

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF MIGRATING FROM STAGE TO SCREEN TRAINING: A CASE STUDY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is on record that theatre art has survived over the ages due to its capacity to reinvent itself by embracing, new tools, languages, styles and forms. It is a fact that when a discipline reinvents its techniques of impartation and training in line with modern demands, the standard of performances is enhanced and the quality of the practitioner is tremendously improved. Over the years, Nigerian theatrical performances had gone through many stages (i.e. ritual, court/church, traditional travelling theatre, professional travelling theatre, academic drama, radio drama, television drama, celluloid film, and video film), reinventing itself in order to keep up with the requirement of each era. In reviewing the essence/spirit of the 50 years of Theatre in the African academy through the University of Ibadan experience, one cannot but wonder why a film school has not developed out of the old Ibadan school of drama. Or question why the central mode of training the theatre artistes in academia stick to the stage despite the various innovations that have taken place over the years. Using a post-modernist theory within a historical perspective and participatory observation approach; the paper explores the challenges and prospects of migrating from stage to video screen in academic training/practices and offers plausible solutions to some of the identified problems.

Key Words: Prospects, Challenges, Stage, Screen, Migrating

Introduction

The university system anywhere in the world is expected to carry out research, training and other extension services as may be required by the society. In other words, the University is meant to serve as the arrow head of research and new discovery; provide highly trained human capacity for societal growth and development; provide training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations within a given society (these may include technological inventions, equipment maintenance and hire)In reviewing the essence of the 50 years of Theatre in the African academy through the University of Ibadan experience, one can see that, the first school of drama in Africa which was officially established in October,1963 was designed to provide the above functions. This was why Geoffrey Axworthy, the pioneering head of the school, preferred the running of a diploma programme instead of a degree course. Yerima (1984) said:

I got the first intakes to read a diploma instead of a degree course because I wanted them to discover what things are all about by doing them. I was more concerned with professionalism than with academic accumulation. (P. 8)

It became obvious that, as soon as the goal of the school was established and directed towards developing human capacity, serving and making impart on the society, the financial needs of the school was naturally supplied by private commitments, Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other international bodies. Arts, Culture and Education (1984) outlines:

The major assistance which came in terms of finance also helped tremendously the activities of furthering and developing the theatre school. In 1960 from the Cocoa funds we obtained money for the alterations and repair, and by 1962 the Rockefeller Foundation gave funds for the running of the school for five years. In 1965, the Ford Foundation gave funds for the teaching of film and other activities at the Theatre School (P. 6).

From the foregoing, one could detect that funds were even made available for the then School of drama at the University Collage, Ibadan for the teaching of film related studies. Thus, one cannot help but speculate on “why a film school has not developed out of the Department of Theatre Arts 50 years after?”.

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework and a historical perspective through which it will propose the establishment of a programme on film studies as well as ruminate on the challenges and prospects of this migration from stage to video screen productions in term of academic training and

practice. In providing plausible answers to the set of questions raised in this paper, the researcher was guided by the post-modernist theory, and the discoveries in this study were acquired through historical exploration and participatory observation. The observations employed were in two-folds: personal experiences as a student of the institution and personal experiences as a media arts tutor in another University.

Theoretical framework

In order to have a better focus on the study, and in applying post-modernist theory to this work, the concept of post-modernism as defined by Morlay (2013) within the context of pre-modernism, modernism and postmodernism will serve as a good premise of distinctions:

1. Pre-modernism: Original meaning is possessed by authority (for example, the Catholic Church). The individual is dominated by tradition.
2. Modernism: The enlightenment humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favour of reason and natural science. This is founded upon the assumption of the autonomous individual as the sole source of meaning and truth – the Cartesian Cogito. Progress and novelty are valorised within a linear conception of history – a history of a “real” world that, becomes increasingly real or objectified. One could view this as a protestant mode of consciousness.
3. Postmodernism: A rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual with an emphasis upon anarchy, collage, diversity, the mystically un-representable, Dionysian passion are the foci of attention. Most importantly we see the dissolution of distinctions. The merging of subject and object, self and other. This is a sarcastic playful parody of western modernity and the “John Wayne” individual and radical, anarchist rejection of all attempts to define, reify or represent the human subject. (Postmodernism in *the Electronic Labyrinth*, Retrieved from: elab.eserver.org/hfl0242.html, 7/8/2013).

