

## ‘It’s the real thing’: performance and murder in Sweden

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*Sju tre* (1999) is the most controversial theatre production in Sweden in modern times. Lars Norén, a well-known playwright and director, staged a dialogue involving three real convicts, of whom two were outspoken Nazis. Shortly after the last performance, the latter two men were involved in a bank robbery in which two policemen were killed. These scandalous events are discussed from three different perspectives, all, however, revolving around the uncertain boundaries between aesthetic, ethical, and political issues. By virtue of its performative impact, the theatrical event proved to be directly linked with critical questions of democracy, although conceivably at the expense of the artistic integrity of the director and the theatre as creator of public opinion.

*An old man came up to Tony, who was masked and had a gun in his hand, and asked him, ‘Is this a masquerade?’ Tony replied, ‘It’s the real thing.’*

This essay offers a response from three perspectives to a situation that developed in Sweden during the past year. Part theatre, part public events, this group of politicized happenings has come to be called ‘The Norén Affair,’ after the theatre writer and director who first set it in motion – one of the most recognized theatre artists in Sweden, who is sometimes mentioned together with Strindberg and Bergman. In brief, Lars Norén devised a play called *Sju tre* with three prisoners from Tidaholm, a Swedish prison for ‘hardened criminals.’ (*Sju tre* is translated as 7:3 and refers to a category of prisoners who, because of the seriousness of their crimes, are not allowed to leave prison on parole or furloughs.) They were given permission to perform the play at one of Sweden’s national theatres, Riksteatern, where Norén was under contract. In the play, one professional actor played the role of ‘theatre director’ instead of Norén himself, who directed the production, while the prisoners played themselves. They were allowed, on their own recognizance, to perform in the play and then return to the prison. When *Sju tre* opened, the public discovered that two of the prisoners were Neo-Nazis. From the stage, they expressed opinions about the supremacy of the Aryan race, the inferiority of immigrants, and

downplayed the historical significance of the Holocaust. A widespread public controversy broke out. The play continued its run from February until May 1999. After the last performance, on 27 May, the prisoners did not return to the prison. The next day, two of them were involved in a bank robbery in the small town of Kisa and, after a car chase with police, two officers were shot and killed by the robbers in woods near Malexander. The suspects were caught, and a high-publicity trial took place in December, lasting 21 days. In January 2000, one of the performers/robbers, Tony Olsson was convicted of the crimes, along with two other perpetrators, and all three were given life sentences; another performer, Mats Nilsson, was convicted as an accessory.

This brief chronicle of the events surrounding the Norén affair provides only a skeletal account of a turbulent and deeply contested production and its dreadful aftermath. Each of the authors will interpret these events in our own manner, two as Swedes, one as a North American. All three of us are theatre researchers for whom these events have become the focus of intense analysis, reflection, and ethical questioning.

### **Background of racial issues in Sweden**

Sweden, generally perceived as a social democratic country, has experienced a growth of racial problems since the 1980s. Historically speaking, the first racist organization was founded in 1889 and was called The Swedish Anti-Semitic Foundation. In the 1930s, small Nazi parties were never elected to the Swedish Parliament, but did well in some regions. In 1932, for example, the Swedish National Socialist Party got 5.7% of the vote in Gothenburg. When World War II ended, most of these groups disappeared. Through the 1960s, the *Folkhemmet* (Welfare State) was healthy enough to absorb the mostly European immigrants who came to Sweden and no extremist party played any significant part in political life. In the 1980s, however, refugees became a prominent political issue. In 1988, the local election in the town of Sjöbo held a referendum in which the population voted not to accept refugees, thus opposing national policy. This initiative had an effect on right-wing extremist organizations, which went from being underground movements to organizations that attempted to influence local schools against refugees. By the 1990s, the question of immigration and treatment of immigrants was exacerbated by a deep economic recession (1992–94). High unemployment resulted in social anxiety, which in turn interacted with other social and historical factors to increase hostility against refugees, especially the many war victims from the former Yugoslavia. From the end of the 1980s onwards, a racist underground movement spread in Sweden, with roots in two organizations: Nordiska Rikspartiet (The Nordic Empire Party) and Bevara Sverige Svenskt (Keep Sweden Swedish). Unlike the organizations of the 1930s, these groups have not taken the form of political parties. Instead, for example, they distribute magazines and music aimed especially at youths. There have been a number of racial killings, which have been highly publicized. In 1991, the so-called ‘Laser Man’ shot ten immigrants (with the help of a laser sight on his gun). The Laser Man became a hero for the Neo-Nazi groups. In more recent years, an African boy was brutally stabbed to death in a small town called Klippan, and another boy outside Gothenburg was kicked to death by skinheads. Arson attacks have been directed against refugee compounds where refugees spend their first year(s) in Sweden. Björn Söderberg, a syndicalist union leader in Sätra, was shot to death for revealing that a member of the union

