

Learning

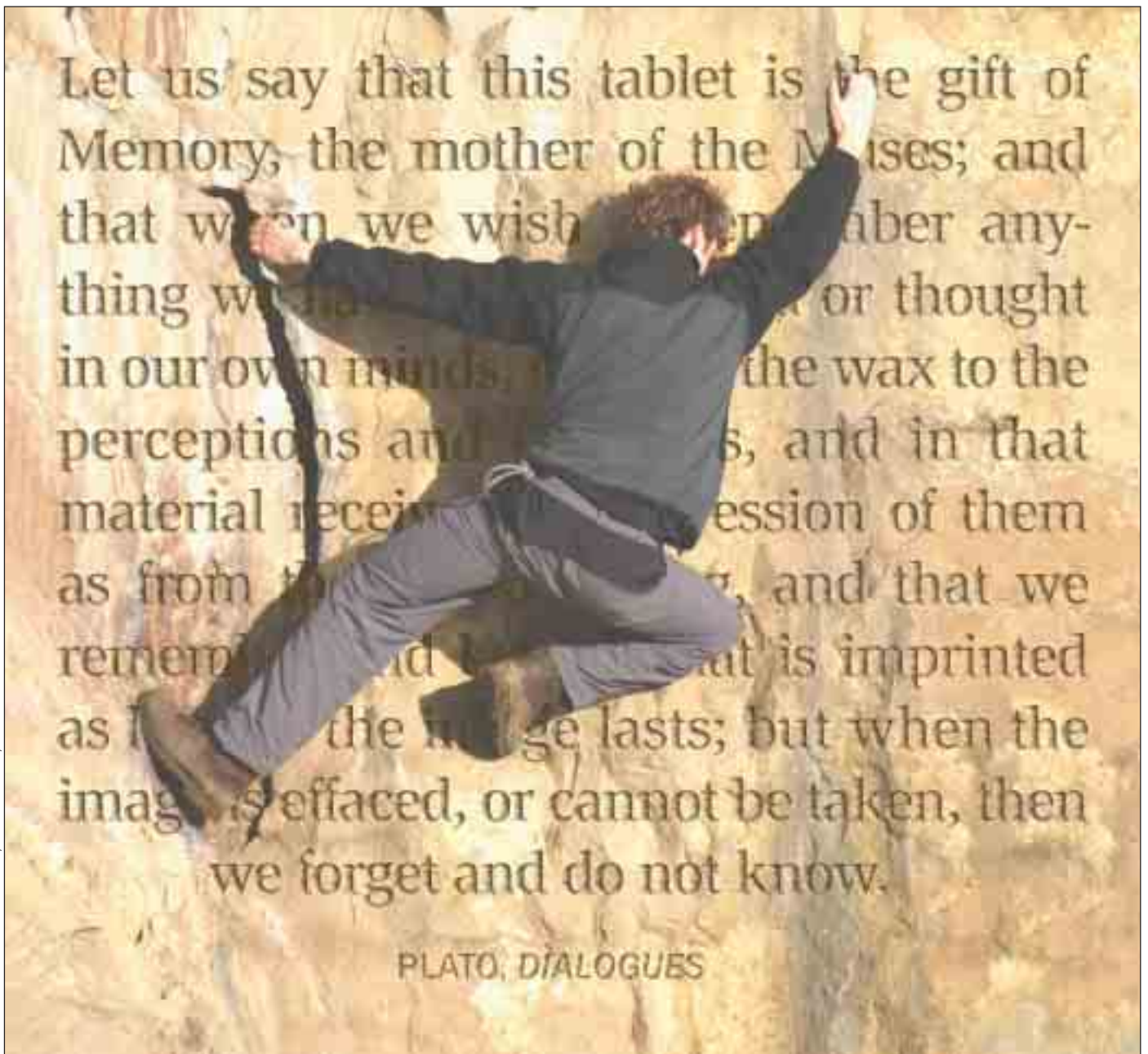


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lines

*For actors, memorizing
is still job one*

BY BRUCE MILLER

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT living in a time before writing was invented, a time when there were no books, no video, no iPods, no Microsoft Word. There was no paper, there were no pencils. Language was exclusively oral: words conjured ideas and images that disappeared like smoke—unless of course the ideas and images were important enough to make the effort to remember the words that represented them.

