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interactive community drama project, devised
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Bennachie and me: A site-specific, promenade, interactive community drama project devised and performed in the North-East of Scotland

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Abstract

This is the first qualitative research study undertaken which discusses the drama aspect of a community led research project based on the history of an informal nineteenth-century colony Bennachie, in the north-east of Scotland. The study applied an open-ended questionnaire gathering data on participants' reasons for participating, their contribution towards and evaluation of a site-specific promenade performance. Research findings offer theatre practitioners guidance for: selecting sites to attract and engage audience as participants; devising with a community group to create a site-specific performance; promoting performance skill development during a site-specific community drama project. This research contributes to increased understanding of the practicalities for generating site-specific promenade theatre with community participants that are transferable to global community performances.

Keywords: Promenade Theatre; Site-Specific Performance; Applied Theatre; Devised Drama; Community Theatre; Drama Conventions.



Image 1: A General View of Bennachie.

Research Description

Research participants comprised of community groups, academics and volunteers to establish a community of practice (Wegner 1998) and develop a shared understanding of the historic Bennachie colony clearances (see Oliver et al. 2022 for a detailed account of the overarching project). The site has been extensively researched by archaeological and historical archivists and it is the centre of an active voluntary community group (the Bailies of Bennachie). The Bailies of Bennachie is a voluntary conservation society whose objectives are to encourage and stimulate the public's interest of Bennachie. Community acting participants came to the research project with variant degrees of knowledge about Bennachie. Over a six-week rehearsal period the community acting participants and researchers shared their knowledge of Bennachie and its inhabitants, through a conventions approach to devising (Neelands and Goode 2015). The rehearsals culminated in an eight-scene site-specific promenade performance situated in and around the ruins of colony crofts (a type of smallholding). Framed as characters visiting the colony, the audience interacted with the community participants (compromised of actors, musicians, Bailies, researchers, and musicians) by sharing their knowledge of Bennachie to develop an understanding of the inhabitants' life. The community was involved at all levels in the production and were supported to create individual scenes. Further, the promenade performance was a research approach as it enabled data to be collected and participants to reflect in and on the action. This project provides data and analysis of how drama can empower the voices and expertise of a community in representing the real lives of the site's deep past, present, and possible futures (Smith 2019; Koplowitz 2022)

Historical Context

In the 19th century, Scottish lairds (landowners) redeveloped their estates (often referred to as the 'improvements') to generate land income through new farming techniques and land organisation (Pretty 1991). Consequently, small-scale tenant farming was abolished to support larger rationalised farming (Turnock 1977). Local tenants, unable to implement the 'improvements', either became landless labourers or migrated to cities (Harper 2012). Lairds, for a time, tolerated informal settlements of crofts and crofters (croft occupants), working and living on unfarmed land, as an opportunity to improve estates (Gray 1976: 93). In 1851, fifty-six people resided in the common land of Bennachie, causing its nine lairds to evoke the 1695 Act for the Division of Commonities (a commonity is an area of land where the rights of property are shared by two or more neighbouring landowners) and resulted in ownership being placed with Colonel Charles Leslie of Balquhain. Colonel Balquhain instructed tenancy agreements, with increased rents (Ledingham 2014), for each crofter which became known as 'the 1859 theft of Bennachie' and was its ultimate demise (Oliver et al. 2016). In 1880, owing to an agricultural depression, the remaining crofters were unable to pay their rent and were evicted (Allen 1983; Fagen 2011); freeing the land to be planted with Scots pine and larch (Kay 1962).

Theoretical context for the Bennachie Drama Project

Bennachie is the north-east of Scotland's foremost iconic landmark. It is clad in heather, has granite peaks, pine trees, arable lowlands and the ruins of nineteenth century crofting settlements (Oliver et al. 2022). As such, it was important that the hill itself was featured in any drama work. A drama form which uses non-traditional theatre spaces is called site-specific performances (Smith 2019). Pearson and Shanks (2001: 23) suggest that site-specific performances are,

conceived for, mounted within, and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused.

Kaye (2000: 11) suggests that site-specific performances attempt 'to *trouble* the oppositions between the site and the work' arguing that the site is like a text, which is constantly being written and read, making it,

subject to the process of slippage deferral and indeterminacy in which its signs are constituted (Kaye 2000: 183).

Pearson and Shanks (2001), and Kaye (2000) recognise the importance of place in site-specific performances suggesting that they are not simply productions performed outside a theatre building.

Unlike a theatre building, which often severs the relationship between social activity and performance (and where the performance is frequently governed by spoken and unspoken theatrical rules and conventions), site-specific performances might,

provide a more appropriate forum for reflecting on and interpreting the relationship between performance, specific places in our worlds, and social contexts than theatre that takes place in conventional theatre venues (Tompkins 2012: 7).

Smith (2019: 8) further Tompkins (2012) advocate that the movement of performances from traditional theatre buildings to sites,

did not then abandon architecture in the flurry of idealism and abstraction. Instead, performance often redirected its straining against the limitations of the stage onto new material 'ground'.

However, the notion of theatre itself is also open to interpretation. For example, Neelands and Goode (2015) offer a wider view of theatre suggesting that it: doesn't describe a single form of activity; is a process for the interpretation and understanding of human behaviour and meaning making; is a right of all people; goes beyond the study of a text or the acting craft; is an active process which empowers participants to construct subjective responses while forming critical judgements and generalisations about the nature and availability of theatre; is a direct shared experience when people act 'as if' they were another in a different place and time. Therefore, Neelands and Goode's (2015: 5) definition of theatre empowers all participants (including traditional interpretations of actors and audience) to create,

a shared understanding of, place, time, characters and other contextual information [which] becomes crucial to the quality of the involvement in the experience.

Koplowitz (2022) and Tompkins (2012) suggest that groups should be mindful of place and its cultural, historical and social landscape when creating site-specific theatre. Citing Cliff McLucas, Pearson (2012) highlights this understanding through the metaphor of ghost and host with the former being the performance and the latter the site. Smith (2019) indicates that a site's history, and the location itself, creates a text predating the performance which might assist in the site's continued meaning making,

action determining space, which reciprocally determines action' (Nidel 2012: 223).