It is stated fact that, postmodernism as a movement began with architecture but in time, the movement was embraced in the arts and humanities. The emphasis of this movement was on the rejection of the modernist theory, avant-garde concept or the passion for the new. Modernism as seen in elab.eserver.org, is to “understand in art and architecture as the project of rejecting tradition in favour of going “where no man has gone before” or “to create forms for no other purpose than novelty [i.e. art for art sake].” Postmodernism movement in the 50’s and 60’s rejected modernism’s exploration of possibilities and a perpetual search for uniqueness and its cognate individuality. Even modernism’s valorisation of the new was rejected for conservative reasons.

Fundamentally, postmodernism wanted to maintain elements of modern utility while returning to the reassuring classical forms of the past. “The result of this was an ironic brick by brick or collage approach to construction that combines several traditional styles into one structure. As collage, meaning found in combination of already created patterns.” (*the Electronic Labyrinth*, 2013). Following this, the modern romantic image of the line creative artist was abandoned for the playful technical (perhaps computer hacker) who could retrieve and recombine creations from the past-data alone becomes necessary. This synthetic approach has been taken up, in a politically radical way, by the visual, musical, and literary arts where collage is used to startle viewers into reflection upon the meaning of reproduction (robin.escalation@ACM.org).

For example, the current trend in pop music in the country where musician combined both the traditional beat with modern elements could be seen as the by-product of postmodernist influence on indigenous pop music in Nigeria.

In summary, postmodernism is seen as a general and wide-ranging term which can be applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural/ literary criticism, amongst others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific knowledge or objective or any other effort deployed to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. (A Glossary Definition on www.pbs.org/~postm-body.html)

An Historical Perspective on Theatrical Performance

From Ogunbiyi’s (1981) edited resource book: *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria...*, and other available texts, one would agree with Ola-Koyi (1997) that, between the pre-historical period and now theatrical performances in the country has gone through many stages starting from the ritual drama, (Rotimi’s “The Drama in African Ritual Display”; Adelugba’s “Trance and Theatre: The Nigerian Experience”), moving through the traditional travelling theatre Adedeji’s (“The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre”) through the church cantata, school musical concert/performance, (Echeruo’s “Concert and Theatre in Late 19th Century Lagos”) through the popular/professional travelling theatre (Ebun Clark’s “Ogunde Theatre: The

Rise of Contemporary Professional Theatre in Nigeria 1946 – 72”; Beier’s “E. K. Ogunmola: A Personal Memoir”; Ogunbiyi’s “The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo”; Isola’s “Modern Yoruba Drama”); through the academic drama (Jayifo’s “Literary Drama and the Search for a Popular Theatre in Nigeria”; Nwoko’s “Search for a New African Theatre”), through the radio drama (Shaibu, 2006), through the television drama Olusola, “The advent of television drama in Nigeria”; to the celluloid film age (Ekwuazi, 1987) and pausing on the current video film era (Ogunleye, 2003).

Right from the time Hubert Ogunde and his contemporaries Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola took to professional acting in the 40s down to 1956 when Axworthy was invited by Molly Mahood, a professor in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, there were flourishing Student Dramatic Societies and other voluntary performing arts groups in Ibadan and Lagos. For instance, there were so many Dramatic Societies in secondary schools, Teacher Training colleges, and the then University College, Ibadan. In the 50s and 60s, there existed along with other Yoruba operatic/dramatic travelling troupes, the *University College Ibadan Dramatic Society (UCIDS)*; the *Arts Theatre Production Group*, *The Players of the Down*, the *Mbari Club* and the *Ibadan Operatic Society*. All these groups were made up of theatrically minded individuals which included, students, clergymen, teachers, civil-servants, and business men, who engaged in the organisation of concerts, cantatas, and other dramatic entertainment in a *British tradition format* (LACE Pub,1984:4).

