

*Romanian Theatre as Public Service.
A Critical Perspective of the Last Decades*

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Abstract: This paper aims at synthetizing, from a critical perspective, the trajectory of the Romanian subsidy scheme of performance - mainly theatre - institutions, over the last century. Our basic argument is that, despite all the major political changes which took place after the First and the Second World War, despite the succession of dominant ideologies, the subsidy scheme has mainly remained the same, although the amounts invested by the authorities have varied from a time to another. The below analysis focuses on the relation between the political project, the state apparatus (both central, and local), the legislative system, the economy, and mentalities, in an attempt to prove the strange conservatism of a unique administrative model, as well as the lack of vision of the various political regimes with regard to the public service dimension of theatre art.

Keywords: National Theatre, Culture, Politics, Policies on culture

Long before the trend of European Cultural Capitals entered Romania through the "Sibiu Customs"², in the summer of 1994, we came into contact with something which, back then, in the UK, was called *City of Drama*. In short, following some sort of public vote based on criteria like coherence, prestige, and municipal logic of the program, the Arts Council (a different type of Ministry of Culture) appointed a provincial capital or a smaller city which, for twelve months, became the host of a cursive, mainly (British and

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² In 2007, the very year Romania joined the European Union, the city of Sibiu was a European Capital of Culture, in partnership with Luxembourg.

international) theatre festival, to which music, dance, fine arts, ethnography, or cinema were also associated. It was a continuous celebration; to fund this, complex public-private partnerships were established, under a unique, specialized management, including logistic services only functional throughout the unfolding of the event, but supported by an impressive number of volunteers of all ages. Almost all performance spaces were involved - in their capacity of hosts, tour partners, or associate producers -, whether conventional or unconventional, from traditional venues to universities, high schools, museums, art galleries, malls, or mere cafe shops. Thus, the "theatrical" interest shifted from London, outwards, in a conscious, systematic, and programmatic movement. Or, more correctly, the City of Drama was supposed to produce a cultural re-centring, given to both the audiences and local production, through a rich, diverse, polychromous, stimulating run of cultural production, from far and wide (they, of course, included tours outside the UK).

In a way, the example above could serve as a far-away, serene starting point for a serious, non-circumstantial, unprejudiced discussion on the relations between the cities in the province and the capital. I would paraphrase one of Albee's lines in *Zoo Story*, which fits this procedure perfectly: the healthiest way to get from one point on the map to another is to take a long (reflection) detour.

Preliminaries: Edge and Centre

We think it is totally irrelevant to repeat truisms about the fact that, from time to time, the province - accidentally or in a concentrated manner - creates more interesting, more courageous, or simply more famous performances than the average productions of Bucharest. Such discussions (the national theatres in Iași, Cernăuți, or Craiova producing more consistent seasons than the one in Bucharest) started at the beginning of the 20th century; each time, they appeared to be entirely justified, but, in the long run, they proved completely sterile.

And then, in this day and place, courageous towards what? Interesting compared to whom? Momentarily, can we still refer to a unitary theatrical canon, aesthetics, which makes such judgements partly viable or at least legitimate - as private and independent companies expand unprecedentedly and compete with subsidized theatres, often making surprising aesthetic

proposals and overcoming huge production difficulties? Any remotely pertinent critical opinion is based on a certain contextual horizon, a complex inventory of functional aesthetics and, only then, some kind of an axiology...

I would therefore, via the above-mentioned detour, start from breaking a hypocritical Romanian consensus on a principle of democratic normality, i.e. a theatre production is a public service. I call this consensus hypocritical, because no decision - including signing a management contract, the budgets, requested or approved, of institutions funded from public money - is honestly based on questioning (with a transformative purpose) the relation between the offer of theatre products and its beneficiary, the spectator.