Consequently, the site is not a fixed object which hosts an ephemeral event. Instead, groups should negotiate the stories that pre-exist, and that are of, the performance (Koplowitz 2022; Pearson and Shanks 2001). Therefore, devising performances should be sensitive to the historical context of the site and the stories which it and the participants wish to share.

Devising performances at historical sites requires participants, gatekeepers to create a shared community of understanding (Nidel 2012), and a performance that encourages audiences to explore and experience their surroundings anew (Tompkins 2012). However, owing to differing site interpretations/knowledge it might be challenging to reach a performance consensus. Dissensus might be a possible counter to consensus working as,

It reveals the unsteady relationship between people, objects and places - the supplement that is tantalizing and potently affective and effective (Irwin, 2012: 97).

Dissensus might create a new understanding and challenge stereotypes in the hope of helping people see the world anew (Ranciere 2010) and to,

imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict (Kester 2004: 8).

Introducing promenade theatre [where the audience moves from location to location exploring the drama instead of remaining stationary (Spires et al. 2015)] might challenge audience, participants' and gatekeepers' stereotypical understanding of theatre (and the site itself). Promenade theatre removes the metaphorical fourth wall, found in representational theatre, requiring audiences to be framed as particular people interpreting the stage actions and interacting with the actors (Zaiontz 2012). These interactions blur the traditional lines between audience and actor (Collins 2012), which require a process of negotiated meaning to create a universal understanding (Wagner 1979: 96),

...everything implies something beyond it. In this sense, we can look below the surface of any moment to its meaning; any event can become a symbol of something that transcends it. What transcends it are the universals, the ultimate meanings that seem to matter to human beings, without which a person is barren of satisfaction and of growing points.

Therefore, site-specific performances enable audiences and actors to develop a shared understanding of what it means to be human while recognising theatre as a continuing process instead of a finalised product.

Bennachie site-specific promenade theatre

Bennachie is a well-preserved archaeological site, in the north-east of Scotland, with a wealth of archival records, which enabled the researchers and participants to move beyond a clichéd understanding of the colony. Drawing upon archaeological and anthropological research, during the rehearsal process, the academic researchers and

participants formed a community of practice (Wegner 1998). This approach built upon the Bennachie research of Oliver, et al. (2016),

Work on the hill by both community and academic researchers has provided multiple checkpoints for thinking and reflecting on how changing relationships with the hillside and with each other have served to underwrite the very nature of the history we are able to tell (Oliver, et al. 2016: 344).

Putting community group participants' and the Baillies of Bennachie's collective knowledge of Bennachie and its people into a performance was challenging as the site can only be accessed by foot. This meant that performers required a suitable level of fitness to ascend the hill and stamina to remain at their specific locations for the full performance. The audience, too, required a good level of fitness to ascend the hill's steep gradient, and to be able to walk at a moderate pace, to ensure that they promenaded as one group. Unfortunately, Scottish weather can be erratic, with all four seasons presenting in the same hour, which meant the audience and performers required suitable attire and protection against midges (small flying insects) which bite indiscriminately. Also, the hill can be covered in mist and fog very quickly which can create visibility issues. Therefore, it was important that health and safety protocols were implemented to ensure the health of performers and audience (Koplowitz 2022); this was undertaken by the Baillies of Bennachie. With this in mind, and to support our decision making in selecting performance locations, we drew upon Shepherd's (1977) key text, *The Living Mountain*. In doing so, and being mindful of any health and safety protocols, we sought to disrupt our first impressions of the hill where we were struggling to see how we could use it to create a piece of theatre. For example, Shepherd (1977: 43) states,

Haze, which hides, can also reveal. Dips and ravines are discerned in what has speared a single hill: new depth is given to the vista.



Image 2: An example of using the site as inspiration for dramatic action – this image depicts the location of a passing place scene (see page 9 for an explanation).

During our visits to the hill, we continued to change the focus of our eyes and altered the position of our heads so that a 'different kind of world may be made to appear' (Shepherd 1977:11). In turn, we began to work with the hill, minimising routes which were too steep and using locations that could provide natural protection from the ever-changeable weather. Further, and in honour of Shepherd's work, we created a vista scene to enable the audience to reflect on their view of the hill. As such, eight episodic scenes (Bowell and Heap 2017) were devised around croft remnants, a quarry, stone-dyke walls, the Laird's marking stone - known as Thieves' mark (used to delineate ownership of the land), peat cutting materials and the prehistoric Gowk Stane (a standing stone). Thus, the performance was mindful of the historical landscape and its stories to negotiate new meanings (Shepherd 1977, Pearson 2012, Tompkins 2012, Smith 2019 & Koplowitz 2022).

To facilitate audience participation, they were divided into sub-groups of 12 – 16 people and were dispatched at timed intervals. Each episodic scene was then repeated as a new audience group arrived. The performance lasted approximately 2 hours with a route of 1.8 miles. This is a similar approach to that documented by Smith (2019: 62) where the audience were able to,

...explore the space, while also likely to chance upon enough content to form a coherent experience of the overall piece...

Theoretical underpinning for performance structure

The following scenes were devised with Tompkins' (2012) recommendation to encourage audience members to re-navigate the site and their interpretation of it. To support this, and mindful of Kay's (2000) notion of 'slippage', the audience were framed as members of the Poor Board who were visiting the site to establish if the colonists required their help. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845 changed how poor relief was distributed. It established parochial boards for all parishes. These parochial boards were responsible for deciding who received support and the distribution of this poor relief. As such, audience members were treated as though they had time-slipped into the past, ruins they saw were treated by the cast as though they were still intact and the people they met acted as though they believed that they were inhabiting a day in 1860.

Keyhole scenes provided privileged information through the audience eavesdropping on a secret/private conversation taking place unknown to other characters. Such scenes echo Prior's (2006: 24) concept of voyeurism,

...getting an eyeful, peeping through the keyhole to gain forbidden knowledge,

creating a performance of,

revelation and concealment...sudden glimpses into an inner sanctum.

Location scenes were constructed, at specific points on the site, where the landscape offered opportunities for the clear delivery of prepared dialogue and audience interaction. These points were selected on the basis that the audience would possibly lack an informed frame of reference for the location. Consequently, they might overlook the historical and anthropological significance of, for example, thecroft ruins. Haedicke (2012: 104) suggests,

Sometimes the performance responds to a particular place, but more often it alters the meaning and function of a type of public space that has become so familiar that it is no longer seen.

