InsideOUT

PRODUCED BY THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

THE LEGEND OF GEORGIA MCBRIDE

BY MATTHEW LOPEZ

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Casey and Jo are a young couple struggling to make ends meet in Panama City in the Florida Panhandle. Jason, their old high school buddy, is now their landlord. Beau, Casey’s successful brother, questions Casey’s life choices. Casey works as an Elvis impersonator at Eddie’s bar – until drag queens Miss Tracy Mills and Miss Anorexia Nervosa invade his dressing room and alter his career path.

Matthew Lopez is the author of The Whipping Man, one of the most widely-produced new American plays of the last few theatrical seasons. It premiered off-Broadway at Manhattan Theatre Club, directed by Doug Hughes and starring André Braugher. Mr. Lopez was awarded the John Gassner New Play Award from the Outer Critics Circle for this production. Prior to New York, the play was developed and produced at Luna Stage, Penumbra Theatre Company, The Old Globe and Barrington Stage. His play Somewhere is currently on the stage at TheatreWorks in Palo Alto, CA following a world premiere at the Old Globe and development at the Summer Play Festival at the Public Theater. He holds commissions from Roundabout Theatre Company, Manhattan Theatre Club and Hartford Stage, where he is the 2012/13 Aetna New Voices Fellow. The Legend of Georgia McBride was originally commissioned by the Old Globe. Other plays include Reverberation, Zoey’s Perfect Wedding and The Sentinels, which premiered in London as part of Headlong Theatre Company’s 9/11 Decade project. Mr. Lopez is currently a staff writer on the HBO series The Newsroom.

This play is a recipient of an Edgerton Foundation New American Plays Award.
Elvis Presley was born in 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi (his twin brother was stillborn). He received a guitar for his 11th birthday, shortly before he and his parents moved to Memphis, TN. He made his first music recording in 1953 and first appeared onstage in Memphis in 1954.

He later described the event: “The first time that I appeared on stage, it scared me to death. I really didn’t know what all the yelling was about. I didn’t realize that my body was moving. It’s a natural thing to me. So to the manager backstage I said, ‘What’d I do? What’d I do?’ And he said, “Whatever it is, go back and do it again.”

Elvis exploded onto the music scene and gained international stardom. His first recording contract with RCA Records came in 1955. The following year saw his first network television appearances and his first record release, Elvis Presley, which included “Blue Suede Shoes.” Also released in 1956 was Elvis’ first movie Love Me Tender. (He eventually appeared in more than 30 films.) The movie was originally called The Reno Brothers, but the producers changed the title to capitalize on the immense popularity of its song, “Love Me Tender,” which Elvis first sang on The Ed Sullivan Show, inspiring a record-breaking one million advance orders.

In Vegas in 1956, Elvis met Liberace, who suggested he add flashy costumes to his act; Elvis soon appeared in a gold lamé jacket and later in a jewelled white jumpsuit. Elvis’ second appearance on Ed Sullivan sparked controversy, as many people considered his dance moves to “Hound Dog” to be too sexual, although teenagers loved them. “Some people tap their feet, some people snap their fingers, and some people sway back and forth. I just sorta do ’em all together, I guess,” Elvis explained.

In December 1956, Elvis dropped in on Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins in a Memphis recording studio and jammed with them; Johnny Cash dropped by as well, and the meeting was nicknamed the “Million Dollar Quartet.” (A musical using that title has been created marking that event; it is scheduled to play Denver’s Buell Theatre Feb. 25 to March 9, 2014).

In early 1957, in Elvis’ third and final appearance on Ed Sullivan, he was shown only from the waist up.

Elvis served in the U.S. Army from 1958 to 1960, after receiving a 60-day deferment (January to March 1958) in order to complete the filming of King Creole with Carolyn Jones and Walter Mathau. He recorded the blues song “Hard Headed Woman,” by African American songwriter Claude Demetrius, for the King Creole soundtrack; the song was the first rock and roll single to earn the Gold Record designation (indicating half a million dollars in sales). After basic training Elvis was stationed for 18 months in West Germany, where he met 14-year-old Priscilla Wagner, whom he would later marry.