management group was a Nazi. Several anti-racist movements have been formed in response to this situation. In January 2000, the Swedish government hosted its first international Holocaust conference and in the spring four nationwide newspapers jointly published 62 pictures of Neo-Nazis who have committed hate crimes in Sweden in recent years.

In the remainder of the essay, we begin with Ola Johansson's eyewitness account of, and response to, the performance. Encountering the performers on the spot involved a great dilemma as the racist assertions threatened to transform the theatrical event into a political occasion. The situation revealed a democratic predicament where the principle of freedom of speech was violated in pursuance of its own privilege. However, being a spectator within a consolidated – and presumably a democratic – audience partially counteracts the extremist expressions on stage. Willmar Sauter then discusses the decision not to see the performance and asks if it is even appropriate to consider *Sju tre* a theatrical event. The combination of, on the one hand, a professional actor who personifies a role and, on the other hand, performers who represent themselves, brings about an uneven balance that impairs the communication between stage action and audience perception. The fictional and artistic level thus became invalidated by, and in favour of, the direct speech of the Neo-Nazis. Sauter also reflects on the questions of responsibility as regards the dreadful outcome of the production. Janelle Reinelt concludes with an analysis of the debates that grew up around the performance and its aftermath. After evaluating the aesthetic, ethical, and political standpoints of the debate, Reinelt argues that *Sju tre* cuts across these conceptual categories, which in turn made the production accountable to all three topics. Hence, had these complex issues been taken into account by the director and the theatre management, *Sju tre* might have become a justifiable project.

The three perspectives differ in approach and, to a certain degree, in outcome. Their common thread, however, is a deliberation on the conceptual limits of 'theatre' and, by the same token, the ethical and political dimensions of public events, whether performed by producers, directors, actors, audiences or critics.

### **A personal perspective (Ola Johansson)**

Something nasty was in the air that treacherously peaceful May evening when I arrived at the Riksteatern in southern Stockholm: scandalous headlines hovering like dark clouds over the theatre, an ominous police van at a rear corner of the building, the entrance door that suddenly felt like an iron gate in my hand. Just going to this performance after a long conscientious media debate was a crucial decision in itself. And once that decision was made, other complex questions would inevitably arise, such as, for instance, what part am I in all this?

Ironically, the functional interior of Riksteatern resembles a modern prison. A long corridor is flanked by a row of bulky metal doors leading into 'black boxes' where stages and audience seats are rearranged for specific productions. In the case of *Sju tre*, the room was kept quite bare – save for a few props that were carried on and off stage during the performance – and the spectators were seated around the open stage, arena style. There was a clinical sense to the setting, a striving for a theatrical ground zero, beyond all previous theatricality, towards a virginal scene of communicative acquittal. Four chairs were within four white lines demarcating a square against the black floor – that is all there was. And so the performers

entered, three muscular blond guys in black pants and black T-shirts. They started off by doing push-ups on the floor for a minute or two; one of them kept count: ‘... 50 ... 60 ... 70 ... 80 ...’. People in the back rows stretched their necks and searched between heads in order to catch a glimpse of the men in black.

What were we looking for so eagerly? Well, at that moment we could not possibly know that two of the performers were going to be part of an event that would paralyse the entire country two days later. But something was definitely in the air, an eerie ambience that already had to do with the state of our nation. Everyone in the audience knew about the crimes these persons had committed prior to their imprisonment and what they stood for, it had all been reported in the press. But they had not been seen. These were the kind of criminals – unknown to Swedish society until fairly recently – that make the police remain inside the station while robbing a bank across the street in broad daylight; the ones behind brief telegrams saying that yet another internal showdown has taken its toll; the ones who have made most heroes in detective novels anti-heroes and wimps for the past couple of decades – the ones whodunit. Here, the ones behind the stories stepped into the light.

