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Moulinet: An Action Quarterly

The Society of American Fight Directors

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2005

## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 6, Issue 2**

Moulinet Staff

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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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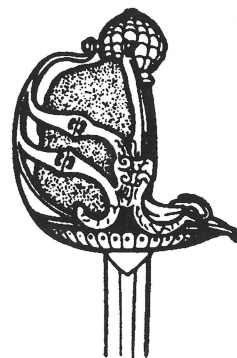
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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Articles, interviews, features – 300-1000 words. Reviews – 100-300 words.

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**Society of American  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Mary Shen Barnidge** is a freelance writer and theatre critic for the *Chicago Reader* and *Windy City Times*. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society Of American Fight Directors.

**D.C. Wright** is a certified instructor in the Society of American Fight Directors and a senior instructor at New York's Juilliard School Of Music. He will be directing fights for an Off-Off-Broadway show later this year.

**Richard Gilbert**, along with his partner, David Gregory, together constitute the creative team of R & D Violence Designers and the senior faculty of The Fight Shop, a stage combat facility soon moving to Chicago's northwest corner.

**Tony Wolf** is founder of the New Zealand Stage Combat Society and inventor of the Re:Action system for performance combat. His work was most recently seen in Peter Jackson's film trilogy, *Lord Of The Rings*.

**David Woolley** and his partner, Douglas Mumaw, recently staged fights for the New Globe Theatre's productions of *Tamburlaine The Great* and *Henry VI*. They are also wrapping up their seventeenth season as the touring comedy-swashbuckling act, The Swordsmen.

**Dawn "Sam" Alden** recently appeared in Eclipse Theater's *Sextet* and is now gearing up for the Babes With Blades' upcoming production of *Cliffhangers*.

**Javon Johnson** is a company member of Congo Square Theatre Company, where his extensive acting credits include the young Cassius Clay in *Ali*. He is, himself, the author of several plays, among them *Hambone*, *Papa's Blues* and *Homebound*.

**Kirsten Fitzgerald** is a company member of A Red Orchid Theater, staging fights for their hit 2004 production of *The Fastest Clock In The Universe*, as well as appearing in the premiere production of Brett Neveu's *4 Murders*.

**Shannon O'Neill** is a member of the Factory Theatre company. She is currently on loan to the Journeymen, appearing in their production of *The Cryptogram*.

**Mik Erwin** recently staged full-field marching formations on a 25 X 30 stage in Single Box Turn Productions' *Band Geeks*.

## BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

*Hanlon-Lees Theatrical Joust Extravaganza*, DVD starring the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater. "A spectacular behind-the-scenes look at the history of the company, including rare film footage of the original Hanlons, from which the troupe takes its name". For ordering information, e-mail [webmaster@hanlon-lees.com](mailto:webmaster@hanlon-lees.com)

*Sword Of Hearts*, DVD starring Kathryn Ann Rosen, Amy E. Harmon and Libby Beyreis of the Babes With Blades. "A rollicking comic adventure in the style of *The Princess Bride* and *The Three Musketeers*". Order from [www.customflix.com/206814](http://www.customflix.com/206814)

*San Valentino And The Melancholy Kid*, DVD of the smash hit action-musical by House Productions. "There's more passion, exuberance, wit, imagination and sheer spirit in the first twenty minutes than most theatres serve up in an entire season" declared Chris Jones, reviewing for the *Chicago Tribune*. Order from [www.thehousetheatre.com](http://www.thehousetheatre.com)

**THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE** at 923 West Belmont Ave. has back issues of *Moulinet: An Action Quarterly*. They are now also available on-line through Advanced Book Exchange, Gallery Bookstore Ltd. inventory number 060 (Abe@Abebooks.com). Price, \$4 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; [ChgosOldst@voyager.net](mailto:ChgosOldst@voyager.net)

## PICK ON SOMEBODY YOUR OWN SIZE: CHOREOGRAPHING FIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

Dramatic literature strives to depict the full spectrum of human behavior, but scenes of violence involving children present special challenges for fight choreographers. Not only is our culture sensitive to the influence of violence-oriented activities on young people, but—as any camp counselor will attest—exuberant boys and girls, unaware of the potential hazards, often throw themselves into physical sport with reckless abandon. Two plays recently provided an opportunity to explore the dimensions of kiddie-combat.