Two weeks after his Army discharge, he was back in the recording studio. His first post-Army television appearance was May 12, 1960, on Frank Sinatra’s variety show, in an episode that came to be known as Welcome Home, Elvis, although Elvis only appeared during the first eight minutes of the show. Presley and Sinatra performed together, each singing a song the other had made famous: Elvis sang “Witchcraft” and Sinatra sang “Love Me Tender.”
For most of the 1960s, Elvis focused on his movie career, with few live concerts or television appearances. He made 27 films in that decade, all but one of them commercially successful, although few of them were critically lauded. Uninspired by the roles and songs written for him, Elvis stated that the “only thing worse than watching a bad movie is being in one.”

While living in California, Elvis hosted the Beatles in his Bel Air home. In 1967, Elvis married Priscilla at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas; their daughter, Lisa Marie, was born the next February. Elvis returned to his rock and roll roots with a television appearance later referred to as the ’68 Comeback Special. Thrilled to be back in front of a live audience and singing what he wanted to instead of what movie studios demanded, he declared, “I give you my word I will never [again] sing a song I don’t believe in.”

The following year he released a critically acclaimed album *From Elvis in Memphis*, which included the song “In the Ghetto,” written by Mac Davis, originally titled “The Vicious Circle.” It described a baby’s birth in the ghetto, his mother’s tears, the child’s hunger, his turn to crime and his death as a young man. In 1969, Elvis’ performances at the new International Hotel in Las Vegas broke attendance records and brought him rave reviews. He wore simple, karate-inspired two-piece outfits in either black or white, precursors to his famous one-piece jumpsuits, which he launched in his 1970 Vegas performances and that became flashier and more elaborate over the coming years.

Elvis died of heart failure in 1977 at his Memphis mansion, Graceland. Although he’d abstained from drug use earlier in his career, he had become increasingly dependent on drugs in the 1970s. Multiple drugs were found in his system at the time of his death.

**ELVIS IMPERSONATORS**

“If life was fair, Elvis would be alive and all the impersonators would be dead.”

— Johnny Carson

Elvis impersonators, professionally known as Elvis tribute artists (ETAs), have existed since the early days of Elvis’ fame. The first was Jim Smith, a 16-year-old who, in 1956, attracted attention due to his physical resemblance to Elvis and his ability to mimic Elvis’ mannerisms, though Smith could neither sing nor play the guitar. In 1970, American protest singer Phil Ochs wore a 1950s Elvis-style gold lamé suit made by Elvis costumer, Nudie Cohen. A few years later Andy Kaufman started including Elvis impersonations in his performances; Elvis himself is said to have proclaimed Kaufman’s impersonations the best he’d seen. Spoof newspaper *Weekly World News* published a story that Elvis had entered an Elvis look-alike contest and placed third. Since Elvis’ death in 1977, his iconic status has never waned and impersonators have become increasingly popular. While some impersonators dress and act as Elvis did when he first became popular in the 1950s, most favor his 1970s Vegas image with sideburns and rhinestone-studded jumpsuits.
The earliest origins of theatre are found in ancient religious practice, which barred females from performing. It was not until the 17th century in Europe and the 20th century in Asia that female performers were allowed on the stage; female impersonation by male actors was the norm until that time. Even after women were allowed on stage, many female roles were still performed by men; for example, roles such as Molière’s Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* were written for and continued to be played by men. This tradition continues in the British pantomime (or panto) performances today; these re-enactments of fairy tales are popular Christmastime entertainments and feature the “pantomime dame,” a comic character played by a man in drag.

Today’s terms “female impersonation” and “drag” originated in the mid-19th century. While the origins of the term “drag” are uncertain, one story is that it came from the expression “putting on the drag,” which meant applying the brakes on a coach, and came to refer to the drag of a gown with a long train. Shortly after the Civil War, female impersonation in theatre, variety shows and minstrel shows began to evolve from a primarily comic effect to a more elegant, refined look appropriate to wider audiences.

Female impersonators celebrated femininity and portrayed the Victorian feminine ideal; the apparent truth of the illusion became important. Good female impersonators were among the highest-paid performers; real actresses could not compete with their popularity and stardom. Some female impersonators ended their acts with a de-wigging, revealing the actor underneath the costume and reassuring the audience that order had been restored; however, other venues specializing in glamour drag maintained the illusion throughout.