For over 150 years, subsidized performance institutions hiding under the umbrella of "culture" have had the same functional definition: some people, the artists, employed or paid based on an individual contract, produce a show, which is part of a repertory built on the intersection of ever-changing angles: the prestige of the playwright, of the lead actor, of the director, the feasibility of production costs, the *photofits* - only confirmed through the director's/manager's pre-existing experience - of the few audience categories which go to the city or neighbourhood theatre in a more or less constant manner. Each of the first elements (artists and manager) of the above-triangle is a construct determined by the accidental context (which is, at the same time, political). However, even though, for more than half a century, we have had enough, both quantitative, and qualitative sociological tools to determine its substance, the potential audience remains an imaginary construct. And, sometimes, this is closer to reality, while, other times, it isn't, right? What remains stable, even immobile, in this algorithm is not the prestige or the costs, but the absolute passivity that makes up the profile of the audience, regardless of their age category, their profession, their knowledge interests, and spectatorial practice, etc. (As far as I know, from time to time, some institutions still use questionnaires to measure the spectators' satisfaction regarding a certain performance, repertory, etc. Nevertheless, over the last 25 years, three or four theatres have conducted some more serious studies, but their results were rather usable by the marketing departments).

In order to represent a real public service, the theatre institution should aim for a very different translation of the concept, both vertically, and horizontally: in the field of culture, a public service means a permanent mapping - starting from an assumed set of functions - of present beneficiaries, of existing or possible relations between artists and spectators,

canvassing and stimulating both artists, and spectators of the future. This cannot fulfil its meaning unless we change the perspective: the primary target is not the conservation of the apparatus but the development of new audience categories, and thus the offering of a greater access to culture³.

Luxury Items without Excise Duties?

The defect perception - and conception - underlying the traditional immobility of Romanian cultural policies (and, in this context, theatre is just a mere space of maximum visibility) is the (hoary) conviction (signalling a serious deficit in the development of national civic culture) that acts of culture are luxury items exempt from surcharges. Simply put, the theatre, opera, or museum ticket is a kind of a symbolic replacement for the receipt issued by a perfume shop; it is less expensive because it includes no excise duties, but it is, in fact, subsidized, to an overwhelming extent, by the state (i.e. by us all). Cultural goods are no "necessities", they have nothing to do with the "daily basket", people can live - and millions actually do so - without ever setting foot in a performance hall, without ever listening to a concert, without knowing anything about Turandot, or without entering an art, history, or ethnographic museum. And a performance is still a luxury and a form of entertainment, as long as the act of subsidizing it is - consistently - seen as a type of "planned loss", bringing no tangible benefit to the budget...

Or, to strictly stick to the issue of theatre, the nineteenth-century thinking model - regarding the literacy of a small bourgeois audience and the synchronisation with European institutions and events, but ONLY at a symbolic level, through "subsidized entertainment" - is far from enough. Not that "entertainment" itself is bad or shady. But, to begin with, because the objectives which made this model legitimate, first of all those related to increasing the level of "general knowledge" of the urban population, or to ascertain national/ethnic unity and spirituality, etc., have lost their initial meaning. From the viewpoint of such objectives, the canon of a "great

³ For further details on this subject, see Iulia Popovici, "Cum am ratat iarăși reforma" ["How We Missed The Reform Again"], in *Observator cultural*, no. 539, August 27 (2010); Iulia Popovici, "Teatru fără bani de la stat?" ["Theatre Without State's Money?"], in *Dilema veche*, September 5-11 (2013); Iulia Popovici, "Pentru cine facem teatru" ["For Whom Do We Make Theatre"], in *Dilema veche*, no. 528, March 27 - April 2 (2014); Iulia Popovici, "Managementul nostru cel de toate zilele" ["Our Daily Management"], in *Observator cultural*, no. 805, January 15 (2016).

culture" (national and tending to universal) was, and remained, throughout the entire past century, indestructible, while exposure to the "masterpiece" was the strategic way (unique and indisputable) on the road to civilization, progress, and Europeanism.

Since, unlike in the case of literature or fine arts, in performing arts, this model was never contradicted by a counterculture, independent from the state subsidised one, be it in the interwar or in the communist period⁴, we have lost another twenty something years involuntarily, conserving the damaging vision about luxury items exempt from surcharges. And the distance between public institutions which have access to resources and the so-dynamic independent space that developed after 2000, with no or with minimum access to resources (through project bids organized by the Administration of National Cultural Fund - AFCN, or by the local authorities), has already created an apparently insuperable gap.