With the establishment of the first African School of Drama in October 1963 at the University College Ibadan, a new door of cooperation in theatrical experiment between the town and the gown was opened. In upholding the tenet of postmodernism which strived to maintain elements of modern utility while returning to the reassuring classical forms of the past, one could identify a positive result of this collage approach to dramatic construction that combined several traditional approaches and modern styles into one amalgamated structure in academic training and practice.

With a postmodernist analysis, one could see that in the 60s through to the 80s, the University of Ibadan was able to perform the following functions:

1. Serve as the arrow head in discovering new methods and techniques, in scripting, designing and staging theatrical productions. For instance, most of the current great African play texts and stage productions were written and performed during this period.
2. Provide highly trained human capacity for societal growth and development. for example, in the Nigeria today, most members of staff and students of the then school of drama are now leading theatre scholars and performing artists in academia.
3. Provide training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations within and outside the country. That is, between 1963 and 1964, Kola Ogunmola’s theatre troupe was invited to the University as Artist in Residence. With his cooperation, an experimental production “Palm Wine Drinkard” was carried out as a masterpiece for his one year stay on campus. After this, many other great productions also emerged from the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan.

In furtherance of the above objectives, when Wole Soyinka became the director of the School of Drama Acting Company within the University College, Ibadan, the school provided extension services and training facilities for selected group of talents. It is on record that the School of Drama Acting Company was the first theatre company formed by any Nigerian University and it produced most of the plays of the then emerging Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, and J. P. Clark.

In term of celluloid film productions, it is on Ekwuazi’s account that the first nongovernmental feature film produced in this country in 1970 was *Kongi’s Harvest*, a collaborative venture between staff of the Department (Wole Soyinka and others) and Calpenny Films. Within the short time of its establishment, many of the players of *The 1960 Masks* and *Orisun Theatre of 1964* migrated from their *Mbari Club* resident in the city of Ibadan to join and become members of the then School of Drama Acting Company at the University College, Ibadan campus. With time, according to Malomo (1986), the Acting Company metamorphosed to “the University Theatre Arts Company following the reconstitution of the school of Drama into a full academic Department at the University of Ibadan in 1970.

By 1979, the University Theatre Arts Company re-emerged as Unibadan Performing Company (UPC). But it was not inaugurated until 8th of April 1980, when the then Vice Chancellor late Prof. Olajuwon Olayide declared the UPC as the first experiment in a viable, professional, profit oriented theatre company in any Nigerian University. (Malomo,1986.)

Although UPC was set up as an autonomous entity with its own board of management, however in term of play productions both for the stage and the screen, the director of UPC who was in charge of play directing, and actor training worked hand in hand with the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. Consequently, there was a symbiotic relationship between the Department and the UPC.

Malomo equally believed that, play selection for the stage was guided by a concern for the well tested, successful and accessible plays by Nigerian authors. Secondly, plays were chosen based on their entertainment and simplicity values. As a result, the UPC gave accelerated popularity to some Nigerian plays such as: Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Wale Ogunyemi's *the Divorce* and Obi Egbuna's *The Wind*; during its 1980/81 season.

During the reign of television drama productions in the 1980s, the UPC and the Department of Theatre Arts were the main source of local drama productions for many stations in the South West. Thus a first independent producer, the Unibadan Performing Company / the Department of Theatre Arts secured TV recording contracts with NTA Ibadan, where they produced *Theatre on the Screen*; for the then Television Service of Oyo State (TSOS now BCOS). They produced *Screen Drama*; for Ogun State Television (OGTV), *Tellydrama*; while *Weekly Dramas* were produced for both Benin Television (BTV) and NTA, Ilorin. (Malomo, 1986)

Between 1980 and 1986, under the directorship of Jide Malomo, UPC/Theatre Arts Department produced two serials – *The Visitors* written by Femi Osofisan, a lecturer in the Department and *Cloudy Horizon* written by Taiwo Adeyemi a member of the UPC. In addition to all these achievements, over sixty single one-hour dramas were produced and shown on various stations all over the country. (Malomo, 1986)

On the running of the UPC operation, Malomo (1986) opined:

“The UPC earned the bulk of its income from television contracts. A breakdown of its gross income showed about 60% accruing from television performances, about 30% from film show, and less than 10% from stage performances

From all indications, the Department of Theatre Arts had been actively engaged in theatrical and drama productions from her inception in the 60s (which could be termed “the popular/ professional travelling theatre period) moving through 70s (i.e. “the Nascent celluloid film era”) to mid-80s (i.e. “the television drama period”) but went under siege right from the beginning of the video film productions era (1988 till date.)