That certainly seems to comply with the basic idea of theatre. True, the prisoners did not act like actors but nevertheless represented characters from a quite different world and, in the light of this, they had drawn full houses since the opening performance four months earlier. Moreover, their appearance was sanctioned by Sweden’s most notable dramatist since Strindberg, namely Lars Norén, who in recent years had altered his dramatic vocation from writing bourgeoisie chamber plays in a naturalist vein to producing a brutal authenticity in a project called *Morire di classe* about social outcasts. However, when the order of things on stage overlaps that of an ‘outer’ realm – as when ordinary people play themselves without adhering to a preconceived dramaturgy of a playwright – theatrical Naturalism does not necessarily represent an outer reality but rather constitutes a version of it. (For a philosophical application of the term ‘world version’, see Nelson Goodman<sup>1</sup>.) In Norén’s reality project, *Sju tre*, the performers’ presence on stage was indeed authorized by an *auteur* and they appeared within an institutional establishment, but their speeches and actions took on a life of their own since they expressed their own words and opinions. This geared the meaning of what was said and done to the occasion as such and, as a consequence, the responsibility of interpreting the stage action became an issue right in my face as a witness to the event. This was soon to become an alarming dilemma.

After the physical exercises, the convicts meet John (Norén’s alter ego) for the first time in the Tidaholm prison. The playwright, who is considerably smaller than his workshop fellows, gives a nervous impression but is pleasantly surprised to be offered coffee and buns that the prisoners baked themselves. They initially engage in some small talk about what play they want to stage, how it could be performed and for what purpose. This leads into issues of imprisonment, which in turn influences personal matters. The latter subject triggers off a thematic bomb. It turns out that two of the three prisoners, Mats and Tony, are committed Nazis. ‘Oh, no,’ John responds spontaneously and makes clear that he is ‘sort of leftish’ but also that he entrusts himself to the forgiving creed of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.<sup>2</sup> However, John decides to continue the conversation in spite of the distressing revelation. (This decision rendered a lot of criticism against Norén; in an article the playwright defended his project by saying: ‘When one of them said that he is a Nazi, should I have gotten up and walked away

and left it at that? Well, I didn't.<sup>2)</sup><sup>b</sup> There were issues that the prisoners would not discuss, most notably the crimes they had committed, but regarding the idea of Nazism and the need for its implementation, Tony and Mats were quite outspoken. The third convict, Teo, mostly spoke in existential terms about his situation and life and the moral standards that make up value judgements like good and evil, right and wrong, and so forth. Even though biographical and reflective topics like the latter dominated the four hour dialogue – Teo eventually wants to become an author, Mats an actor and Tony a history teacher – the personal discussions were thematically eclipsed by the instances of racist assertions.

Tony and Mats' main point is all too familiar: Sweden, like all other nations, needs to be racially clean in order to reclaim its historical and cultural homogeneity. They repeatedly emphasized the need for social discipline and order. To obtain such a stability it is necessary to use tough means, like installing other types of politicians and sending back the foreigners. Instead of taking a verbal fight on ideological grounds, John set out to discern what all these 'needs' implicate on a personal level. He consequently attempted to take them back in time, away from the present, beyond the prison walls, to their childhood memories and upbringing, lure them into talking about their early dreams and future plans; in short, entice them into patterns of discourse similar to the ones a psychoanalyst gathers and interprets. Occasionally, in that winding and cautious conversation, I admittedly sensed a certain empathy with the prisoners; it was as if a classical Greek dramaturgy sneaked into the trial-like drama as the protagonists became exposed to various misfortunes through a retrospective purgation, which in turn persuaded a mimetic identification, at least on my part, as a little voice inside provoked the question: 'could it have been me?'. My overall impression, however, turned out to be quite apprehensive, mostly due to the second act when some Nazi statements really shattered all sense of compassion.