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* recounts the story of an orphan boy, raised by his sister and her blacksmith husband, Joe. When young Pip piques the interest of an orphaned girl's rich and eccentric foster-mother, he discovers that one of his tasks in service of his benefactor is to engage in fisticuffs with Herbert, a boy of privileged upbringing, in a mock duel for the young damsel's favor.

"The kids' fight was the most fun to work on," says Richard Gilbert, along with David Gregory, the team of R & D Violence Designers, "The kids are cute, and watching them fight is cute. But we spent a lot of thought on the 'hook' for that fight's design—that is, the choreographic element that makes it unified and specific, and not just a whole-buncha-cool-moves.

"The technique we wanted was the kind of schoolyard scrapping that kids engage in, but Pip has grown up in a *culture* of violence. He's seen Joe—whom he idolizes—fight with Orlick, the mean-tempered assistant, and so Pip's moves *echo* what he's seen, but as a *child* might emulate them. For example, Joe 'coverblocks' a lot, so Pip tries to do likewise. Joe throws his opponent around, and so does Pip. Sometimes it works. Other times, he gets the *shape* of a move right, but not the mechanics *behind* it.

"In the meantime, the upper-class Herbert tries to box like a prizefighter. He loses, of course, since he's not the story's main character. And we get a lot of irony later, when they're grown and Herbert saves Pip's life in a mortal struggle with his old enemy, Orlick."

A short, leisurely-paced scuffle acted by teenage boys well-trained in movement and dance is one thing, but the brutal slaying of Macduff's wife and children in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is quite another. Illinois Shakespeare Festival director Karen Kessler,

no stranger to theatrical homicide, had declared that, in her show, "Nobody dies without a fight!" Thus, fight choreographer D.C. Wright was left to determine the extent of the resistance summoned up by Macduff's son—and, in this production, daughter—against their assassins.

"This was probably the most disturbing fight in the play, because it involves children," Wright recalls, "But the story's universe is a warrior's world and Karen didn't want them to just scream and run offstage to be slaughtered. In our show, the kids put up a fight—and they do better than you'd *expect* against three murderers.

"Our actors were Nathan Stark, who's about fourteen, Megan Riley, who's around ten years old, and a baby, played by a doll. Nathan has the most to do. When the murderer calls his father a 'traitor', he flies off the handle—"Thou liest, thou shag-haired villain!"—and charges at the intruder. And he *gets* a stab in, before the murderer throws him to the ground—but then he gets up and attacks *again*, so that the murderer has to take his knife away and stab *him* with it, and only *after* that, throw him against a pillar and cut his throat.

"Now, Karen wanted to open the scene with Lady Macduff hanging sheets on a clothesline, so that the murderers could appear very suddenly from *behind* them, and also, so that we could get a bloody handprint at the end of the scene. We started Megan slapping at the back of the murderer who's struggling with her mother. Then after she gets pushed off, she tries to save her baby brother by snatching him up just as another murderer puts a spear through his cradle. The stage is backlit, so after she runs behind the sheet, we see the murderer rip the baby from her arms and fling it to the ground, and we see him raise the spear and throw her onto it—but we see it all in *silhouette*. That takes *some* of the edge off seeing the children get hurt, but it's still a very grisly and very, very effective scene.

"The staging also solves the problem of getting the kids to make it look convincing. I think the hardest part of the training was teaching them to fall down correctly. And even though there's plenty of padding where she's hitting, when we began, Megan was sort of timid about whaling on the great big murderer. She's fine with it now. She's gotten so good, in fact, that her *real* little brother came to see the show one night, and after that scene, he was *inconsolable* until we brought him backstage. He hugged the stuffing out of his sister when he saw she was alive and safe."



## ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

### THE KNIGHTS OF THE SILVER SWORD at JUBILEE COLLEGE OLDE ENGLISH FAIRE

A joust where the strongest epithet is “eat dirt!”, but which still ends in cold-blooded murder, all without offending family audiences, is a difficult trick to pull off, but this tightly-knit ensemble now accomplishes it with cheerful alacrity. The arrogant Lord Dirkan and his killer horse, Strider, along with Lady Briana and *her* dainty steed, MacLoud, anchor a diverse roster of armored combatants encompassing men and women, young and old (as with the white-bearded Reynard MacDuff), Anglo, Latin and Teutonic, every last one of them engaging in spectacle so evenly paced and patter so good-humored as to squelch the complaints of the staunchest historical purists. The exotic Lady Allia Anwar’s swordwork improves with her every appearance. The comeuppance of the burly Lord Robert Armstrong comes sooner (“You may be strong,” his squire warns as he prepares to battle the lofty Briana, “But she is *shrewd*.”). And the courage of the squire chosen to have his watermelon crest struck off his helm by a mounted rider grows more commendable with each repetition.

Indeed, the entertainment value of this popular combat spectacle has so increased over the years that it now serves to point up the shortcomings of the field at the Jubilee Faire—chief among which are the scarcity of seats and shade, an inconvenience common with government-preserve sites where motor vehicles are restricted to the paved roads and tampering with the natural landscape is strictly regulated.

Fortunately, the North Midwestern faire circuit shows signs of reviving, after their setback at the turn of the present century, with small faires scheduled in the coming year for such diverse settings as Cambridge, Wausau and Lake Geneva in Wisconsin, Urbana, Murphysboro and Rock Island in Illinois and Fishers in Indiana. Far from engendering feudalistic rivalries, this development is to be applauded for allowing audiences a wider range of opportunities to see their favorite acts in a variety of seasonal climes and pastoral environments.

11817 Jubilee College Road (Highway 150), Brimfield, Illinois. For information, phone (309) 243-9489

### HANLON-LEES ACTION THEATER at BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE

One of the biggest problems with a joust-to-the-death is justifying its very existence during the Renaissance. The trial-by-combat protocol is a product of medieval feudalism, more in keeping with Malory than Shakespeare. This year’s Hanlon-Lees script, however, emphasizes internecine alliances by first posing a competition between the military commanders of Elizabeth’s realm for rank equivalent to our five-star General Of The Army, then introducing a duel of *individual* honor as a consequence of a sore loser sucker-slashing the winner. The eagerness with which the leaders who have no personal claim to the quarrel align themselves with the squabblers (“Victory at any cost!”) is thus held to be the error that makes for the destruction of *all* the kingdom’s senior officers. The caveat against interfering in other people’s wars is a lesson well taken nowadays.

Chris Mitri and Joe D’Arrigo, respectively, Sir Christopher of Dennison and Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe, have developed increasing confidence over the years, and Kent Shelton—one of the troupe’s founding members—continues to radiate wholesome sportsmanship. Stealing the show again, however, is Steve Cowan, whose wicked Sir Guy of Guisborne this year wears a vaguely Scottish accent and a smile wide and toothy enough to win him the governorship of a small duchy, say, the size of California. Tawn Jones’ sturdy whip-wielding master of arms Sir Richard Griffin is as agile with his body-microphone as with his leather, but the prize for oratory goes to Squire “Wolf” Gould, whose unamplified vocal prowess and parade-ground enunciation made good his mockery of his “marble-mouthed” peers’ efforts to lead supporters in cheering.

ALSO AT BRISTOL: The Swordsmen’s rapiers might have been cupid’s arrows on one weekend, when their customary prank of making (courtly) advances on a young lady from the audience took a surprise twist as her swain, instructed to retrieve her in a “bold and stupid manner”, dropped to one knee and proposed marriage. Dirk and Guido’s bow to romantic sentiment was balanced by plenty of vigorous bladework, however, impressing fight fans from across the midwest (including, on that same day, a group of recently-certified actor-combatants from Minneapolis.)