No, the acts of artistic expression, cultural products, and, finally, theatre performances, are no luxury, and, at least in European culture, they only follow the rules of the free market to a negligible extent⁵. And their social advantage is not strictly related to "spiritual enrichment", as defined in boilerplate, since the Enlightenment until today. Especially in the field of performing arts, their social advantage stems from their cohesive-participatory function and, as a factor of the continuity with the past, from their educational function, in the broad sense⁶.

⁴ Years ago, I spoke extensively about the fact that, starting from the 19th, and especially in the 20th century, both subsidized national theatres and private companies, reproduced the very same repertory model, with small and insignificant commercial differences; during the Communist rule, due to the centralization, the nationalization, and the exponential growth of subsidies throughout the country, the model was reproduced and preserved intact - differences only appeared after 2000, as the independent sector developed in a dynamic manner. In this sense, see Miruna Runcan, *Modelul teatral românesc [The Romanian Theatre Model]*, (Bucharest: UNITEXT, 2001).

⁵ Ruth Towse (ed.), *A Handbook for Cultural Economics*. Second Edition, (Cheltham/Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2011). See also "Vasile Ernu în dialog cu Iulia Popovici" ["Vasile Ernu in a dialogue with Iulia Popovici"], in *Adevărul*, October 25 (2017), http://adevarul.ro/cultura/teatru/nimeni-n-a-descoperit-ultimii-500-ani-metoda-teatrul-opera-muzica-simfonica-devina-profitabile-vasile-ernu-dialog-iulia-popovici-1_59f0443b5ab6550cb877d320/index.html

⁶ We should highlight that, despite the successive changes in the legislation regarding the organization and functioning of performing arts institutions, and regarding their management system, no significant improvements were seen in defining and implementing the condition of public service, as we are attempting to define here.

Edge and Centre

That, sometimes, certain theatre performances produced outside Bucharest are more coherent, stylistically more uniform, and run "smoothly" for a longer time than those from the capital, is rather easily explained from the viewpoint of the above-described unique perspective of repertory institutions. First of all, actor teams have a greater availability for concentrated, sympathetic, "campaign" effort demanded by prestigious directors, who take great pleasure in working in places where the actual rehearsal time is not limited to the (maximum) four, super rushed hours per day, as offered by Bucharest theatres. By now, this has become common practice.

Secondly, the same teams are, to a certain extent, much more motivated to achieve critical success, to be selected by national and international festivals, precisely because their theatre as such, as well as each cast member wishes to gain higher visibility, which, in the capital, seems to be taken for granted, through television stations, advertising, etc. In Bucharest, actors are in a constant rush to earn some extra money, be it through the radio, soap operas, adds, events organized outside the institution paying their salary, or from teaching at related theatre schools. Although it hasn't yet become a secondary activity, stage acting has little to do with the apostleship still preserved by actors outside the capital.

Finally, some - few - provincial festivals have a much stronger (though not always explicit, or consciously built) connection with the city's real heart beats, with the possible functions of a multi-layered cultural policy, than similar offers in the capital, especially the National Theatre Festival (FNT). For the underlying philosophy of FNT has very rarely exceeded its dominant condition from the 1990s, i.e. the "show case": "Here you are, this is what was produced this year in Romania." This is also the reason the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, with its multi-tier profile and based on a completely different philosophy (that of an international performance market, where Romanian and foreign shows can compete) has rightfully been perceived as outshining the one in Bucharest. And it is not all due to its cosmopolitanism.

I do not think it is healthy for us to keep referring to Romanian theatre using the terms of the false dialectics of edge-centre, since, on the one hand, it is deeply untrue, and, on the other, it clearly lacks equity. I believe that, if

finally perceived as a public service, Romanian theatre (as well as numerous other strata of cultural expression) deserves a complete (long overdue) makeover of its functions, procedures, and institutions, from a totally different perspective, especially with regards to its targeted the audiences and funding systems. Clear initiatives, active consistency, dedicated projects, participation, building new audiences - these are all pillars which should build diverse artistic communities, whether traditional or independent, from Bucharest and not only, guiding and multiplying their messages, their aesthetics, and their offer.