One might encounter Nazis on a square or in some other public place and get physically damaged, especially if one belongs to an ethnic minority, or one might come upon them in the media and get observant at a distance. At *Sju tre*, one got culturally damaged at close distance. An extreme public situation transgressed the place of a cultural practice that is commonly used to frame a fictional realm and thus represent events other than the given, or, put more clearly, which mostly stages theatre and other fine arts. By breaking the conventional frame, *Sju tre* turned into a public event, which staged the audience as much as the performers. No theatrical codes could unload the interpretative burden from the onlookers. The more I tried to dissociate myself from the offensive expressions on stage, the more involved I got. With what? With a paradox. The people on stage looked like me, spoke like me (one of them shared my dialect), moved like me, came from similar places, and yet would have looked upon me as an enemy had they been able to read my mind. Without the other spectators, or perhaps with another kind of audience,<sup>c</sup> they probably would have been able to read my mind (sighing, shaking my head, a vague but evident sense of nausea). Still, I had the feeling that I was among the real antagonists, seated around the stage, those who helped me contrive an ad hoc and extraordinary frame in the lack of the ordinary theatrical frame.

Towards the end of the second act, at their last meeting in prison, John suggests that they need to talk 'about the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the mass murders'. He has deliberately postponed the matter until this moment since he believed that they would have been 'caught in our own arguments' at an earlier stage. 'I've got to know,' John inquires, 'how

you, today, can accept an ideology which has so terrible crimes and outrages on – I almost said – my conscience. How can you do that? Don't you become an accessory to crimes that have been committed, even if it is soon 60 years ago, by adhering to the ideology behind them and prolonging it? What do the concentration camps tell you, the Holocaust, which evidently is the consequence of Nazism?' Tony responds that 'we wouldn't set up gas chambers'. Mats adds that he believes that the death camps did exist but that he still can put faith in the ideology of that time. Tony even argues that he can understand what Israel is doing in order to protect itself from the outside world. It is obvious that they soften their arguments a great deal at this point, much like contemporary racist politicians in Europe do when caught in the public eye. Even if I cannot remember their lines verbatim, I do recall the lukewarm attitude of Tony and Mats when the burning issues of National Socialism were brought up. This performative demeanour is as significant as any words and certainly an extension of their meaning in site-specific contexts. The offensive notions of Tony and Mats were enacted in the form of a verbal defence but became tacitly assertive by their physical proximity to John and the audience. The weak spot of the dispute thus became a rhetorical concern for defending ideas, while the ideas themselves and their defenders remained solid.

By the time I saw *Sju tre*, the extremist statements hardly came as a shock but still proved a shocking truth about the production. The dialogue was based on recorded conversations in the prison, which were then arranged dramaturgically by Norén. However, it was also well known that the convicts had the final word by their approval or disapproval about what had been typed out before rehearsals. A performance about planning a performance with actors in the role of co-operative writers is no doubt an exciting concept for performance art, but in this case the collaboration involved a moral dimension which made several lines cognate to racial agitation (as Willmar Sauter will elaborate in greater detail below). Regardless of how the manuscript came about, two of the performers inevitably seemed to address the audience by 'writing' the script in the act of performing it. To paraphrase John L. Austin and his idea of speech acts, this is not a matter of describing words but *doing* what words mean.<sup>3</sup> For words to become actions, however, Austin also points out that utterances take effect when carried out under appropriate circumstances (Ref. 3, p. 8). In the theatre, as in much language philosophy, communication involves a third person's perspective in order to be meaningful, i.e. a shared cultural stage on which intersubjective expressions prove their worth. Then what about seeing and hearing the political statements in *Sju tre*? Is not this an integral part of the 'appropriate' context and therefore also a support of what is stated? Most definitely.

Witnessing the event involved a historical responsibility in the form of a contemporary promise not to forget and a future obligation to remain aware. Some commentators thought that *Sju tre* was an anti-democratic event. I thought it was 'extremely' democratic since we did not really have an acceptable interpretive option besides relying on the tacit public opinion, which encircled and counterbalanced the staged dialogue. The latter stand stresses the theoretical need to take a spectatorial perspective into consideration as an integral part of theatre as well as other public events, for this is what made the stage event at issue translational into a powerful debate. Hence, when the theatrical frame of *Sju tre* threatened to dissolve and transform into a political platform, a contingent frame had to be consolidated among the spectators, in an ulterior agreement of trust. In lack of a secure author or fiction, the audience

had to take interpretive action by embodying a virtual as well as conceptual setting and thus developing a democratic frame of resistance right then and there.