Participants and audience can interact and, although there is a high level of informational dialogue, the latter are free to ask questions and make observations. Thus, the location scene enables audiences, through interaction with the participants and one another, to develop a greater understanding of the site, their relationship with it, and to begin to view it anew (Koplowitz 2022).

A vista scene adopted the Drama Convention of *Still-Image* as,

[a] sign to be interpreted or read by observers; groups can represent more than they would be able to communicate through words alone...requires reflection and analysis in the making and observing of images.

(Neelands and Goode 2015: 28).

Passing place scenes, demonstrated the working life of the hill with community acting participants and audience walking, in opposite directions, stopping to interact. The resulting interaction highlighted the site itself, while being open to audience interpretation. This concurs with Pearson and Shanks' (2014: 206) suggestion,

The challenge is to maintain an irreducible richness that enables multiple engagements, letting the place be itself, be open to encounters that differ according to time and visitor.

Devising site-specific performance through a conventions approach

(N.B. Henceforth all conventions noted are taken from Neelands and Goode (2015).)

Theatre derives its content from human experience with conventions providing,

entertainment and illumination through the accurate, critical and sensuous depiction of individuals and groups engaged in the business of living in the world, within a variety of socio-historical contexts.

(Neelands and Goode 2015: 145).

The Bennachie performance depicted isolated elements of the colonists' experience, grounded in historical research, and the participants' understandings of the site (Oliver et al. 2022). With the caveat, as Oliver et al. (2016) suggests that the local memory of the colony tends to be,

a half-written, half-remembered account shaped by over a century of retelling.

Therefore, the devising process embedded the community acting participants' understandings of the colony with the objective reality of archaeological and historical archival records. Community acting participants discussed their understanding of each episodic scene selecting a particular example to explore and perform. Drama conventions such as *First Impressions* and *Iceberg* were adopted to create a visual record of the emerging theatrical form and content; form is derived and bound by the content which emerges over time. Establishing form is time consuming, therefore, a holding form (a theatrical device which gives continuity to the individual meanings of each scene and literally holds them together in a coherent unity) was established linking the inner meanings of each episodic scene (Ross 1987). This was represented through a pebble which was *Gifted* by two characters to the audience early in the performance, and the subsequent social interaction between the participants and audience throughout the drama.

Social interaction occurs in the real and symbolic dimensions with participants devising in the real world and interacting (with each other and the audience) within the symbolic. Bridging both the real and symbolic dimensions requires a sense of playfulness necessary to act as if you are another person in a different place, time and space (Neelands and Goode 2015). Bruner and Blythe (1966) refer to this as a disciplined intuition building upon the conscious and unconscious interplay of creativity. In this way, community acting participants built their creative responses to develop a working 'text'.

A 'text' emerges as the form and content begin to stabilise, though this might not be in the form of a conventional written script. Language, in site-specific performance, capitalises on the interplay between visual and oral communication. This might be achieved through the symbolic use of space to provide visual contexts and reinforce meanings created with characters, the site, and the psychological distance in relationships. Symbols can be used to go beyond the literal and develop meaning as the drama advances, while acting as reference points which bind the previous stages of the drama; the issuing of the pebble is an example of this. This contributes to a sense of atmosphere by building credibility that is appropriate to the context experienced by the participants and audience. As the devising process unfolds a sense of tension, rhythm and pace is built and the participants' understanding of theatre form and conventions develops (Neelands and Goode 2015).

It should be stressed that the choice of drama conventions was in no way arbitrary. The researchers' task in selecting drama conventions for the purposes of devising was to match form to content, to give participants effective understanding of the process and the creation of the meaning of their drama work. Artwork content engenders its own form, and such form should not be externally imposed upon content. Thus, the researchers' objective can best be described as 'finding form' to capture made meanings, rather than the imposition of any kind of structural framework. In doing so, the participants begin to fuse form and content thus providing the drama with its necessary internal coherence (Neelands and Goode 2015). Devising in this manner enabled the participants to create their own 'scripts' which were then incorporated into the final performance.

A description of the rehearsal process and performance scenario

The production comprised eight scenes. Each scene was devised by the participants and facilitated by the two researchers. Researchers undertook a recce of the site to explore the suitability of locations. Suitability was determined by accessibility (some croft remnants were precarious and unsafe); proximity to one another (some crofts were too far apart, thus would create a long (and time consuming) walk for the audience); the creative potential of each location – i.e. was there linked documented history as to the croft occupants and their personal histories which could be used to construct a connected narrative between the crofts; clear spaces to allow for ritualistic performances [a ceilidh (a community dance)] and wedding; potential to demonstrate the working life of the crofters; did not damage the hill and met with current health and safety requirements. Therefore, the researchers sought to work with the location by being sensitive to the geographical and social landscapes (Koplowitz 2022 and Tompkins 2012).

Once a route was determined (and accepted by the Baillies), the researchers shared their initial findings and locations with the participants and invited them to visit the site as a group and share their stories of the hill (Oliver et al. 2016). Sharing stories in advance enabled the community acting participants to begin to connect with each of the characters of the colonists and determine if they would like to represent them in the performance. Further, by inviting the group to collectively walk the route, it was hoped that they would bond with the site and its stories and thus begin to understand how these elements could be represented in the drama (Heddon et al. 2022). In so doing, the researchers acknowledged Smith's (2019: 11) suggestion that,

...site-specific performance making is eclectic, conflicted and ambivalent business; and requires a matching set of inspirations, motivations and justifications.

After the site visit, and upon reading the stories of the colonists, the community acting participants suggested the roles which they would like to adopt in the performance.

Further, they indicated additional areas that they felt were important to be included in the drama. For example, one community acting participant who had knowledge of Stone dyking (*wall building using stones*) wished for this important aspect to be included in the performance – this became scene 2a. Further, two community acting participants stated that they knew that the crofters would have used specific tools to work the land and wished for these props to be included. They then spoke with the university museum and sourced specific artefacts to aid their depiction of the characters (this became scene 6). Consequently, the community acting participants were,

blending the subjective with the real, the personal with the historical, to firm up its abstract meanings with precise, local materials and effects (Smith 2019: 107).