To this end, we need a syncretic restructuring of the legal system through which acts of culture are funded, in order to encourage both the rhythmical movement of urban centres producing high quality culture, as well as a fast shift from subsidizing culture as a "planned loss", to subsidizing an efficient public service, regardless of whether its producer is a state or an independent figure. Does anybody know when we will no longer be poor? Or when we will no longer be in a crisis? One thing is clear: theatre is still a luxury, who knows for how much longer. Cheap, therefore dispensable.

By the way, do you know which is the best National Theatre in Romania? The Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj. Do you know why? Because it (still) has a referential 'nation' – a compact community identified as a potential audience. The quibble above, which I keep referring to every time I find the opportunity, includes, at its core, an answer to the question in the title. Of course, by far not the only possible answer.

What was, what is, and what could a "National Theatre" be?

Like many other things whose names hide vague concepts, according to Romanian dictionaries, "*Teatru Național*" (National Theatre) is written with capitals. This shows – what else than – a symbolic status stronger than the mere and even 1/1 ratio between a signified and a signifier. In other words, as in the case of all vague concepts, the emotional-symbolic charge of the form is much greater than the material charge of its underlying content. In the modern (longer than a century and a half) life of Romanian culture, this emotional imbalance is downright hyperbolic. This teensy country, first made up through the lucky union of two mono-linguistic provinces, started with not one, but two National Theatres, in Iași, and Bucharest respectively. Then, overnight, in 1919, a third one was decreed in Cluj, during the siege;

immediately after 1920, three more, in Craiova, Cernăuți, and Chișinău (to be dissolved after more than a decade because of the economic crisis, only to be re-established four years later, just as spontaneously). Timișoara, which had suffered from the injustice of not having a subsidized theatre for a long time, received its National Theatre status after World War 2, while, through the symbolic nationalistic sowing "care" of Ceaușescu's policy, the former Székelys Theatre of Târgu-Mureș became, firstly bilingual, in the 60s, and then, in its turn, National, in the 80s.

Don't you find this phenomenon strange? Isn't it shivering to realise that, in the collective subconsciousness, which dictates symbolic perceptions, representations, and acts, the frustration regarding national unity proves much stronger than the motivation of the public service, i.e. than the trivial, natural need of a city, of a region, of a county, to have a theatre of its own? From their first organization-activist stage, Communists perceived this vain imbalance, born out of frustration, quite correctly, considering they set up and fed - despite the terrific shortages caused by the Soviet semi-occupation, by paying war debts and the costs of reconstruction - almost forty "State" and five "National" (of course, also "State") theatres.

The debate about the goal, the role, and the functions of a National Theatre (or about its mission, as we used to say) has been present in Romanian culture, like some kind of a compulsive genetic disorder, starting from mid-19th century and until now, its successive platoons including irrefutable heroes, coryphaei, martyrs, as well as demagogues, parvenus, cravens, and all kinds of riffraff, questionable politicians, and loud-mouthed trumps. Sure, almost all educated people know that Ion Ghica and Vasile Alecsandri were both not only famous writers and participants to the 1848 revolution, but also directors whose portrait still hangs in National Theatres; also, everybody knows that Eminescu struggled in vain for a vivid repertory, or that Ion Luca Caragiale, the father of modern playwriting, had both managerial ideas and talent in his theatrical management of the National in Bucharest, which didn't help him from being sabotaged and ultimately fired through the direct contribution of the associates, all of them celebrities who went down in history⁷.

What use is it to remember that the playwright Alexandru Davila and leading actor Nottara were at loggerheads, with the former leaving and

⁷ Șerban Cioculescu, *Viața lui I. L. Caragiale [The Life of I.L. Caragiale]*, (București: Editura pentru literatura, 1969).

independently establishing the most durable private company in the history of Romania, *Compania Davila*, now the *Bulandra Theatre*⁸? Or that Liviu Rebreanu set up the studio (that is not the *Creangă Theatre*); that, during difficult years, Camil Petrescu went above and beyond to renovate the legendary building on *Calea Victoriei St.*, but only managed to get himself cast out after only ten months, just like *Caragiale*⁹; that professor Tudor Vianu was the manager of a bombed building, just after the war, staging performances in the hall of the *St. Sava High School*¹⁰; that Zaharia Stancu did both good and bad things, while the new building was inaugurated by legendary actor-manager Radu Beligan, with one of Aurel Baranga's forgotten texts?