As a student of the Department, the author cannot help but ask the following three questions:

1. Why it is that, one of the most innovative Departments of the University of Ibadan not been able to come to terms with the latest medium of dramatic and film production in Nigeria?
2. Why it is that, the first Department of Theatre Arts in Africa has not developed new strategies or invented a new methods of teaching or devised a new means of engaging and promoting video film productions as they did in the 80s, during “the era of television drama productions”?
3. How is the Department fulfilling the two other functions of providing highly trained manpower for emerging Nigerian film industry or providing training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations in the country, apart from serving as the arrow head of research and new discoveries in film study?

In providing answer to the first question, one can perhaps take solace in the fact that, the great Department of Theatre Arts might not want to mingle with the uncertainty found in an experimental, nascent or under developed industry like “Nollywood”. However, one must acknowledge the fact that, due to individual interests and afterschool training, some members of staff and alumina of this Department have done the University proud in the areas of directing, acting, and costuming for the Nigerian film industry while many staff and students of this same Department have carried many resounding studies on this industry.

Yet, the fact remains that, up till the time of writing this paper, one is unable to point out a production in Nollywood endorsed by or emanating from this Department as it has for Kola Ogunmola's production in the 60s or as in the production of the required local dramatic contents for most nascent television stations in the 80s as enumerated above.

On the challenge of moulding, the highly trained human capacity required for the growth of the Nigerian film industry, one must come to terms with the fact that, the first Department of Theatre Arts in the country has not commenced any programme that will take care of the training of executive personnel/crew for the nascent film industry in Nigeria. To some operators/employers of labour in Nigerian entertainment industry, the university graduates in the country are unemployable in the sense that most of these graduates are often retained before they could be given any executive portfolio in the industry.

For instance, the top echelons of a film production company will include director, script supervisor, dialogue coach, director of photography/cinematographer, sound designer, special effect specialist, makeup artist, costumier, production manager, supervising editor among others. Even though, some of the alumina of this Department have found their ways into some of these executive positions in Nigerian film industry, this is made possible largely due to their personal interests and after school knowledge acquisition or on the job training. Thus, a full credit could not be given to their undergraduate training at

the University. In previous study on "Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the Development of Performing Arts Programme", one Ola-Koyi (2011) observed:

...how many tertiary institutions in the country could claim to have included the following courses on film as part of their media arts syllabus: *Cinematography, Film Editing, Soundtrack Design, Location and Production Management* etc.? Yet the qualities of manpower produced in our tertiary institutions are seen by some practitioners as grossly incapable and inadequate for the emerging digital film industry.

Apart from areas such as script writing, dialogue coaching, makeup, costume, and sometimes production management that are common positions in which knowledge and training on stage techniques could easily be applied when it comes to screen production. Other areas such as cinematography/ "videography", sound design, special effects and film editing are yet to be incorporated into the University of Ibadan undergraduate training programme/degree syllabus or that of any other university within the country at large. In his study on "Theory, Criticism and the Nigerian Film" Onikoyi (2013) suggested:

It is essential for the Nigerian university don to ensure that the Nigerian student is equipped with the various ideas of the usefulness of theories to film. They shall develop not just a critical mind but 'an active critical mind' that will question existing ideas for the purpose of developing new direction to theory. But it rests upon the shoulders of the teacher to courageously guide the student carefully, meticulously and dynamically.