Although female impersonation was not initially associated with homosexuality in the public mind, a link between the two began to take hold in the early 20th century. The Chicago Vice Commission in 1911 decried the *double entendre* in a man’s music hall performance. In 1928, the New York City vice squad stopped a performance of Mae West’s Broadway play *Pleasure Man*, which was set behind the scenes of a vaudeville show and performed by female impersonators, for the crime of “endangering the morals of youth and others.” The image of the impersonator as a masculine man who magically transformed himself into a glamorous woman for performance was replaced by the idea that female impersonators were flagrantly feminine homosexual men who were merely enacting their socially unacceptable reality on the stage. However, specific performance spaces developed in which female impersonators could safely perform for tourists: Miami’s Jewel Box in 1938, followed by Finnochio’s in San Francisco, Club 83 in New York City and My-Oh-My in New Orleans.

World War II saw military drag performances throughout the armed services. As the end of World War II approached, United States authorities tried to limit the practice of drag. In Great Britain, however, post-war military drag shows were huge hits throughout the 1950s. While the shows themselves continued, their casts gradually boasted fewer ex-servicemen, as professional drag queens began to infiltrate the ranks of this new and popular form of entertainment. Thus, ex-servicemen performances, while retaining the restoration-of-order ending common to drag shows for straight audiences, allowed professional female impersonators wide access to a mainstream audience.

In the 1950s, mass media made impersonations of specific female stars possible. At the Jewel Box, performer T. C. Jones almost exclusively performed impressions, including those of Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, and Tallulah Bankhead, usually ending the show by removing his wig to reveal his bald head.

The Stonewall Riots in June 1969 were led by drag queens engaged in a three-day struggle with police after a midnight-raid of the Stonewall Inn, a bar in New York’s Greenwich Village. Not only was public consciousness of homosexuality raised by this event, but the occasion led to drag queens claiming their place in the gay liberation movement.
L
ady Chablis (born Benjamin Knox in 1957) is an African-American drag queen entertainer. Early in her career, she won multiple drag pageants, including Miss Gay World 1976. She became more widely known when she appeared as a character in John Berendt’s 1994 non-fiction book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* about a murder in Savannah, GA; Lady Chablis played herself in the 1997 movie of the same name, directed by Clint Eastwood. According to her website, “I am the Lady Chablis and I put Savannah on the map and then took over the world!” She is a non-operative transsexual woman, as described in her 1996 autobiography *Hiding My Candy: The Autobiography of the Grand Empress of Savannah*. Her website taunts viewers, “Like dark chocolate with nuts?”

Hedda Lettuce (actor Steven Polito) is an American drag queen comedian and singer. She is one of the few drag queens who sing live rather than lipsynching. Polito, who once served as assistant to Lypsinka, launched his character Hedda Lettuce, Queen of Green, in 1991. Awarded Drag Queen of the Year six times by *HX Magazine*, he/she has appeared on MTV and Comedy Central, as well as *Project Runway, Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty*.

L
ypsinka (born John Epperson in 1955) is an American drag artist, actor, pianist, vocalist and writer. Lypsinka’s website and Facebook page refer to “my dreadful maid, John Epperson.” Originally from Hazelhurst, MS, Epperson became a rehearsal pianist for the American Ballet Theatre in 1978 (and appears as such in the 2010 film *Black Swan*), though he eventually left that job in order to perform as Lypsinka full-time. Epperson also has written a play, *My Deah*, a retelling of *Medea* set in Mississippi.

D
iverse (Harris Glenn Milstead, 1945-1988) was an actor, singer and drag icon. Born in Baltimore, MD, Milstead became part of the local acting company the Dreamlanders, with whom he first appeared as Divine in director John Waters’ early taboo-breaking films such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972). International Movie Database (IMDB) declares Divine to be “Baltimore’s most outrageous resident” and “the international icon of bad taste cinema.” Ursula the Sea Witch in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* was based on Divine. Designated People Magazine’s Drag Queen of the Century, Milstead said, “My favorite part of dressing in drag is getting out of it. Drag is my work clothes. I only put it on when someone pays me to.” After portraying two characters, Edna Turnblad and Arvin Hodgepile, in the 1988 film *Hairspray*, Milstead was hired to play Uncle Otto in *Married...with Children*, but he passed away in his sleep the night before filming was to begin.