History buffs may appreciate the military encampment's less theatrical re-enactments of pike drills and demonstrations of period muskets that boom with impressive might. And parents of children enthused by the swashbuckling, instead of buying them wooden swords to swing about recklessly, might consider treating them to fencing lessons, courtesy of master Skip Fox and his staff. Safety is assured through the pint-sized combatants being armored like Mongol warriors, while their targets—balloons mounted atop the helms after the manner of the knights' crests—encourage strikes well above body-range.

12520 120th Street, Bristol, Wisconsin. For information, phone (847) 395-7773 or log onto [www.renfaire.com](http://www.renfaire.com)

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA fight choreography by Shannon O'Neill

The slap-and-snuggle courtship starts in a bar and ends in a bed, but whatever advantages SlimTack Theatre anticipated by staging their play in the director's living quarters, the fact remains that there isn't a lot of space for rough stuff. In addition to an audience of twelve, the first setting demands two tables with chairs sufficiently distant from the bar for an irate lady to reject a sour-tempered suitor by withdrawing thereto. The action also requires her to bitch-slap him across the room until he loses control and throttles her amid a mess of spilled ashtrays, pretzels and beer. (Looking over the debris during intermission, a theatregoer was heard to remark, "Did I come to *True West* by mistake?")

Shannon O'Neill's actors, neither of them small in stature, readily acknowledge the limitations of their space—us downstage, as aforementioned, and a tangle of extension cords plugged into a single household socket at stage right (the latter of which became dislodged on opening night, plunging the room into darkness and adding a ripped-from-the-wall clock and waterfall-painting to the general disorder). When Sean Neely and Jenn Remke chase each other around the furniture, they do so with torsos

sprawled over the table-tops to further minimize the body mass negotiating the narrow passageways between the furniture. They also confine the straight-line action to the relatively obstruction-free upstage area.

Ironically, the bedroom choreography proves to be much simpler, despite the lesser dimensions. For one, the audience is ranged in a line against one wall. For another, a mattress on the floor is easy to jump on or step over. And, of course, there's the dramatic arc dictating that the physical action tend more toward the two reluctant lovers closing *in* on, rather than pushing *away* from, one another. Still, only the most fortuitous of sight-lines from the Lawrence Avenue El platform outside the window enable Neely to climb bare-ass onto the sill to howl at the moon at the appropriate moment.

### SUBURBAN MOTEL

#### fight choreography by David Woolley

Massive quantities of violence can't make a silk purse out of a George F. Walker, but that never stopped this Canadian playwright from shoveling it on like a stoker in a locomotive chase. The challenge presented by the two plays comprising this double-bill, however, is their shared setting in a cheap, no-frills, motel room.

David Woolley, however, could stage a fight inside a refrigerator if the sight-lines were set up properly. He guides *Adult Entertainment's* two men and two women through hyperemotive mattress wrestling, belly punches, multiple disarms and even some protracted field surgery on a grisly knife wound. And for *Criminal Minds*, he has its five buffoonish thugs engage in such reliable slapstick as ear-pulls, head-slaps and crotch-kicks, climaxing in the obligatory pile-on. In this case, the side-by-side double beds allow the scrum to finish with the lightest of the grapplers upended in a somersault launched from one mattress and landing on the other. It also allows a sodden drunk to muffle himself in the covers, the better to roll off into the gap between, ostensibly without regaining consciousness.

After these acrobatics, however, the finale—in which everyone is gunned down by an unseen assailant lurking outside the door—emerges as facile, dramatically *and* physically. Or maybe our regret is that it signals an end to the only excitement the play provides.

## 4 MURDERS

fight choreography by Kirsten Fitzgerald

Whether the nondescript drifter calling himself Joel is the Grim Reaper himself, a commonplace news-at-five killer, or a specter of our imagined fears, Brett Neveu's play isn't an ordinary hack-and-slash thriller even if it *did* premiere at Red Orchid Theatre, where the blood usually flows like the mighty Mississippi. So how is Kirsten Fitzgerald to forestall our expectations long enough to suggest the otherworldliness of the four homicides hinted at in the title?