It was only about five thousand years ago that the Sumerians started scraping cuneiform letters onto clay tablets. Before that, stories and secrets, accumulated knowledge—all of the fundamental elements of human culture—had to be memorized to preserve them from oblivion. Early civilizations depended on the ability to preserve ideas through memorization for their very existence. Things that had to be remembered were passed down from generation to generation orally. That meant that anything worth keeping alive—directions to the best hunting grounds, recipes for healing potions, the history of the tribe's great ancestors—had to be kept in someone's head. Children were selected at birth to become the living libraries for any tribe that was to survive.

In more recent times, memorization was still considered a valuable if not essential part of the educational process. Just a century ago, properly educated students were still being asked to memorize great tracts of their Latin studies. Poems and impor-

tant historical and civic documents were memorized, too, because it was believed that the skills involved in memorization were also important to the development of mental agility. This was still true even when I was growing up. I memorized the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution for various civics and history classes, and I can still remember much of this material.

Today, however, all of these documents are a few keystrokes away on a computer. So is virtually any information we might find useful in our daily lives, including phone numbers, birth dates, and who won the Battle of Hastings, and it seems hardly worth the effort to memorize stuff any more. I'm sure most of you reading this would agree.

An essential skill

Though memorization may no longer be necessary to the survival of our culture, or even valued as an educational tool, it is still an essential though seldom discussed aspect of any actor's toolkit. There is no way around it: an actor, if she is going to be employable, must be able to learn her lines accurately and in a timely manner. She must be able to reliably deliver them when called upon to do so. This is certainly true on the professional level, and in my experience any college actor unable to do so will not prosper if he cannot work within the time frames assigned him for getting the part down.

But observation tells me that this is not always the case on the high school level. I suspect that there may be some high school actors out there who do not place learning their lines anywhere near the top of their to-do lists. In fact, I suspect that there may be some high school actors who feel that as long as they learn their lines by the time the play is performed, that that is perfectly fine. I believe there may even be a high school actor or two who is satisfied if he can approximate the lines the playwright wrote rather than delivering them precisely—despite the fact that what he says and how he says it affects those that he is working with, not to mention the pacing and overall dramatic effectiveness of the play.

These actors are cheating themselves, shortchanging their peers, and damaging the productions they're in.

Disciplined and committed actors know that their lines need to be learned long before opening night. By the time the play is performed for an audience, those lines should be as second nature as breathing. By opening night, the best actors are focused on reacting to the moment, not thinking about whether their next set of lines will be there for them.

I am sure that many of you reading this article have had the feeling of being totally in the moment on stage. And a wonderful feeling that is. It is a magical place where you are no longer thinking about what you are going to do or say. You don't have to; it's all there. You are so well re-

heard that all of your energy goes into listening and reacting, because you no longer need to think about any of that stuff that you worked on during the rehearsal process. When you are in this zone, you act spontaneously; your lines are nuanced and they rise from the specifics generated in the moment. No longer do your lines sound canned or sung. Better, this state you're in also infects those you work with—because you are, in effect, taking them out of their habit as well, and bringing them into the moment too. And the best part is that all this is happening without compromising anything you have been asked to do by the director and by the script. Yet, everything you do is better, more real, more compelling. This is what acting is about, and it can never happen if you haven't learned your lines properly, if you haven't absorbed them totally into your being.