In spite of his loss of discursive command, Norén managed to stage a crucial, not to say paradoxical, predicament of democracy, namely the one of how a form of constitution based on freedom of expression and liberty of association must protect expressions and associations made to destroy these very principles. It is like a parasite the body needs to maintain but which can also kill you. In other words, one must be aware of it and try to trace its ways before it goes berserk. How? Well, just like the parasitologist, it is urgent to gather evidence of previous cases, scrutinize its alignment, beware of its symptoms, and keep it under close observation. Norén did not implant a fatal civil disease, but examined and demonstrated a potential malignancy with almost unbearably real means. And when all hell eventually broke loose the experiment reached its full potential, although in a way that no one except the two performers could anticipate. *Sju tre* died in the Malexander crossfire, but it will take a long time to forget it since its shadowy appearance endures with those of us who saw it and who can clearly see its potential cataclysm reappear and strike anew in other places.

Admittedly, I was a part of all this – by witnessing a Naturalist performance art experiment that eventually turned into a tragedy. And although I did not see it coming then, I can at least see it coming now. But one time is quite enough, perhaps even one too many.

#### **A theoretical perspective (Willmar Sauter)**

No – I have not seen *Sju tre*. I deliberately chose not to spend my money on such a performance. Or, more accurately: I did not want that my attendance at a performance could be interpreted as support for this project, of which I had disapproved. A moral issue, then? Certainly, but this is not the topic of my comments here. I am, however, aware that my moral decisions are implied in whatever I can say about *Sju tre*.

How, then, do I dare to write about a performance that I have not even seen myself? Is this a moral issue or a scholarly one – and is there any difference, anyway? Well, most theatre scholars write about performances they have not seen personally. All theatre history has been written this way. To establish a historical event, however, the theatre historian needs some evidence about the event itself, some information about the context in which it took place, and also a theoretical framework, which describes the perspectives, the values – including the moral values – the aesthetics, and the personal preferences of the researcher. What applies to historical events, can also be claimed in respect to contemporary theatrical events, which we have not attended personally. I think this is a common practice among theatre scholars. Few have seen the *Untitled Event*, which John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olsson, Robert Rauschenberg and others mounted in 1952 – and yet there is hardly an article or book on Performance Art or Happenings that do not refer to this event. It has entered the discourse of theatre and thus become part of our heritage.

If the reader accepts that I am entitled to write something about *Sju tre*, depending on written evidence, public and private discussions, statements by medical expertise, my earlier experiences of plays by the same author, etc – then what do I have to say? The question I find central in this type of performance (Norén did not exactly invent the idea of placing an ‘original’ on stage), is the relationship between the so-called reality and the so-called fiction.

In the public debate this issue has been treated as an ontological problem, i.e. assuming that it is possible to distinguish between reality and fiction. I think that a yes-or-no-answer is neither reasonable nor possible. In my contribution to the discussion of this highly charged question of moral responsibility, I would like to examine some aspects of theatrical actions. I want to discuss the ways actions in a theatrical performance produce fiction and how this fiction relates to the reality outside the theatre. First, I will try to illuminate this question from a theoretical point of view, and then the possible consequences for the understanding of *Sju tre* are examined.

When an actor enters the stage, he does so first and foremost in his own right, as a person with specific physical and mental features. Although a very basic observation, the importance of the stage personality of the performer is easily neglected. (Since *Sju tre* had an all-male cast, I will not speak about actresses in this context.) In terms of the reality–fiction dichotomy, the performer is and remains part of the non-theatrical reality. Despite make-up or costume or any other kind of disguise, the performer appears as a person, unique and not interchangeable within the framework of a particular performance. At the same time, we have to realize that the actor does not occupy the performance space on his own. He does so to exhibit himself to someone – the spectator. Only together can they create an act of performance. Such an act of performance takes place during a limited span of time, as long, indeed, as the performer *and* the spectator participate in what I call the theatrical event.

How do the actor and the spectator know when and where the theatrical event begins and ends? There are many conventions marking the time and the place of performance, and these are usually familiar to both performer and spectator. In whatever form, these conventions mark a distinction between everyday-life actions and experiences and those we call theatrical. This distinction does not permit us automatically to separate reality from fiction. Not everything that happens during a theatrical event is fiction. On the contrary: as I already have pointed out, there are actions that clearly remain in the sphere of reality, such as the exhibitory actions of the performer. The exhibitory actions in the theatre are distinguishable from most non-theatrical actions of the same kind through the public act of showing – the actor wilfully displays his body, his voice, his temperament etc, to the audience. By doing so, he attracts the attention of the audience. I call this relationship the sensory communication between performer and spectator. Of course, such sensory relations also occur outside of the theatre; what makes them theatrical in a performance is not that they are fictional, but that they follow certain rules and conventions.