To begin, she arms our mystery man with a knife cut from plexiglass, its blade curved in a shape not unlike the traditional scythe. Then she has him stab his prey with a loose, underhanded swing like pitching a softball—a gesture so perfunctory that we understand perfectly why his victims are more puzzled than alarmed at such an attack.

And when his fourth assignment proves to be so resigned to *Going Gently Into That Good Night* as to welcome the lethal intruder with never a protest, what can our messenger do but lift his sleeping victim's head from its pillow, delicately touch his weapon's point to the slumberer's neck three times, and depart silently after bestowing a maternal kiss to his host's forehead? For those with no real life to act as a deterrent, hints the author, Death is not "murder", but only an inevitable outcome.

## LOST LAND

fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

It's 1918, and all Hungary is in ruin, ravaged by World War One. What could be more absurd than two old aristocrats—one of them gymnasium-schooled and dressed in a suit, the other one shirtless, boot-shod and ready to rumble—proposing to duel with *swords* because, historically, that's what Hungarian aristocrats with cavalry experience *did*?

But their hearts aren't really in it, nor is it the dramatic moment for swashing buckles, and so even if John Malkovich and Yassen Peyankov are quite capable of crossing blades with Prussian expertise, Robin McFarquhar keeps the combatants spaced far apart and their swordplay short and slow. Actual engagement is limited to combinations rarely exceeding five beats, with Peyankov's field-trained ruffian scoring a swift and easy victory over Malkovich's bookish gentleman.

To be sure, disappointed Malkopaths see their hero get his revenge in the last moments of the play. But how many of them would suspect that a cold-blooded shot-to-the-back, executed without the actors telegraphing an instant too soon the raising of the gun and the fall of its target, is a far more difficult trick to pull off than mere sword-banging?

## ETERNAL RETURN

fight choreography by Dawn "Sam" Alden

The story is primarily a collective-memory flashback, but, at one point, it calls for two simultaneous teenage-girl cat-spats. The actors at Free Street, however, are *actual* teenage girls, with no training except in *real* street fighting. Furthermore, one pair of fighters has to *talk* as they pummel each other. So how do you diminish the likelihood of accidental injuries, without reducing the spectacle to innocuous activity all but indistinguishable from interpretive dance?

Sam Alden solves the problem by placing the secondary fight well upstage, where the punches and hairpulls are seen too dimly for us to assess the force behind the aggression. Meanwhile, the fight involving dialogue, constructed mostly of rolling grapples and pins, occurs far downstage, where our attention quickly becomes focused on what the scrappers are *saying* rather than on the physical dynamic.

## SEVEN GUITARS

fight choreography by Javon Johnson

In August Wilson's account of dreams deferred in 1948 Pittsburgh, guns are drawn, but never fired, and knives are exhibited, but never brandished. So you'd think it would be an easy assignment for a fight director. But then, you've got two scenes of conspicuous violence—one where a rooster has its throat brutally slit, and another where a crazed man in an ecstatic frenzy slashes an unwary victim with a West Indian cane-cutting knife.

Javon Johnson takes a risk placing the first downstage, with a patently artificial fowl in full view. But we are so transfixed by its butcher's icy resolution that we gasp in horror as the blood drips and pools on the ground. Johnson doesn't push his luck a second time, however, but instead shows us only the *shadow* of the man we have come to fear, guarding his home against imaginary enemies with blade at the ready. When our unwary hero recklessly invades his sanctuary, our imaginations act as the tragic messenger conveying the fatal tidings.

## THE RIGHTEOUS OUTRAGEOUS TWIRLING CORPS

movement choreography by Mik Erwin, Kerri Baker and Mike Voves

Their choreography borrows more from the Rockettes than the Rough Riders, but under the tutelage of drill instructors Mik Erwin, Kerri Baker

and Mike Voves, the weapon line of the Righteous Outrageous Twirling Corps delivers faux-firearms prestidigitation strack and snappy enough to warm the cockles of an old sergeant's heart. The picture of twenty-two aerial moulinets—more properly called “triple parallels”—executed by rifles flying in precise three-count unison will likely never decorate a recruiting poster, but fans of mock-military spoofs (think Monty Python and George MacDonald Fraser) will find fresh inspiration in this playful martial burlesque.