Nevertheless, far fewer people know that, to make peace, the manager who replaced Davila wrote a sample text about the purpose of the National Theatre. His name was Pompiliu Eliade and, like any self-respecting academic, decided, at that point, that the goal of the National Theatre was to be *a school for the many who searched for entertainment*¹¹. Well, in the end, the thing about "theatre being a school" has made and continues to make history, as anyone can include whatever crosses their mind in the "educational purpose".

And even less people know that, in 1922, an ephemeral manager, the lawyer and writer I. Valjean, with a highly subtle and open mind, went fishing for talented directors (not necessarily a trend on *Calea Victoriei St.*, nor in the provincial Nationals of the time), and set up the journal *Teatrul*, a real jewel¹². Moreover, few talk about the fact that, after a theoretical training that lasted for more than ten years, in the political asylum that was Marshal Antonescu's cohabitation with the fascist Legionnaires, Haig Acterian became the manager of the Bucharest National Theatre, with a view to achieving greatness, though he only managed to partially fulfil his plans, as, after the Rebellion, he was sent to the front line and died¹³.

⁸ Mihai Vasiliu, *Alexandru Davila*, (Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, 1965).

⁹ Aurel Petrescu, *Opera lui Camil Petrescu [The Works of Camil Petrescu]*, (Bucureşti: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1972).

¹⁰ Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul Românesc [Romanian Theatre]*, vol VII, (Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1977).

¹¹ Ileana Berlogea; George Muntean (eds.), *Pagini din istoria gândirii teatrale românești [Pages From the History of Romanian Theatrical Thought]*, (Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, 1972), 104-106.

¹² Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul Românesc [Romanian Theatre]*, vol VI, (Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1976).

¹³ Haig Acterian, *Cealaltă parte a vieții noastre [The Other Side of Our Life]*, (Iași: Institutul european, 1991).

Regarding the painful stake surrounding the National Theatres in the tumultuous debate fired by the new directing school in 1956-1957, this is hardly considered when the theatre model or, if you wish, canon, is discussed. Back then, the youngsters' united front denounced the improvisation, the imprecise repertory, the lack of professionalism in training and guiding actors, as well as (between the lines) the stubborn and gaudy sinecures of directors and playwrights who had become "people's artists" overnight (such as Sică Alexandrescu, recently awarded by the government with a tour to Paris, after a lifetime of dubious affairs and shameful plagiarism).

So many bloody wars in the history of Romanian "National" theatre! ... And for what? To be able to make good, interesting, high quality theatre for the audience? Traditionalists will not miss the chance to answer that yes, the stake was/is the audience, its configuration, its representation, and its serving. It is very difficult for one to confirm such a thesis. Most of the times, it was no longer about the audience, which has become a mere manoeuvre element in polemic confrontations. I would even go as far as saying that one of the few items over which enemies do not fight in polemics of substance, over almost the last century, was the estimation regarding the audience, which is always haemorrhagic and hard to understand. But no, these endless fights come from the very fact that, in a rather self-sufficient artistic environment, there was and still is a terrific lack of competition. And, after all, of efficiency. In our country, until not very long ago, theatre used to be just "national". Whether in Bucharest, Petroșani, Barlad, or any other place with a theatre paid by public budgets. Even if the theatre was/is... smaller, it is still seen as 'National'. Sometimes, being a theatre become a secondary term of the expression...

And the reason for this is that, when it comes to theatre, our cultural history is both placidly coherent, and limping. From the very beginning, Romanian theatre developed, as stated in the preamble, because some artists, writers, actors, musicians, later painters who became stage designers, or mere high school graduates who became theatre managers, *wanted to make theatre*. And they had the illusion that the others, the audience, *the audiences*, couldn't wait to watch them do so. This proved sometimes to be true, but other times, just an illusion.

And the people in power, from poor Vodă Caragea, whose daughter compelled him to set up a theatre for her, to present-day presidents, having passed through a huge and inchoate bureaucratic apparatus, were always

sure that, in any fussy county capital or city, the theatre was the undeniable sign of civilization and the mark of power. This also proves, in our modern history, sometimes true, but other times less so. Throughout this game, which has, in time, developed its own dynamics and become a tradition, the simplest, most fundamental question is never pronounced as a matter of principle.

