, not really. Unless you are in the industry creating your own fringe shows etc, most conventional jobs don’t really

require the skills acquired during this project. (Interview 15 February 2018)

Lachlan Ruffly (Interview 15 February 2018) has “told the story of devising our piece as part of a stand-up routine. I didn’t have to add any jokes”. Aitken stated that she:

Learned the importance of having a collective purpose or mission statement. It’s vital to have a common goal, an intrinsic one even. And to respect the process. There’s a lot that goes into self-devised work ... The project was, in a lot of ways, a lesson in what not to do as a team. But as the performance week came around, there was a greater camaraderie brought about by our shared joy of performance and ensemble. (Interview 15 February 2018)

Forrest did not feel that devised theatre was for her, as “I enjoy having the base of a script and knowing where my character will arc before starting”. Her reflections on the process were insightful, commenting that a self-devised piece:

Would be better in first or second year, in particular, when there won’t be agents and people coming to it, so you’d feel more free to creatively express, without fear of judgement. Because WAAPA has been so safe and really branching yourself out there and not being seen by the public eye until later on. I think a lot of people, and I think I definitely did, pulled back on risky choices with the thought of it being seen by the industry. (Interview 24 October 2017)

Elle Mickel’s opinion differs:

I think it was an interesting exercise to do just before graduating because it was all about being self-reliant ... For me, it was a mini showcase, in a way. It’s about looking at yourself objectively and going, okay, these are the parameters, what am I good at? What have I got to sell? An audience is coming and, in this particular case, a lot of agents, and it’s a time in our WAAPA careers where we really need to sell ourselves. How creative am I? What can I make of this opportunity? ... I auditioned for this really cool feminist play ... and they encouraged you to write your own thing. So, I just did my beat poetry thing. So, I’ve actually used it in an audition. (Interview 23 October 2018)

Rotondella and O’Keeffe were interviewed together. Rotondella:

Think[s] that pressure, it makes you ... aware that you can make your own work. And so many people in our year have gone off to make their own work ... And if you don’t have anything to do, which isn’t uncommon, as we’ve found out, it’s good to be able to rely on your own. (Interview 14 October 2017)

O’Keeffe notes that he has already written a:

Western that I’m filming ... with a couple of mates. I guess it gives you the confidence that you can create work. And there’s nothing holding you back. And you can do it with anything ... it’s just about taking action.

Rotondella conceded that when work dries up:

The teaching that we learned in that last part of third year come into play, because you begin to think about how I can curate a piece that I can put on myself.

Angus MacLaren was filming in India at the time. However, his:

Experience of watching the show from an outside perspective and talking to those who were involved ... it was a very positive and skill enhancing project that has proved extremely useful in terms of self-devised work. (Interview 22 February 2018)

Conclusion

Interviews with international colleagues at five elite acting conservatoires—RCS, Juilliard School, NYU Tisch School of Arts, Ryerson University and UMKC—revealed that each has a different perspective on self-generated student-driven work and where it is placed in their respective programs. Other than Juilliard, the actor conservatoires have woven devising units and student-driven productions into their programs. Juilliard are not opposed to devised work, but they have nowhere to include it in their current curriculum. The other leading conservatoires recognise the need to empower student actors in the decision-making process, thus providing agency in what they do. Using collective creation rather than the often-used playwright–director model provides an interdisciplinary experience that enhances student actors’ skills and challenges their imagination. This approach provides an entrepreneurial sensibility that can benefit students upon graduation. Roberts echoes these sentiments:

In a competitive industry such as ours, I maintain that the only way to guarantee that you will consistently work is if you create the work yourself. Regardless of whether an individual ends up producing her own work, the learning experience, in all aspects—from writing, interpersonal and technical skills, to self-discovery—is vast. (Interview 13 April 2018)

The comments from Roberts and the other interviewed academics reveal the benefit for student actors being provided with opportunities to create their own work. This allows student and graduate actors to view themselves as self-generators of material instead of just actors waiting to be employed in a vicarious arts environment. The collated data allowed Lewis to reflect on the current curriculum in the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) at WAAPA and better determine, in discussion with staff, if and where changes could occur.

The WAAPA training culminates in an industry showcase in which students perform for agents, casting consultants and industry. *The Beat Generation* was performed as the last production prior to the showcase. This was problematic for some students such as Smart (Interview 1 March 2018), who “thought it was a mess”, and Betcher (Interview 15 February 2018), who felt that “it did not help” her in the industry.

Our research indicates that some students were preoccupied with exiting the course and did not want the responsibility of creating their own work at that time. However, many other students felt empowered by the process. Clancey-Lowe (Interview 7 February 2018) enjoyed “gaining confidence from having creative control”, while O’Sullivan (Interview 15 February 2018) liked having the “licence to create something she had always wanted to perform” and Mickel (Interview 23 October 2018) said it was a “mini showcase” for her.

The benefits were substantial and, in addition to favourable reviews, many students had a positive experience. As a result of the accumulated data, the WAAPA Acting Department is examining how and where to embed devised work—and associated training skills—into conservatoire actor training, while maintaining high-quality actor education. In 2019, a new unit of self-devised work will be introduced for students in the second semester of their first year, titled *Life Stories*. This will be student-driven work, in which students will draw from material from their own lives and create short theatrical pieces or etudes, while being mentored by a staff member. Given the feedback from the students regarding the timing of *The Beat Generation*, another slot in the second year is being considered for a devised production.

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