During the rehearsal process, the researchers and community acting participants negotiated a rehearsal time to suit individual circumstances. This meant that they did not always work as a full group. However, it did enable the researchers and community acting participants to focus rehearsal time (Koplowitz 2022). This enabled the researchers and community acting participants to work together as co-artists (Sanchez-Camus 2011) and determine the direction of individual scenes. Also, it enabled the community acting participants, Bailies, and wider research team to delve deeper into their shared understanding of the hill and challenge any misconceptions about it (Oliver et al. 2016).

Drama conventions were utilised from all four groups of dramatic action (Neelands and Goode 2015) to develop context, narrative, poetic, and reflective opportunities throughout the rehearsal process. For example, after sharing the life story of Little John in scene four, the researchers began to structure a context for the community acting participants to support their developing belief in the unfolding action. This was achieved through the drama convention of *Unfinished Materials*. Here the researchers recreated a partial letter of the eviction notice which Little John and his wife would have received. The community acting participants then built upon the clues within the letter to construct and explore the developing themes, events and meanings suggested within the text. Next, the researchers and community acting participants developed the unfolding narrative of the scene through the drama convention of *Critical Events*. Here the two community acting participants developed their understanding of their characters through the life's turning point of receiving the eviction letter, which represented a clear moment of choice and decision making for the couple. It was at this point that the community acting participant representing Little John, suggested that his character might be unable to read the letter, thus adding to the scene's unfolding tension. This was accepted by the other actor, who was playing his wife, and thus an added complexity to the storyline was created. Building upon this discovery, the researchers introduced the poetic drama convention of *Small-group playmaking* where the community acting participants enacted what

they thought would happen to them (and their family) if they were evicted. This resulted in a scene which depicted Little John and his wife living in the 'poor house' with little hope of returning to the land they loved. Finally, using the reflective convention of a **Character Box**, the community acting participants undertook a character analysis based upon their actions, dialogue and the things others might say about them. Once they identified characteristics, they then gathered objects which represented aspects of the character's life, placing them into a suitcase and the actors shared their stories and their reasons for the selection of their chosen objects with one another.

Bennachie promenade performance scenario in eight episodic scenes

Episodic scene 1 - Thieves' mark - a keyhole and location scene.



Image 3: Keyhole scene

The audience happen upon the Laird, Colonel Leslie of Balquhain, and his factor (a rent collector for the Laird's estate) discussing the placing of boundary stones to mark out ownership rights, issue eviction notices and demolish the crofts for tree planting. This keyhole scene, through a process of 'slippage' (Kay 2000), transitions into a location scene, where the Laird and factor, frame the audience as poor board members and answer their questions. Next, the participant playing the Laird incorporated his own research into his character by including several facts about him within the dialogue. This included the Laird's wealth and business attributes.

Episodic Scene 2 - Cairn Cootie (two sisters) - a location scene.



Image 4: A location scene

The audience are reminded of their frame by the two sisters:

Aw look at thur posh shaes, an' thur fancy clathes. You will be fae thon Pair Baird ('Oh, look at their posh shoes, and their fancy clothes. You will be from the poor board').

The sisters raise concerns about the Laird, then describe their croft's appearance and living stating, 'We neid, nae help fae ony manie' ('We need no help from any man'). Next, they gift a unique erratic pebble, 'stane fae thon hill' ('stone from the hill'), instructing the audience to keep it safe on their travels and explaining to them that it will be needed later in the day. The two community acting participants here, during the rehearsals, were keen to include their love of knitting and indicated that they felt the sisters would knit too. This was welcomed by the researchers as they were following Smith's (2019) suggestion to encourage the performers to draw upon their own experiences. Further, they suggested during the rehearsal process using the drama convention of **Gifting** that the two women would not allow anyone to come to their door and not receive the gift of food, or leave empty handed. This resulted in the community acting participants baking bread with the audience and offering the pebble to take on their onward journey. Thus, their personal insights of the hill and the traditions of its people influenced the unfolding narrative (Koplowitz 2022).

Episodic Scene 2a - Stone dykers - a vista scene



Image 5: A vista scene

The audience pass a distant still-image of colonists constructing a stone dyke wall and are given time to observe the image - building upon Heathcote and Bolton's (1985: 185) concept of 'permission to stare'. Permission to stare enables participants to observe the action without acting. This offers protection to participants when they feel involved in a scene while remaining objective (Wooster 2016).

Episodic Scene 3 - The Buchting place (The Ceilidh Rehearsal) - a location scene



Image 6: A location scene

During the site visit the researchers discovered an open and flat level platform on the hill. The researchers were initially unsure of why and how best to incorporate this location into the narrative. Upon pointing this space out to the community acting participants one suggested it was an ideal place for a ceilidh and then and then spontaneously led the group in a traditional Scottish dance. Such was the group's enjoyment that it was decided to incorporate this into the narrative of the day. Consequently, it became a scene in which the audience hear Ceilidh music from a distance and in meeting with the players they are invited to participate and informed that this is a musical rehearsal for festivities at a handfasting due to take place that evening. The rehearsal is interrupted by a colonist arriving and explaining that Colonel Balquhain's factor is enroute to evict Alexander Little John.

Episodic Scene 4 - Shepherd's lodge (eviction notice) - a location scene.



Image 7: A location scene

The Little Johns are wary of the audience, stressing that they are self-sufficient and require no help. During their discussions, the factor's henchman arrives with an eviction notice. The Little Johns are illiterate and request an audience member to read the letter aloud and subsequently refuse to leave their home.

Episodic Scene 5 - The Quarry (handfasting) - a location scene.

Image 8: A location scene

During the initial site visit one community acting participant suggested that she felt this location to be a special place of love. Using the acting participant's suggestion, the researchers adopted the drama convention **Ritual** during rehearsals to establish a wedding between two young lovers of the hill. One community acting participant suggested that the colonists would have likely used a handfasting and leaping the broom (both traditions of the time). As such, they were incorporated into the scene. It should be noted, that two people from each audience group were invited to become the young people to be married and the remaining audience members became wedding guests. The audience meet a colonist who welcomes them into the quarry to rehearse the

forthcoming handfasting. A handfasting binds a man and woman together for one year and a day in a trial marriage. Thereafter, the couple can marry or end their handfast without consequence. During the ceremony the couple make a commitment to one another for 'as long as love shall last' with their hands clasped and fastened together with a cord, forming an infinity symbol. The couple then take their first step together by 'leaping the broom' - a wooden broom is placed at their feet for them to step over symbolising the first steps of their journey as a couple. Finally, the couple drink from a quaich which is passed around the audience.