You have to work at it

But what if you're not so good at memorizing? What if it takes you forever to get those lines down? What if you're great once you know the lines, but it's just so painful and time-consuming getting to that place quickly, and you're worth being indulged until you do? Well, the fact is, you may be great, but in the profession, no one will ever know it if you can't handle your actor's homework. The professional expectation is that you'll know the lines when you need to have them down. If you're dyslexic, if you have a learning disability, if you are just sloooooow, no one in the business cares. That is your problem and one that you're responsible for, no matter what the reasons. It is your job to work it out. It's your job to have the goods when you're supposed to.

I'm totally sympathetic if you're a slow learner. I am too. But, as a di-

rector, my attitude has to be: if you can't give me what I need, there's someone else who can, and your inability is affecting others as well as my game plan for bringing my play along. I don't want you slowing me down, distracting me and the other actors, or forcing me to change my rehearsal plan. The production is not about you. If you are currently in the habit of thinking you're worth the trouble, you will have a rude awakening later on. So start considering your memorization problem as your cross to bear and begin learning how to bear it.

I recently had to learn forty-five minutes worth of monologue after years without exercising my memorization muscles, so I know how painful the process can be. To learn a piece well enough to be able to deliver it to an audience night after night without a net is a scary proposition. Believe me, I am now very familiar with the feel-

Ways of working

HERE IS A LIST of memorization techniques, some discussed in this article, some recommended by others. Try them out as your time and energy allow. Mix and match, and eventually you'll arrive at a memorizing regime that works best for you.

1. Treat memory as you would a muscle. Memorize texts regularly and get better at it. Increase the amounts you take on to memorize each day as your ability grows.
2. Find a time of day that works best for you to memorize. Consider that time sacred and make sure you use your best time for memorizing whenever possible.
3. Memorize before you go to bed and sleep on it.
4. Repeat lines in your head all through the day.
5. Read the lines over and over before trying to memorize them.
6. Learn the ideas and their interconnectedness before trying to memorize.

7. Learn the story of the lines before you learn the lines.
8. Say your lines aloud rather than in your head.
9. Say your lines aloud and in your head.
10. Say your lines while moving around.
11. Picture your lines as images as you say them.
12. Remember the feelings that the words and images create, not just the words.
13. Write your lines down before you memorize them. Write them as you are memorizing them.
14. See all of your lines in a scene as one big whole. Write them down as though they are a monologue. Examine this monologue in terms of its dramatic progression. Divide it into its beginning section, middle section, and concluding section. Then divide each section into its constituent parts. Once you understand all of each section, and its cause and effect sequences, then memorize.

15. Figure out what the character is actually saying when he says what he says before trying to memorize it. (This is not the same thing as memorizing the way to say the line. That should be avoided absolutely.)
16. Use mnemonic devices to help remember lists. Anagrams, rhymes, silly sentences, and song tunes, for instance, can be all effective.
17. Make a tape of your part and once you have memorized sections, repeat it along with your taped version.
18. Learn the part by listening to and reciting with your taped version.
19. Listen to your taped version and develop specific gestures, movements, and business that you actually do while listening. Eventually, the physicalities will help you remember the lines.
20. Memorize by beats. Learn a beat, add a beat, repeat the already learned material and add another new beat.

—B.M.

ing of being in front of an audience fearful of going blank—with no one else on stage with me who can toss me a line or a hint. With that experience as a catalyst, I have spent the last several months doing a lot of research about how people memorize. I have learned that there is great deal of disagreement on what works and what doesn't. These differences are no doubt caused by variations in how we learn individually. But there is also a lot of agreement about how certain techniques can make it easier for anyone to learn and retain lines.

Finding something that works

I have tried almost everything to get lines into my head. I have tried working on them at the crack of dawn when my mind is fresh and undistracted. I have tried doing my lines before bed so I could sleep on them overnight. I have recorded my lines into a tape recorder, and recited along with my recording until I could scream. I have recorded my lines with no expression and I have recorded them while emoting. But the fact is that no matter what I do, it is a slow and unpleasant process for me.