From the foregoing, it shows that some of the existing programmes on performative arts and media entertainment are not specifically designed to meet the peculiar needs of the Nigerian film industry, therefore, there is a fresh demand for university trained human capacity for top executive positions in Nollywood. Hence, the need for all Nigerian Universities to develop new programmes that are specifically tailored towards meeting the demand for highly trained manpower requirement in the ever growing entertainment industry in Nigeria (Onikoyi, 2013:321).

As at the time of writing this paper, a fresh high school graduate could not aspire to study any of the following modern programmes in some universities in the country not even at the pioneer University of Ibadan: Filmmaking, Sound Design, Sound and Music for Interactive Games, Music for Moving Image, Audio Post Production, etc.

The Concept of a B. A. / B. Sc. Programme in Film Studies

A designed B.A./B.Sc. programme in film studies as it is obtainable in other higher institutions in foreign countries, is based on both theoretical studies and practical exercises in the art of filmmaking. It involves creativity, project development and business strategies in film production and a strong collaboration with independent production companies.

In this course, the concept of the filmmaker as auteur is emphasised and his place as a creative artiste is at the heart of teaching the process of film production. Basically this course often involves sharing on various filmmaking techniques and theories. A properly designed course on film studies often enables students to think, research, discuss and watch a lot of films. It encourages radical approach to film production, and the development of truly independent stories and ideas.

In such a course, students are exposed to different genres and modes of film productions/making. Areas such as narrative, documentary, animation and other experimental filmmaking are common grounds for workshop ensemble. At the end of this programme, each of the students is to specialize in any of the following areas: screenwriting, screen directing, creative production, cinematography, production design, sound recording technique/design, film editing, screen performance, special effects design and animation. Sometimes the institution can also give financial assistance to some deserving students to pursue final year projects in film production.

In his postulation Onikoyi (2013:321), among other things recommended the establishment of a Department of Film Arts, that will develop a full time or part time undergraduate and post graduate programmes on film studies, the employment of master/PhD students in film related fields, and the setting up of film laboratory / studio for practical training.

Challenges of the Proposed Programme

Like any other innovation, the introduction of a film programme or film production courses into any academic system could not be without any problem, confrontation or hindrance. The plausible challenges which the introduction of this proposed programme may encounter include: challenges on the retraining of manpower, problems of equipment acquisition, enlargement/introduction of new syllabus, the cumbersome process of registration with regulatory bodies.

1. Retraining of Manpower

Naturally the introduction of a new programme/course of study will require the retraining or the acquisition of human resources who are to be the facilitators of the proposed programme/ discipline. From practical experience as a tutor, one could see that most conservative lecturers are unenthusiastic about the introduction of new programmes. Some tutors are not just willing to explore new frontiers or venture into new courses except to remain in their comfort zone. This unwillingness of such rigid tutors may compel them to antagonize any move to introduce any teaching on film production as a new discipline/course of study.

From all indications these conservative lecturers (both young and old) must realise that theatre or performing arts as a discipline is very dynamic in nature. It continues to reinvent itself year in, year out by adapting new media in its training, practices and manifestation. This is why the course is still very much relevant to the new age of ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Therefore, the conservative teachers must change with time and allow themselves to migrate from stage to screen. By venturing into the new frontiers or acquiring film knowledge and engaging in retraining programmes, both the students and the film industry will be better for it. It is on record that some of the pioneering play writers on the Nigerian stage (Akinwunmi Isola, Adebayo Falati and Femi Osofisan) have already migrated or in the process of migrating from stage to screen by acquiring new skills of writing for the screen drama/movies which is not the same as writing for the stage.

Some of the production scripts written by these pioneering playwrights include *Afunsetan Aniwura*, *Saworoide*, *Agogo-Eewo*, and *Maa mi*. Thus, the conservative custodians of knowledge in the Departments of Theatre or Performing Arts, in Nigerian universities/colleges of education stand to gain more by cueing into new trends of performative arts and acquiring new knowledge which the new terrain demand. In addition, as Onikoyi posited above, post graduate students / candidates in film related fields could be injected in to the system by encouraging them to take up the teaching of the new courses on film studies.