Episodic Scene 6 - Tap o' the Hill (peat-cutters) - a passing place scene.



Image 9: A passing place scene

The audience pass three jovial peat-cutters who share their stories, songs, jokes and explain peat-cutting. Passing examples of peat, and the tools they used to cut it, the characters remind the audience of colony life and that they do not require (or want) their support as they have land to work. The community acting participants independently sourced the correct peat cutting equipment from the university museum staff to support their performance.

Episodic Scene 7 - Crossing the water (Stone dyke wall) - a location scene.

Image 10: A location scene

The audience meet and question four stone dykers on a break, from rebuilding a wall, playing music, singing songs, telling stories and eating lunch. As noted above this scene evolved from the site visit with the community acting participant (who was also a Bailie) keen to demonstrate to the audience how the crofters worked the land. Additionally, the community acting participant suggested the use of a traditional song during the rehearsal process. Adopting the drama convention of **Soundtracking** the community acting participants used stones and sticks (alongside the playing of a guitar) to establish a melody which they shared with the audience.

Episodic Scene 8 - The Gowk Stane (mystical stone) - a location scene.

The audience hear a harp, played by the spirit of the hill, who welcomes and asks them to circle the Gowk Stane explaining its history and mystical power. Next, the audience are invited to sing along with the spirit while touching their pebble (issued in episodic Scene 2) against the Gowk Stane hoping for a better future. The spirit reminds the audience of their connection (and ghosting) of the hill like those who have gone before them and who have yet to come. This scene evolved due to one community acting participant sharing her love of harp music and her skills as a storyteller. The community acting participant would visit the site outside of the rehearsal process and spend time writing music and poetry based on her thoughts as to how the colonists would have behaved during the evictions.



Image 11: A location scene

Therefore, with the above in mind, the hill itself began to provide the 'potential, structure, form, content and participants for the piece' (Oddey 1994: 125).

Below is a video record of the whole performance.



Video: *The Day The World Changed*.

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/rpv7VYUhwF4?feature=oembed>

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Why do participants engage in local site-specific promenade performance?
2. What are participants' views on devising a local site-specific promenade performance through a drama conventions approach?
3. What are participants' thoughts on using site-specific promenade performance to enact local history?
4. What skills do participants identify as being developed from participating in local site-specific promenade performance?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were based upon the British Educational Research Association's 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (BERA 2011) and were approved by the University of Aberdeen's College of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics and Governance Committee. Participants attended an information sharing on the drama component of the research and participated in a question-and-answer session. The research purpose, its aims and questions arising from the process were shared with the participants and their right to anonymity, confidentiality, withdrawal and consent was underlined.

Data collection through participant questionnaire

Participants completed a written questionnaire approximately 4-6 weeks after the event to provide time for reflection. Questionnaires were distributed, via email and post, and participants were invited to return or destroy them. To protect confidentiality, no names were required on the questionnaire. All e-mails were deleted with responses coded and securely stored on a password protected database. Data was also collected in the form of pictures and video of the embodied theatrical experiences.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by the two researchers with each reviewing the other's work. All responses were initially read, to develop a sense of the answers, then thematically coded establishing patterns, commonalities and disparities. The researchers reviewed the assigned codes and amalgamated them to create a working thematic schematic. Finally, for ease of reading, all coded answers were grouped together in individual themes and copied onto one document (Creswell 2007).

Discussion

Research question 1 - Why do participants engage in local site-specific promenade performance?

Initially, researchers created a poster and press release to establish a group, however, this produced only a limited uptake. The researchers felt the project required at least 20 participants owing to the scale of the physical locations that were to be used in devising and performance. Drawing upon Kuppers' (2007: 62) suggestion that a project should be, 'embedded in its social, cultural and natural environment', the researchers approached local senior, drama and music groups inviting them to an information day at Bennachie. Speaking directly to these groups enabled the community participants to share their physical knowledge of the site which factored into their decision to join the project,

I also wanted the experience of actually being on the Bennachie Hill which is one of my favourite places to be (P5).

Their decision to join, because of their close proximity to Bennachie, confirms Lippard's (1997: 7) suggestion that the 'lure of the local' is 'the pull of the place that operates on each of us'. This first person contact on site led to the creation of a viable group of 25 participants.

Somers (2017) suggests that residents' community knowledge is valuable in creating community theatre. This was true of the community acting participants who had an historical awareness of the hill/colony and wished to explore this,

to celebrate drystone-dyking and its role in the heritage of the Bennachie Colony (P4)

while sharing their knowledge with an audience to,

help people coming to the drama get an understanding of what it was like to live in the Colony (P2)

in an entertaining manner,

entertain visitors and local people in an interesting and interactive way and have fun at the same time (P8).

Applied theatre seeks to question, challenge and change understandings (Landy and Montgomery 2012) in non-theatrical settings to raise,

awareness about how we are situated in the world and what we as individuals and as communities might do to make the world a better place.

(Taylor 2003: xx).

Casey (2001: 684) suggests that the relationship between self and place is linked,

In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place.

Participants wished to develop their understanding of the hill, their local community and self, 'I hoped to learn even more about one of my favourite places (P6)' and 'to get closer to the hill and people who lived there (P2).' This supports Somers' (2017: 17) suggestion that community theatre,

takes account of the particular histories and concerns of the communities in which the work is made and performed.

Therefore, the community acting participants developed their philosophical understanding of the colony through their engagement with research into place and historical context (Koplowitz 2022). This concurs with Nicholson's (2014) suggestion that applied theatre praxis connects theatre, politics, ethics, globalisation and community together through an aesthetic medium.

Developing an artists' community, forging new friendships, and working with different people was a reason for participation,

A chance to meet new people and participate in a drama group performance (P5).

This confirms Somers' (2017: 21) suggestion that theatre is a shared activity which brings people together to,

discover and articulate the stories of the community within vertical rather than horizontal age-related groupings.