Eventually, as I prepared for this recent role, it got better. In part, I think, it was a matter of some of the long-unused neural corridors in my brain getting used to having traffic again. But it was also because as I worked I started making connections with the words I had to memorize beyond the simple rote mechanics, and that, for me, was crucial. For me, memorization works best when I am connecting the lines to the story I am telling as an actor, when I am able to give the memorization meaning.

The fact is, each of us has several kinds of memory at play. When we memorize, are we seeing the words as they are printed on the page in our minds, or are we hearing them in our heads? The answer to that question depends on who we are and how we retain information. It could be one or the other or both. Besides visual and auditory memory, however, we also have our muscle memory, our sense

memory, our kinetic memory, and probably several more kinds of memory that I am not even aware of. As I worked through my part last spring, I discovered that the more kinds of memory I activated, the better and more efficient I got at learning my lines.

Many years ago, I discovered that when I began blocking a scene during a scene study rehearsal, by the time I finished I knew most of my lines fairly well. I realized that this was because I somehow associated my lines with the movements I was making while saying these lines. My muscle memory and my kinetic memory (my memory of moving from place to place) were apparently reinforcing the retention of the words I was saying. The repetition of rehearsal combined with the various kinds of memory I was using began to produce results.

More recently, I rediscovered that mental images and emotional associations with my dialogue helped me retain the lines. Much of my long monologue was concerned with my character's difficult relationship with his son. If, as my character, I was picturing my son specifically when I talked about him, I retained that image as well as the lines I was supposed to say. The more specific the image, the easier my lines came. Soon I had created a mental image of the son: he had an almost-shaved head, he wore black, and he sneered at me all the time. I also allowed this sneer to produce a feeling in me. Usually it made me angry and resentful, and this, too, helped me retain the lines of that section. Later as I ran the lines of the section together, I actually got the picture or feeling first, which then triggered me to remember the lines.

I also rediscovered that, for me, saying lines aloud from the beginning of the memorization process greatly improved both my ability to remember them and my ability to get them out of my mouth smoothly and efficiently. This seems perfectly logical to me. When the words are

being said aloud, all of the muscles that will be involved in the process are coming aboard sooner rather than later. My tongue and lips, my facial muscles and body are all learning their parts and the body memory associated with word production are all being called into play. In addition, I am hearing the words in my ears as well as in my mind. In summary, I have more machinery working at once to help get those lines scratched into my thick skull.

Some actors I spoke to aren't comfortable with the kinds of memorization processes I have just described. They felt that making these kinds of associations and physical commitments while memorizing lines might make them memorize a particular thought and feeling too early in the game, and that saying a line in a particular way might become habituated. They worried that if their ideas changed as rehearsals progressed, they would be unable to make adjustments. They thought that if they were to memorize these kinds of associations and ways of delivery at the beginning of their rehearsal journey, they would find themselves stuck with these choices at the other end because they would be unable to jettison them later. These actors felt that all their dialogue needed to be memorized without association of idea, sound, and or emotion.

I can only say that has not been my experience. In fact, one of the touchstones of good acting, it seems to me, is the ability to adjust to the nuances of change that might occur at any time during a rehearsal process, or, for that matter, during a performance. The really good actor is able to show the flexibility necessary to adjust to changes as they occur. Some of the actors who disagreed with me, by the way, are fine actors, and I suspect that some of their fears may be groundless. Nonetheless, you must do what works for you. But you will only learn what works for you by trying things out.

For me, making associations initially helped me learn the lines more

efficiently and with more economy. There were no side effects later. That is all I need to know. Those devices freed me of the burden of focusing on lines and allowed me to focus on objectives sooner.

Once I am at ease with my lines, I am able to do a great range of things fearlessly and with abandon. I have always been able to use lines with ample flexibility—as my awareness of character and situation grows, and as those I work with change and grow. And of course, it is essential that an actor adjust to the requirements of the director as she discovers more about the play she is directing.