2. Equipment and Infrastructure acquisition

The task of acquiring new equipment and infrastructure for a new programme could be very cumbersome and tiring. Administratively, the proposal for the new equipment could take many years for it to be approved; its actual execution might equally be tied to the availability of funds. If these two huddles are finally scaled through, the new challenge that needs to be overcome is sticking to the specification of the standard/quality of the required equipment and infrastructure or else wrong or inferior equipment might be purchased and this will in the long run be a disservice to the proposed programme. Therefore, sufficient capital must be made available for the purchase/importation of required apparatus for the programme and skill must be acquired on the equipment handling and maintenance. In addition, constant electricity source must be provided for the operation and preservation of these targets.

3. Enlargement/Introduction of new syllabus

A model B.A./B.Sc. Programme in film studies could be obtained in any of U. S. Universities that offer film studies or other independent film Institutions. Even though most syllabi will include courses in introduction to film, mode of film studies, film analysis, history of film/media, film theory and criticism with emphasis on time/period; regional creation; genres, and creative style/auteur approaches. In an attempt to enlarge or introduce new syllabus on film studies, care must be taken to incorporate indigenous components that are tailored towards national inspirations.

The proposed programme operators must see to the setting up and the provision of the practical facilities like required media laboratories, sound studio, standard theatre, green screen and other industry-standard equipment. And the programme must be designed in such a way that it will make provision for industrial attachment and other linkage-programmes with other institutions and production companies.

4. The Involvement of Regulatory Bodies

Even though the film industry and other performing arts fields do not have a central professional regulatory body like ICAN, Nigerian Bar Association, Nigerian Medical Board, The Guild of Editors etc. that could assist in instilling and maintain standards in the training of film practitioners, the involvement of related bodies in education (NUC, technical education body etc.), and other professional organisations in the industry can still go a long way in ensuring high standards in the training of professionals for the ever expending film/entertainment industry. However, the cumbersome process of registration with regulatory bodies must be revisited and restructured to be less cumbersome, straight forward and cost effective.

The Prospects of the Programme

In order for Nigerian universities especially the University of Ibadan, to carry out her fundamental roles of serving as the arrow head of research and teaching, providing highly trained human capacity for the ever growing entertainment industry; providing training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations, this institution must be alive to her responsibilities and come up with

designed programmes/courses of studies in line with required manpower needs of her immediate environment.

For instance, in the 60s through to mid-80s it was fashionable to study Theatre Arts solely as a course or a standalone discipline but from 1990s till date it is no longer fashionable for any institution to train students solely on the arts of the theatre. Rather the new trend in theatre arts training is usually in combination with other disciplines such as Mass Communication, Film Arts, Psychology or Biology.

Since the proposed programme involves both human and institutional changes, the paper therefore, proposes a transitional period during which existing Department of Theatre Arts will run combined courses in both Theatre and Film Arts. However, a well-designed Department/Programme on Film studies must aid any institution in carrying out all its identified functions as a university. By training graduates for the required manpower in Nigerian entertainment industry, it is believed that the new programme will help in eradicating “the trail by error approach” in filmmaking.

Conclusion

Having ruminated through a theoretical framework, as well as a historical reflection, proposed a B.A. / B.Sc. programme in Film Studies and considered the challenges and prospects of such programme, one can conclude that, if the quality of a tree is known by its fruits, then it is possible that by improving the quality of training given to potential filmmakers, this will rub off positively on the quality of their productions.

Secondly, negative image created for the country through movies could be changed by improving the quality of films made in Nigeria. Thus, the production of knowledgeable directors always shows in their insightful movies, and they often create better images of the country in terms of film contents and themes, Moreover, a team of scholars/experts in the proposed Department of Theatre and Film Arts will not only benefit from rendering consultant services like their counterparts in the legal, medical, engineering professions; who often combine professional practices with academic teaching and research but the adequate training facility provided for the use of the students, could also be used for extension services in the area of camera hiring, sound system and editing for individuals and private organisations requiring such services.

Once the Department or the University is attuned to the reality in the Nigeria film/entertainment industry, the institution will definitely succeed in performing her statutory duties of carrying out beneficiary researches, training advanced manpower for the ever growing entertainment industry and providing other extension services as may be required by the society.

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