B
arbette (Vander Clyde Broadway, 1898-1973) was a female impersonator and circus acrobat from Texas who was famous throughout the United States and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. He fell in love with the circus as a young boy, and just after high school, he joined the aerialist performing group The Alfaretta Sisters before making his name as a solo artist. Feeling it would be more dramatic for a woman to perform the acrobatic acts, he performed in full drag, waiting until the end of his act to sweep off his wig to reveal himself as a man. After retiring from performance in 1938, Barbette served as an aerialist trainer and choreographer for many outfits, including the Ringling Bros. Circus, *Disney on Parade* and Orson Welles’ Broadway musical *Around the World*. He also coached Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis on gender illusion for the 1959 film *Some Like It Hot.*
“Where the boys are boys... and female impersonation is an art!”
—www.MissGayAmerica.com

Miss Gay America is a national pageant for female impersonators, based on the Miss America pageant system. Contestants may advance to the national pageant by placing first or second in state-level pageants, most of which are preceded by local pageants; in all, approximately 500 contestants compete each year. The first national pageant was held in 1972, when Norman Jones, performing as Norma Kristie, Miss Gay Arkansas America, was crowned Miss Gay America 1973. Wishing to enhance the art of female illusion not only as a competitor, Jones purchased the Miss Gay America pageant in 1975 in order to grow and promote the art form; he ran the national pageant network for the next 30 years. Current Miss Gay America pageant categories include interview (in male attire), talent (most contestants lip synch), evening gown and on-stage question and answer. Since the pageant is dedicated to the art of female impersonation, the rules prohibit participation by contestants who are using female hormones or have undergone feminizing plastic surgery such as breast implants.

Miss Gay America 2014 is Jessica Jade, who competed as Miss Gay East Coast America in the national pageant, held October 13 in St. Louis, Missouri. Jessica Jade is Billy Wilson, a radiology technician in Roanoke, VA, who began performing in drag on a dare in 1999, just after graduating high school. He explains, “It’s like theatre. I’m not doing this because I want to be a woman. It’s never been that. It’s like another job. It’s like acting.” He has competed in the Miss Gay America pageant network for the past ten years and designs his own gowns. Having won the national title, he can no longer compete, but he says, “I think eventually I will retire from entertaining. It’s hard on the body doing this. I mean the dancing, the prep work, the traveling. But I think I’ll always be involved in some capacity in the art form.”

Édith Piaf

“For me, singing is a way of escaping. It is another world. I’m no longer on earth.”
—Édith Piaf (1915-1963)

Édith Piaf was a French singer, widely considered France’s national diva; her songs are pervaded by love, loss and sorrow. Born Édith Gassion to desperately poor street performers in Paris, she was soon abandoned by her mother, and as a teenager began performing with her father. At 17, she bore a daughter, Marcelle, who died of meningitis two years later. Impresario and nightclub owner Louis Leplée discovered Édith Gassion at age 20 and renamed her La Môme Piaf, “Kid Sparrow,” due to her initial stage fright and diminutive stature (well under 5’). He taught her stage presence and suggested she wear black, which became her signature attire.

She immediately became popular, recording two albums in 1935. The following year, Leplée was murdered by mobsters (Piaf was questioned and acquitted), but Piaf was already on her way to stardom, singing songs romanticizing and lamenting her previous life on the streets.