Forming a community of artists, 'I liked the idea of reenacting history with others (P3) while developing drama skills factored in reasons to participate, 'Experience new forms of drama. Meet a diversity of people (P9).'

Discoveries

It appears that there are multiple reasons to support why community acting participants might join a site-specific promenade performance. Future research and drama practitioners might wish to consider creating work with people who have a local connection with the site and enjoy spending time there. Further, they might wish to work with community participants who are interested in sharing their knowledge and understanding of the site with others; this might include specific skills which are situational. Also, it appears that if community participants have a sense that they can develop existing or new skills and knowledge of the site, then they are likely to participate. This might include theatre making, social interaction and forging and building upon new friendships. In sum, researchers and theatre makers working in site-specific theatre, who might wish to develop community participant recruitment, should develop recruitment strategies which acknowledges community participants' social and cultural responsibility (by celebrating their knowledge and understanding of a site) for an audience through performance.

Research question 2 - What are participants' views on devising a local site-specific promenade performance through a drama conventions approach?

Kuppers (2007) suggests that there are many ways of working with community groups to connect with a place highlighting pictures, historical workshops and personal research. This project used all three, including Bennachie's historical literature, photographs and workshops with archaeological researchers, including the site itself, as the devising starting point. Neelands and Goode (2015: 150) suggest that a starting point should be rooted in the human experience and its ability to,

bring the experience into the intellectual and emotional comprehension of the participants (helping the group to make human contact with the experience... so that responses and questions can be shared, and some element of the experience can be located within their own personal and collective experience.

Bennachie's historical records helped to trigger the groups' interest to make sense of, and flesh out, their understanding of the place and its/their memories (Kuppers 2007).

The community acting participants made imaginative connections on an individual level and then collectively to the source material which developed the scenario,

Although the basic outline was there because it had to fit what happened on Bennachie at the time of the colonists, ideas were interweaved (sic) at rehearsal time (P9).

Therefore, poetic licence encouraged group and individual contributions during the rehearsal process and the scenario supported the community acting participants' artistic interpretation of their individualised episodes. However, some community acting participants indicated that their understanding of the format developed during a site visit,

The explanation was initially quite clear and once we visited the site everything fell into place (P8).

Adopting a drama conventions approach enabled the researchers to introduce conventions, as the activity developed, which matched or challenged the group's response (Neelands and Goode 2015). However, the improvisational structure of a drama conventions approach wasn't to everyone's initial satisfaction,

a little alarmed, to start with, by the informal try-it-and-see rehearsal approach, especially as I wasn't used to being part of a performance group – but the organisers' encouragement, along with my fellow actors' patience, skill and enthusiasm helped a lot (P4).

Nevertheless, community acting participants valued the artistic freedom to interpret stimuli and the inclusion of their ideas in the final production through active imaginings,

Happy that any suggestions were gladly received. Felt really happy that my idea to rip up the Laird's letter was incorporated right away. This definitely added to our scene. Felt everyone was valued and listened to (P9).

Moving into the symbolic dimension of the drama process enabled the community acting participants to create a 'here and now' experience which was representative of the source material. For example, some participants noted that their knowledge of traditions were included in the final production,

I enjoyed adding some of my knowledge of Bennachie or perhaps of Scottish life at that time, to the 'script'. I came to the realisation at one point that the action of jumping over the brush during the handfasting ceremony was something that had been carried forward, I remembered this being mentioned in the context of 'I'm kirk'it noo, nae jist bidin' wi' him ower the brush' (now having been married formally by a man of the cloth in the kirk (church) or elsewhere). I thought it was a good idea to mention this addition during one of the scenes I was happy to feel I could share this with others (P6).

This suggests that the community acting participants developed their understanding of the theatre structure and its symbolic potential to generate further and deeper meaning as the drama progressed. Participant 6's suggestion of the brush served as a reference point that bound the previous sections of the drama. The use of ceremony, ritual and re-enactment in this scene helped to develop a sense of atmosphere which built credibility, aroused feelings and moods that were appropriate to the context and the real experience of both participant and audience. It also shows how today's apparent liberality is an echo of earlier times. Participant 2 suggested that the atmosphere generated, via the drama conventions, helped the audience to,

feel something of the almost intangible atmosphere of the places.

This concurs with Neelands and Goode's (2015: 154) suggestion that,

Because theatre is always live, atmosphere has a special importance for the audience in creating levels of mood, context and circumstance.

The learning potential of drama has been widely documented in drama education literature (Heathcote and Bolton 1985). Neelands and Goode (2015: 157) suggest that devising through drama conventions supports an active inquiry mode which helps community participants,

discover more about human experience and the aesthetic possibilities of theatre...

An active enquiry model might challenge community participants' knowledge of the human issue being discussed. Neelands and Goode's (2015) suggestion was confirmed as community acting participants highlighted that their understanding and interpretations of the colonists and Laird changed because of the convention devising process,

Knew a good bit about the hill and inhabitants but had not fully appreciated that the hill was not forested at the time of the colonies (P1).

I realized how much the lairds controlled events (P3).

Learning through imagined experience requires the community acting participants to commit to the exploration of the colonists' lives through the process of suspending disbelief. This enables them to discover and make their own meanings. Community acting participant 1 highlights this understanding through their engagement,

I did feel very much how the colonists must have felt and how hard life on the hill must have been.

Therefore, community acting participants' character development benefits from their individual research as they integrate their understanding of role(s) and the site in contrast to their life experiences. This confirms Cordileone and Whorton's (2015: 299) suggestion that devising site-specific theatre is responsive to the,

living presence of the actors, lines spoken, exploration of architecture, ebb and flow of ever-changing audiences, and how these things constantly affect the dynamics of a given space.

Discoveries

Site-specific theatre makers and researchers working with community acting participants should seek to visit the site early into the rehearsal process. Also, if the site is of historical significance, then they should share relevant artefacts (or support others to share their own artefacts) with the group. This might help the group to develop a connection and begin to develop a psychological, cognitive, and aesthetic engagement with the site. Further, as site-specific theatre might be new to the community acting group, then it is advisable for facilitators (researchers/theatre makers) to discuss the challenges and opportunities of this style of theatre in conjunction with a walk of the site. In doing so, it might provide clarity to those unfamiliar with the approach.