The point is that you must learn for yourself what works for you and what doesn't. If you can use some of the tools I mention above without losing your ability to remain available to change, then go for it. If you are not, then do what best works for you. (See the box on page 16 for a list of suggested techniques.)

Stepping stones

I also discovered in my memorization journey that learning the ideas behind the words and making connections between them expedited my learning process. So did examining my lines for the story they contained, for the subtext implied, and for the cause-and-effect progression that the lines provide. If you look closely, the back and forth dialogue in any scene—and the content of most monologues, for that matter—progresses in a sequence of causes and effects. One line leads to another in a logical order. The logic may not be clear to the characters living in the moment, but to the actors playing them, they can and should be. Since the playwright is writing a story based on conflict and the conflict progresses through a scene, this all makes perfect sense. I discovered that if I divide a scene's dialogue into sections—beginning, middle, and end, for instance—it's easier for me to remember the story and its progression. This in turn helps me remember the lines, which for the most part are linear and chronological.

That means that line by line, idea by idea, the words of the scene are like stepping stones that form a dramatic progression. These stepping stones of ideas are usually easy to remember simply because one leads to the next. These connections are like built-in mnemonic devices. It's a connect-the-dot drawing: each idea leads to the next and next and next, and ultimately creates a clear picture, one that is easy to remember. And better yet, both for learning the lines and the acting of them, each of these dots tells its own little story which also helps make each dot easier to remember, and gives the actor specific things to picture and to act.

The memorization of the lines and the acting of them ultimately need not be considered separate processes. You might also notice that the idea units you come up with are very consistent with the acting beats you discover as you analyze your dialogue while doing your actor's homework. Beats, you will recall, are the length of script during which you play a particular objective. The end of a beat is usually reached when as a character you win, you lose, you make a discovery, or you are interrupted by new information that causes you to change your objective. Recognizing beats is also a good way to separate your memorization into learnable chunks.

One final point about saying lines aloud as you learn them. I discovered as I was struggling to learn my own part that very often the process of digging for and finding that next line was not unlike what we do in life when we try to come up with the words that adequately express our feelings or thoughts. Ironically as actors, once we get comfortable with our lines, they sometimes fall into a pattern that is almost musical. We know them so well that we no longer struggle in any way when we are called upon to say them. It is like we totally know what we need to say, and how we are going to say it. But with many of us in life, most of the time that is not the case. Unless we have specifically prepared what we are going to say, more

often than not there remains an element of searching, of hesitation, of finding the right word or phrase or idea, and discovering that we have done so. When we are able to retain this element in our acting, it often seems more improvised, spontaneous, and lifelike. I am not advocating not knowing your lines well here. What I am saying is that that element of struggle, the thought process that is there when you are first learning the lines, is worth remembering and using when it is appropriate to do so.

An exercise

Let's take a look at how some of these suggestions might actually work. Below you will find a speech by Morty, one of the characters from the play *Shooting Blank's Verse*, a farce about a group of memory-challenged actors trying to get their play on its feet. Use the speech to explore some of the memorizing suggestions cited above. Here is a list of things you might want to explore using the speech:

1. Read the speech several times, looking for its story arc.
2. Divide it into idea units.
3. Find its logical progression and isolate its dramatic stepping stones.
4. Picture specifically any images that the speech produces in you.
5. Use any feelings that the images and ideas produce in you.
6. You might even want to write a copy of the speech in a form that separates its idea units visually. You could separate the piece into its opening, middle and concluding sections as well, to help you see the story arc in your mind.
7. Separate the speech into beats, if you can.
8. Try saying the speech aloud as you work.
9. Physicalize it if you wish.
10. Try any and all of the things that have been discussed above.

Here's the speech.