I am not referring to the question of “*What does the audience want?*” This is ruinous and demagogic, as well as unpopularizing hypocrisy. Any elementary marketing course teaches (should one want to learn) that one should make people want something they’ve never thought of wanting, and enthusiastically buy things they clearly didn’t know they needed. This fundamental question is: *Why do we make theatre?* But, as strange as it may seem, the urgent, painful question, which takes us outside of the mechanics of a tradition that consumed its motivations, is the one above. The lack of interest in such simple interrogations shows that both politicians and theatre people don’t actually care about the identity of the addressee, the person sitting in front of the artists, who bought a ticket to see a performance. At the same time, this question is about legitimacy, about the other, the spectator, and about yourself, the artist; while, in this equation, the artistic product plays the part of an agent of exchanging ideas and practicing a healthy dialogue.

What is a National Theatre? Before anything else, it is one of the tens of theatres paid from public money, to offer thus a public service model. Then, we should probably find out what the meaning of “nation” and of someone who belongs to it, i.e. “national”, is, in the 19th century, in Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Craiova, Timișoara, Tîrgu Mureș, Sibiu. We are now touching upon dramatic/sensitive topics, where the political - and political theories, as well as history, geography, anthropology, collective psychology, symbolic imagology, and many others pull each other’s hair, starting a loud and uncontrollable carnival. Couldn’t this state-funded institution formula find a more precise status and a load of functions to clearly set it apart from other public institutions, beyond the propaganda traditionally instilled to its name?

For now, though, in Romania, the National Theatre refers to *a building*, a big one, bigger than others, possibly including several halls, which eats up funds, energy, resources, staking the final product, which is... what? A good performance? An extraordinary performance? A performance replacing required-readings?

Nowadays, I don’t think it’s wise to start from what we already have. And not because we don’t have high quality products/works, when we do,

where we do, and as many as we do. It's already very clear, to me at least, that the ambition to feed industrial complexes like the National Theatres with money, here and now, can only be justified if we fully exit this trap of producing masterpieces. I believe the "purpose" of such theatres is not (just) to create good performances, I think this is the implicit duty of any theatre, be it state or private, independent or experimental, Romanian, Hungarian, Jewish, or playing in Turkish, French, English or Swahili, in a yard or in the basement of a block of flats.

A theatre called National should produce, here and now, *national culture* - in the broad, not nationalistic sense - that is, with the status of model, in rich layers, using the performances, but not only. A National Theatre - a tradition always craved, but never truly achieved in our country - should be a nursery for domestic playwrighting, through broad talent discovery and fostering programmes, capitalizing on this literature, as well as for carrying out other collaborative creation systems, based on verbal expression or not, in the literal sense. It should set out to discover and encourage diverse creations, helping those sitting in the audience to discover themselves and ask questions. A theatre paid for with public money and receiving National as a title, should be a space of *cultural research through art*, but also of *public debate by way of art*. Not only theatre art, but also all arts combined in and claimed from the performance. Over the last four-five years, Târgu Mureş and Cluj showed the clearest signs of suiting the multi-layer condition of such an institutional status, and I think this is a first sign that things have started to move.

Most certainly, a National Theatre should constantly, and through long-term programmes, aim at getting down into the world of people, and rebuilding a healthy relation with schools and universities. (I'm not referring to the sham of buying tickets by the kilo, hauling children by the bus, but to stimulating theatre production in schools, high schools, and universities, to hosting and even organizing festivals for pupils, and many other tens of possible programmes to pull present-day youngsters from the mechanized futility in which they are soaking). More than that, of course, a National Theatre should work like a turntable, through which the voice of the present world talks to other, far-away voices of today and tomorrow. Such a theatre should, with a radar-like attention and coherence, place Romanians in relation to those outside the country, by means of the arts that fully represent them - whether through precise events, such as tours, or by organizing cyclic actions, like festivals.

A National Theatre sits as far away as possible from a museum, even when it hosts one or several museums under its roof, or when it carefully and competently does curatorial work (which they should very well do). It should be a strategic cultural institution, designed as such, but, at the same time, using complex procedures to express the live aesthetics that have not yet gone down into history.

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