Similarly, it is important that the group facilitators (researchers/theatre makers) offer additional support to the community acting participants when devising without a traditional script. This is because some community acting participants might be unaware of the devising process and come to the work with expectations as to what their role is within the theatre making process. Therefore, researchers/theatre makers should appreciate participant knowledge and experience when devising site-specific work and structure rehearsals that support their creative engagement (Beirne and Knight 2004). This might include devising workshops that offer greater familiarity towards conventions, before commencing rehearsals, as well as including additional rehearsal time focusing on improvisation tasks. In turn, and due to the learning potential of drama, it might develop the community participants' knowledge of the site.

Research question 3 - What are participants' thoughts on using site-specific promenade performance to enact local history?

Community acting participants understood how space supported storytelling by providing the audience with a 'sense of place' (P10) which they highlighted as a strength of the work,

I think on this occasion the site was the perfect backdrop to emphasise the story being told, to bring it to life and I'm sure and hope, for any future projects as much care would be given (P6).

The community acting participants' relationship with space developed as they engaged with it,

In our group we all still feel an attachment and sense of belonging in the quarry and a sense of pride in bringing the past back into the future (P1).

The theatricality of place provides a structure for the audience that defines and signals their frame and engagement in the production without fully controlling their actions. Site specific audiences might arrive as 'theatre goers' and through the process of being an 'onlooker' (Goffman 1974: 129-130) develop into an onlooker-participant as they enter the stage set directly and not an auditorium as a traditional theatre audience (Jackson 2000). Participation between actor and audience was, at certain points, based on a mixture between first- and third-person interpretation. Osterud (1992: 18) suggests first person interpretation, 'creates a sense of immediacy that makes the past seem real' to an audience. In the first episodic scene, community acting participants used first person interpretation for the Laird and Factor. In doing so, they discussed the context for the forthcoming evictions framing the audience for questions. Once the Laird acknowledged the audience (framed as members of the Poor Board) the scene transitioned from a keyhole into a location scene. This enabled the audience to shift from observer to participant observer by asking the characters questions in role. Participant 7 suggested that the audience,

were convinced that the laird and his henchman were the 'baddies'...We found that, because the audience did get involved and also sometimes mildly angry at us, we had achieved what was required, and this was rewarding, as a performer.

Nonetheless, first person interpretation might create,

a false-sense that it is possible to 'know the truth' about past realities.
(Osterud 1992: 18).

Giles (1997: 2) indicates that reenacting historical characters, using modern language for a contemporary audience would, 'not be a true representation of the times.' Third person interpretation enables participants, to use their own voices, and in period costume, to communicate with an audience without generating stereotypical character responses. Participant 6 suggests that being 'herself' helped to share the role of peat cutting,

I think it was a brilliant way of putting this particular story across. Being 'allowed' to add our own interpretation in 'oor ane spik' (our own spoken word) was good.

Audience and participant interaction, using historical artifacts and documents, was highlighted as an enjoyable factor,

It's a good way to involve the audience more closely with the drama. I think you have to give the audience the means to get involved – whether by asking questions or by physical action (P7).

P7's comments concur with Jackson's (2000: 213) suggestion that site-specific performance helps to,

stimulate engagement and insight into the past [rather] than the safer and more traditional methods which privilege the word, the document and the well-packaged textbook.

Therefore, participatory theatre engages audiences in developing their understanding of the past and its multiple interpretations. Participant 2 provides an example of audience multiple interpretation,

I felt there was a good interaction in that on the political side, one member of the audience tried to put down the colonists saying that they were basically scroungers and the rest of the audience rallied in the defence of the settlers. It seemed quite a political moment where the underdog was being championed (P2).

The multiple perspective of audience members outlined by P2 above, echoes Jackson's (2000: 213) comments,

The use of participatory theatre *can* open up the past precisely to those multiple perspectives and to the complexities and minutiae of the social context that most historians now stress.

However, if the audience is to believe they are entering 'as if' worlds in a new time and place they require performers that have a secure knowledge of the history and adequate performance skills,

a Brechtian capacity to 'demonstrate' the character, and the TIE performer's ability to be both teacher and actor at the same time (Jackson 2000: 212).

Community participants reflected on their ability to achieve Jackson's (2000) suggestion stating that similar productions would require, 'confident performers as it's a different skill to having set lines (P9)' and that it, 'put you on your metal coming in with answers that were acceptable (P11)' which was, 'daunting at first...but it was good fun (P7)'. This suggests that inexperienced participants require additional time and support to negotiate the complexities of historical performance and maintaining frame.

Community acting participants indicated that the audience required support with their frame and interaction; this is especially true for international guests and those who took photographs.

...if audience members are to be 'in character' they need to be clearly briefed at the start. This didn't happen at Bennachie. As a result, some international visitors had little or no idea either of the context of the plot or their intended role. Audience interaction became complicated when it was uncertain when audience questions (which were encouraged) should be answered 'in character' or from today's perspective. Similar issues occurred with people wanting photographs of actors 'on set' at the end of a scene (P4).

During rehearsals, to ensure role continuity and believability, researchers outlined the need for participants to answer questions in character. However, it appears that during the complexities of performance, this advice was not always followed.

Discoveries

Community participants acknowledge that performing in an historical site requires a lived understanding of the space to devise a narrative that is sensitive to its needs. Further, it appears that the community acting participants relationship with the space develops through the devising and performance process. Therefore, researchers and theatre makers might wish to consider how they can support a sense of belonging to the space in the community acting participants, while being cognisant how this sense of belonging changes throughout time and interaction (with one another and the site itself).

Community acting participants performing in historical site-specific productions appear to enjoy using their own knowledge and understanding of the site, and interpretations of it, to support dialogue and characterisation. This is aided using historical artefacts within the devising and performance, as they seem to support community acting participants to share their knowledge and interpretation of the site with an audience. In turn, this develops new interpretations of the site (and its artefacts) as the community acting participants begin to create felt historical knowledge through their interactions, and multiple perspectives, with the site, artefacts and audience.

In future, specified rehearsals could be offered to support community acting participants interaction with audience members who struggle maintaining their frame. Future researcher and site-specific theatre makers should consider if additional audience support is required, at a visitor centre, with staff explaining the historical period and the process of interactive role.

Research question 4 - What skills do participants identify as being developed from participating in local site-specific promenade performance?