She starred in Jean Cocteau’s 1940 play Le Bel Indifférent. Piaf was France’s most popular performer during World War II, although her concerts for the German occupying forces were controversial and raised a few eyebrows. In 1945, she wrote her signature song, “La vie en rose” (“Life through Rose-Colored Glasses”). After the war, she toured Europe, South America and the United States, appearing multiple times.
times on The Ed Sullivan Show and in Carnegie Hall. She had numerous high-profile love affairs and two marriages, first to singer Jacques Pills (1952-1957), and then to Théo Sarapo, 20 years her junior, in 1962. The lover who had counted the most, boxer Marcel Cerdan, was killed in a plane crash in 1949. Two years later Piaf was seriously injured in an automobile accident, which led to difficulties with morphine and alcohol addiction. In 1951, she recorded the song “Padam, Padam,” which begins, “This tune which haunts me day and night...” Piaf died of liver cancer in 1963 at her villa on the French Riviera. Her grand funeral, attended by 100,000 fans, brought Paris traffic to a complete stop for the first time since World War II. The Archbishop of Paris denied her a funeral mass citing her irreligious lifestyle, but on the 50th anniversary of her death, the Roman Catholic Church offered a memorial mass in Belleville, Paris, the parish where she was born. ■

FEMALE ARTISTS

Female impersonators often base their characters on a famous female artist, dressing in her style and, if she is a singer, singing or lip synching her songs. Below are some of the artists mentioned in the play.

Joan Crawford (1904-1977) was an American actress, born Lucille Fay LeSueur in San Antonio, TX. Arriving in Hollywood in 1925, she self-promoted by entering dance competitions until MGM Studios gave her bigger and better roles. She was among the highest-paid actresses in the 1930s, and earned an Oscar for 1945’s Mildred Pierce.

The Dixie Chicks are an American country music trio formed in 1989 in Dallas, Texas. They came to national prominence in 1998 with hit songs “There’s Your Trouble” and “Wide Open Spaces.” They are the highest selling female group in any music genre. Their 2006 album started at #1 on Billboard’s Country charts and their subsequent tours have sold out in Europe and many parts of North America.

Emmylou Harris (born 1947) is an American singer and songwriter born in Birmingham, AL; she has won three Country Music Association Awards and 12 Grammy Awards. Her first of 26 studio albums, Gliding Bird, was released in 1969; her most recent, Hard Bargain, in 2011.

Whitney Houston (1963-2012) was an American singer and actress, whose song “I Will Always Love You” in the 1992 movie The Bodyguard (in which Houston starred with Kevin Costner) became the best-selling single by a female artist in music history. Born in Newark, NJ, Houston was the daughter of gospel star Cissy Houston (once a back-up singer for Elvis Presley) and goddaughter of soul legend Aretha Franklin. In the later 1990s, she began to struggle with drug addiction, which contributed to her death in 2012.

Loretta Lynn (born in 1932 in Kentucky) is called the First Lady of Mountry Music. Married at age 15 and a mother of four by age 19, Lynn taught herself to play guitar. She was a trailblazer in the male-dominated 1960s world of country music, though some radio stations refused to play her songs about birth control, repeated childbirth and double standards. Her 1976 autobiography Coal Miner’s Daughter was filmed in 1980, starring Sissy Spacek and Tommy Lee Jones.

Brenda Lee (born Brenda Mae Tarpley in 1944 in Atlanta, GA) is an American singer of pop and country music. Her most famous songs include the 1960 “I’m Sorry” and the 1958 “Rockin’ around the Christmas Tree.” With her song “One Step at a Time,” recorded when she was 12 years old, she became the youngest person to place a song on Billboard’s country singles chart. For the entire decade of the 1960s, she was the Top Female Charted Act and fourth overall, behind Elvis, the Beatles and Ray Charles. ■
Anorexia nervosa: A psychological disorder characterized by self-starvation, unrealistic fear of weight gain and conspicuous distortion of body image; from two Latin words indicating a nervous inability to eat.

Braves: A Major League Baseball team based in Atlanta, Georgia.

Cherry Garcia: A Ben & Jerry’s ice cream flavor with cherries and fudge flakes; the name was inspired by Jerry Garcia, guitarist for the rock band The Grateful Dead.

Circumspect: Wary and unwilling to take risks.

Deleterious: Causing harm or damage.

DeLorean: A fictional time machine (created from the 1981-82 American sports car the DeLorean DMC-12) featured in the Back to the Future film trilogy.

Dilettante: A person who cultivates an area of interest without real commitment or knowledge.