## CALL TO ARMS

**September 17-November 8.** Broadsword for the Stage at Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. Taught by Brian LeTraunik, this course's curriculum concludes with certification exams for the Society Of American Fight Directors. For further information, phone (773) 549-5788 X107 or log onto [www.brianletraunik.com](http://www.brianletraunik.com).

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### PAST BLASTS AND FUTURE SHOOTERS

Bartitsu, says Tony Wolf—whose experience at designing fights for the *Lord Of The Rings* film trilogy has made him something of an expert in combat ethnography—is a fighting style combining techniques from all over Europe and the British Empire and, therefore, the most likely to be employed by professional detectives in Victorian London.

From England, we get stand-and-punch pugilistics. From southeast Asia, we get ju-jitsu, using balance, rather than force, as a weapon. And from France, we get *savate*—a type of kick-boxing whose developer also formulated a technique, based on Japanese stick-fighting, for laying attackers low using canes, walking sticks or umbrellas. (An advertisement from the period shows a *petite mademoiselle* employing a dainty parasol to thrash her oversized opponent.)

Wolf also introduced his class to “Gun Fu”, first developed for the film, *Equilibrium*. This stylish choreography is rooted in hand-to-hand martial arts. The story's uniformed thugs wield handguns, but—for reasons known only to the scriptwriters—fatal shots require the firearm to be aimed straight at their targets' faces. For purposes of live-action combat, this means shots to *bodies* are off limits, with fire-

arms used exclusively to *threaten* the combatants. And if shots-into-the-air are desired, cautions Wolf, the sound should be foleyed from offstage, as the fighters will be too close together to rule out powder and wadding injuries.

Wolf offered instruction in both these techniques at a workshop sponsored by the Babes With Blades. Participants included Dawn “Sam” Alden, Kathrynne Rosen and Libby Beyrus, for anyone interested in learning more about these fight-styles.

### PRIZE FIGHTERS

Once in the proverbial Blue Moon, a production saturated in combat action spurs the Joseph Jefferson Awards committee to invent a category enabling them to honor fight choreographers. This was such a year, with prizes going to Matthew Hawkins for House Productions' *Curse Of The Crying Heart*, and to the team of Joe Foust and Geoffrey Coates for Defiant Theatre's *Action Movie: The Play*.

Presenting the awards were David Woolley, recipient of the first such award in 1987, and Dawn “Sam” Alden, founder of the Babes With Blades company. (Scouting for distributors appropriate to the occasion, an anonymous committee member ventured, “A *female* fight choreographer would be nice.”) Woolley did the grunt work, however, reading the names of both nominees and then opening the envelope to gleefully announce, “And the award goes to—EVERYBODY!!”

Fight fans hoping for some demonstration of the skills deemed worthy of recognition were disappointed. But the mischievous Foust and likewise irreverent Marc Grapey were not about to let the occasion go wholly unacknowledged: in his acceptance speech, Foust twice referred to emcee Grapey as a “loser”, setting up a later gag in which Grapey, learning of the slight rendered him by a “choreographer”, challenged the slanderer to a duel—“Come on, dancing boy! Let's take this outside! I'm ready!”—only to subside upon being informed of his proposed opponent's actual artistic discipline.

### EN GARDE!

Don't be fooled by the title. *Stage Combat*, opening at Piccolo Theatre in October, is not a Night At The Fights. According to its publicity, the battle between an actress and her director in this new play by award-winning French playwright Victor Haim is one of “wits, emotion, exasperation, egotism and the ultimate need for each other”. Nary a mention of physical violence.



**“Unruly children make their  
Sire stoop under the oppression  
of their prodigal weight.”**

**—William Shakespeare, *Richard II***

**MOULINET: An Action Quarterly**  
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