Community acting participants developed a greater understanding of their identity, in relation to the hill, from participating in the project,

It gave me nice memories of the past. My mother's side of the family were farming (P10),

which often linked to similar evictions in Scottish history,

It reminded me of the Highland Clearances as my mother was Highland (P9).

Harvie (2005: 42) suggests that site-specific experiences can work as a 'mnemonic trigger' evoking past memories. Community acting participants drew upon their histories to develop a greater understanding of character and self,

Drystone-dyking is very much part of my sense of identity. It was very fulfilling being able to express this in terms both practical and dramatic, while at the same time celebrating local heritage. As the other three actors in the dyking scene had analogous multi-level links to their personal life-experience (farming; knitting), I would suggest that this is one of the key benefits to be gained from community-based drama of this nature. In fact during the process it became less and less relevant to try and separate one's own life from one's role in the drama. In that sense there was a true integration between art and community, and between our 21st century personae and the 19th century Colonists (P4).

Boal (1995: 43) offers the term Metaxis to describe,

the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image

which enables a participant to perform and explore a character while simultaneously retaining their own identity (Walker et al 2016). Participant 6 summarises this below,

I learned, or felt, during the process that the peat cutter I helped to portray wasn't that different to myself. I've had to work most of my life, sometimes harder than others. I was born and grew up in Aberdeenshire, married young, (aye kirk'it) had three healthy children I'm pleased to say. This project helped me to remember some of my journey to here and now (P6).

Site-specific theatre creates a spatial history which mediates the past and present, including the identities of the past, present and future (Harvie 2005). Pearsons' (2012) suggestion that a site's history creates a text which blurs the lines between ghost and host might be similar to the process of metaxis. For example, participants draw upon their previous versions of self (or self-ghosts) and interact with the host, and previous ghosts, to create a new text. Therefore, participants enter the fictional world to enact previous ghosts by drawing upon their past experiences (self-ghosts) and connecting this to their colonist roles (who are now ghosts). Consequently, participants' rationality is based in the 'bodily experience and the embodied mind' (Wright 2011: 113) to create a new understanding of self, host and ghost.

Performance skill development is not necessarily a priority for devising with nonprofessional community acting participants. Instead, the focus of community devised work might centre on,

communal making or discussion, and collaborative endeavour towards performance (Heddon and Milling, 2006: 156).

Heddon and Milling's (2006) suggestions are addressed by the community acting participants when they indicated that their, 'confidence' (P2), 'communication' (P8), 'taking part' (P1) and 'sense of camaraderie' (P2) developed. However, participants also noted that their performance skills developed such as: 'ad libbing' (P3); 'costuming' (P4); 'storytelling' (P5, P10 and P11); 'singing' (P6); 'script writing' (P7); 'reacting...remembering the key points' (P9) which supports Gieseckam and Knight's (2000) suggestion that community-based theatre develops participants' skills.

Overall research discoveries

Community acting participants suggest that by contributing to this project developed their understanding of self. This is due to their developing knowledge of the hill and their place in relation to it. Interestingly, the community acting participants suggested that this enabled them to relate their life to the people who had populated the hill throughout time. As such, future researchers and site-specific theatre makers might wish to support community acting participants reflect on their own personal history and how this relates to the site and the people that lived in and around it throughout time. In doing so, the site itself becomes a holding form for community participants to negotiate new meanings to established and narratives. This enables them to begin to create new personal narratives which are based upon their ongoing relationship with the site, its history and their memories.

Researchers and site-specific theatre makers might wish to consider how they support the development of an ensemble approach to devising with community acting performers. This is because it appears that community performers, in this project, acknowledge this as an aspect of the work which helped to engage and maintain their commitment. Further, it appears that the community participants appreciated developing skills in theatre making and performance. This suggests that researchers and site-specific theatre makers might wish to be mindful how they are explicitly developing these skills with their community acting participants – even if this is not an intended outcome of the work.

Final Observations

This paper outlines the potential reasons why inexperienced community acting participants might join a local site-specific promenade performance; their views on devising for site-specific theatre; how site-specific theatre supports the historical understanding of the site itself; and the skills that community participants develop through their involvement in making, performing, and reflecting on the work.

Although the researchers acknowledge that the reasons for participant engagement is unique to this project, readers might wish to reflect on this research's discoveries and determine how they can support their work within their individual context. In doing so, they should consider how they begin to forge, and support, a community of people (with various experiences, knowledge, and expertise) in devising and performing a relevant drama that builds upon individuals' knowledge and personal history of the site while being mindful as to how this might develop during the drama work.

Culture and place are intertwined (Casey 1997) and sometimes our relationship between place and self can become obscured. However, as this study shows, participants developed their understanding of self and others (and of the place itself) through their direct experience with the site and social engagement. Further, community participants suggest that they are likely to engage with site-specific theatre if they have physical and emotional connections to the performance place. Should this be the case, participants develop a shared identity as a theatrical ensemble, based on social relationships and co-creation, to create socially engaged applied theatre and drama work. Working together, to make meanings in social circumstances, enabled participants to discuss and reflect on their understandings of self and other (and of the location itself) to make, explore and communicate meaning through theatrical form.

Devising through a drama conventions approach empowered the participants to manipulate time, space and presence through imagination, interaction and their interpretations of human behaviour and experience. Through these interactions, participants, in this specific locale, developed and shared their knowledge of the hill and its peoples both in and outside the fiction. As the fiction unfolded participants developed a greater understanding of self as they began to recognise the interplay of relationships in both the drama and the reality of the outside world. These discoveries could well apply to other locations, and stories throughout the world.



Image 12: The Gowk Stane [see Episodic Scene 8]

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Credits

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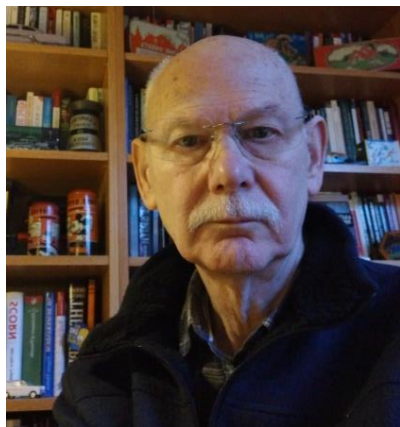
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