MORTY: I suck. I suck. I can't friggin' learn lines to save my life. People

who can read words on the printed page, say them once and parrot them back amaze me. And I know such people exist because my father is one of them. He reads a page of a script once or twice, and I swear he has it memorized. Completely memorized. What pisses me off even more is that he can actually still remember it a few hours later. Now that, my friend, is a gift. What a piece of magic. Imagine being an actor who doesn't have to go through that clumsy crap—tripping over words, panicking when you go blank. Imagine being able to focus on the other guy and actually listen to him without worrying about what you're gonna have to say next. Honest to god, that would be nirvana, that would be acting heaven.

Here is the speech again. This time I italicized images that I might work with to build memorable images and feelings. In turn, this should help with memorization and with finding deeper specific moments.

I suck. I suck. I can't friggin' learn lines to save my life. People who can read words on the printed page, say them once and ***parrot them back*** amaze me. And I know such people exist because ***my father*** is one of them. He reads a page of a script once or twice, and I swear he has it memorized. Completely memorized. ***What pisses me off*** even more is that he can actually still remember it a few hours later. Now that, my friend, is a gift. What a ***piece of magic***. Imagine being an actor who doesn't have to go through that clumsy crap—***tripping over words, panicking when you go blank***. Imagine being able to focus on the other guy and actually listen to him without ***worrying*** about what you're gonna have to say next. Honest to god, that would be ***nirvana***, that would be ***acting heaven***.

Now here it is in possible idea units. Your ideas don't have to match mine. I've divided it into units that in my mind go easily together. Maybe you'll need a different fit.

I suck. I suck. / I can't friggin' learn lines to save my life. / People who can read words on the printed page, / say them once / and parrot them back amaze me. / And I know such people exist / because my father is one of them. / He reads a page of a script once or twice, / and I swear he has it memorized. / Completely memorized. / What pisses me off even more / is that he can actually still remember it a few hours later. / Now that, my friend, is a gift. / What a piece of magic. / Imagine being an actor / who doesn't have to go through that clumsy crap— / tripping over words, / panicking when you go blank. / Imagine being able to focus on the other guy / and actually listen to him / without worrying about what you're gonna have to say next. / Honest to god, / that would be nirvana, / that would be acting heaven.

Finally, here's the speech in possible beats.

I suck. I suck. I can't friggin' learn lines to save my life. People who can read words on the printed page, say them once and parrot them back amaze me.

And I know such people exist because my father is one of them. He reads a page of a script once or twice, and I swear he has it memorized. Completely memorized. What pisses me off even more is that he can actually still remember it a few hours later.

Now that, my friend, is a gift. What a piece of magic.

Imagine being an actor who doesn't have to go through that clumsy crap—tripping over words, panicking when you go blank. Imagine being able to focus on the other guy and actually listen to him without worrying about what you're gonna have to say next.

Honest to god, that would be nir-

vana, that would be acting heaven.

Your breaking the speech down might have produced different results, but that's fine. The purpose here has been to see which devices work best for you, or work for you at all. Ask yourself the following:

Which of the tools made your memorizing process easier, more economical? Why and how did they work for you?

What refinements might you have been able to make that would have improved your memorization process even more?

Did you discover that doing your actor's homework in this fashion helped you put the piece on its feet more quickly? With better acting results than if you use your regular grunt-it-out method of memorization? Why? How?

Whatever you learned about the way you memorize, begin to employ these techniques in your future memorization and acting homework. There are many, many other devices that I have not touched on here, I'm sure. Some other very effective devices you may discover on your own. Maybe you have already discovered some. If so, share them with your fellow actors. Most importantly, don't be afraid to try new things.

Regardless of what techniques ultimately work for you, never forget that what the playwright has written into the script is there for a reason. Each word, each phrase, and every piece of punctuation was put there by the playwright after careful deliberation and with painstaking care. You owe it to the playwright and to yourself as an artist to respect his choices and his craft. It is very unlikely that your accidental changes will improve upon what is already there. Learn your lines and deliver them the way they were written.

Bruce Miller, director of acting programs at the University of Miami, is the author of The Actor as Storyteller and Head-First Acting.

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