Zac Efron: A 26-year-old actor who became a teen idol after playing the lead in the Disney Channel’s High School Musical.

Et tu, Brute?: The Latin phrase for “Even you, Brutus?”; supposedly Julius Caesar’s final words as Brutus and others assassinated him.


Jalopy: An old car in a dilapidated condition.

Taylor Lautner: A 22-year-old actor best known for playing Jacob Black in The Twilight Saga; ranked second in Glamour’s “The 50 Sexiest Men of 2010” list.

Lord of the Flies: A 1954 novel by William Golding featuring several prepubescent boys trapped on a deserted island; early attempts by the boys to form a civilized society descend into chaos and murder.

“Maggie and Bricked it all night”: Maggie and Brick are a continually fighting married couple in Tennessee Williams’ play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Moribund: At the point of death.

Perspicacity: The quality of having a ready insight into things; shrewdness.

QB, QB1: Quarterback, first-string quarterback; a football player who is the leader of the offense.

Janet Reno: Attorney General of the United States from 1993 to 2001 under President Bill Clinton.

Smirnoff: A brand of vodka; started at a distillery in Moscow in the 1860s and now one of the best-selling spirits in the world.

Jason Statham: A 46-year-old actor in such film series as The Transporter, The Expendables and Fast & Furious.

Sweeney Todd: A 1979 musical thriller subtitled The Demon Barber of Fleet Street; the main character Todd is a barber returning from unjust imprisonment bent on revenge; when he recovers his razors, he declares, “At last, my arm is complete again!”

Watergate: A political scandal in the early 1970s which eventually led to President Richard Nixon’s resignation.

“You is kind. You is smart. You is important”: A phrase spoken by actress Viola Davis as Aibileen Clark in 2011 film The Help.

SOURCES
International Movie Database. http://www.imdb.com/
THE LEGEND OF GEORGIA MCBRIDE QUESTIONS

PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTION

1. What is the definition of a “legend”? What are your expectations about the story from the title of the play?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

1. How did the costuming and staging set the tone for the play?
2. What does Casey learn about himself during the play? How does his attitude change?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Beau and Casey? What keeps Beau from helping his brother?
4. What prompts Casey to change his performance?
5. Why is Casey embarrassed about his new job at Cleo’s Bar?
6. Why does Rexy have a problem with Casey? Why does Rexy think Casey is not authentic?
7. How does Jo react to seeing Casey’s performance? Does her reaction surprise you?
8. What role does Miss Auburn Sienna play in the story? What advice does she give Georgia?
9. What is the difference between being an Elvis impersonator and being a drag queen?
10. What do you think happens to the characters after the end of the play?
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Held in the theatre, post-show
- Jan 19, Talkback
- Jan 26, HEAC Talkback
- Feb 18, Theatre & Theology Talkback

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THE DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY RECOMMENDS:

Read! *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* by Laurence Senelick
This well-researched, comprehensive history of cross-dressing on the stage covers a huge span of time, from ancient Greece to Elizabethan England to such modern examples as Charles Ludlum and Dame Edna Everage. A fascinating study of the history behind drag performance.

Watch! *Connie and Carla* (Universal Pictures, 2004)
In a new take on Billy Wilder’s classic *Some Like it Hot*, best friends Connie and Carla pose as drag queens to evade Mafia hit men. Nia Vardalos and Toni Collette star in a fun action comedy that features some fantastic musical numbers.

Listen! *Kinky Boots: The Original Broadway Cast Recording*
Based on the wonderful 2005 movie of the same title, *Kinky Boots* follows the travails of the workers at a failing shoe company who risk everything to save themselves. This recording really captures the whimsical spirit of the play with great performances by the Tony winning cast--and honestly, how can you go wrong with music and lyrics by Cyndi Lauper?!

Download! *Elvis Presley: the Man, the Life, the Legend* by Pamela Clarke Keogh
Download this audio eBook and explore the man behind the myth. When Elvis shook those hips on the “Ed Sullivan Show,” he made Americans feel “all shook up.” In this extensively researched and caringly delivered book, Koegh approaches her subject more as a style icon than as a musician. Learn more about the legend and see him as a man with complexity, triumphs and failures.

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