The spectator's attention toward the performer depends largely on the sensory level of communication. This is also obvious in Ola Johansson's account of *Sju tre* – the well-trained, muscular bodies of Tony Olsson and Mats Nilsson made a strong impression on him, especially during their physical exercises in the performance. Also, the comparably 'small' body of the professional actor, Reine Brynolfsson, becomes part of his relationship. These physical conditions certainly belong to reality, but may become part of fiction – intended or not – through the perception of the individual spectator.

One of the most persistent conventions of theatrical events is the use of an artistic means of expression. The performer does not limit himself to exhibitory actions alone, but adds encoded actions to communicate, also on an artistic level. Different theatrical genres employ different artistic means: in opera, the performers sing, in ballet they dance, in dramatic theatre

they speak. For the professional actor, speaking on stage is not the same as talking in private. They have trained their voices to be heard by large audiences, they have learned to articulate and phrase a text, they have adopted a certain style of delivery etc. The same is true of other aspects of acting – walking across a stage can very well be made an art. I want to stress the fact that whatever personal or conventional style a performer chooses, it has no fictional significance as such. A tragedy can be spoken, sung, or danced with the same violent impact. Artistic expressions on stage have a different function (whatever they may contribute to the fictional narrative): the artistic level of communication distinguishes the theatrical performance from everyday experiences.

This distinction is not easily established. Of course people use artistic expressions outside the theatre – and we sometimes even use the word ‘theatrical’ to describe such behaviour. In everyday situations, the ‘artistic’ aspect of actions is mostly hidden, whereas the theatre artist explicitly shows his artistic skills. The ostentation of the artistry lends theatre an aura of playfulness, which identifies the theatrical event as *playing* culture as opposed to *written* culture. Instead of reading the dramatic text at home, we take upon ourselves the inconvenience of attending a performance to become part of this interplay between performer and spectator. The English language uses the term ‘player’, in German actors are called ‘*Schauspieler*’ – both indications of the playing character of the theatrical event. The watching of the artistic capabilities of the performers is one of the major reasons for the audience to buy tickets. It gives pleasure, it is valued, and it is evaluated. Even in amateur theatre, the artistic skills and means of expression are very important, although they are normally measured by other standards than in the professional theatre.

The artistic level of communication also constitutes the prerequisite for the transition from the reality-based sensory communication to the symbolic level of communication, through which the fictional world is created. Fiction, however, is created through the interaction between performer and spectator. Without artistic expressions, fiction is no longer part of the playful relationship between stage and auditorium.

On the symbolic level, the fictional characters are finally constructed. The performer employs now a third kind of action, which I call embodied actions. Physically, they are carried out by the actor, but they are meant to embody the actions of a fictional character. Such actions can be real actions or pretend ones. The actor really sits on a chair while he pretends to be angry, drunk, or in love through his movements, tone of voice, contact with other actors/characters etc. The artistic way of conducting such actions both enhances the embodied actions and provides pleasure, astonishment, or disapproval for the spectator. In addition, the exhibitory actions can become part of the fictional character, but need not to do so: while some actors present a ‘beautiful’ Romeo, we also accept less ‘beautiful’ actors in this role. On my own behalf, I could say that the artistic skills of a performer sometimes substitute a lack of exhibitory features – especially in opera, this has frequently been the case.

The last remark already refers to the significance of the spectator in the process of creating fiction. Fiction is not produced on stage but in the mind of the beholder. What the stage offers, in terms of actions and pictures, are images, which the spectator converts into fictional persons and places. Only through the active imagination of the spectator will the images presented on stage assume symbolic meaning and indicate a fictional narrative. The nature of such a fictional narrative therefore depends on both the images and the imagination involved in this process.

The spectator's references are as important for the fictionalization as the artist's intentions. The stage provides the impulses, the auditorium adds its responses: that is how we should conceptualize fiction in the theatre.

The observant reader will already have guessed that *Sju tre* was – at least in part – lacking one of the levels in my model of theatrical communication. On the part of the convicts, there were no artistic means of expression. The question we have to ask is, what happens when the momentum of artistic 'playing' is missing and the exhibitory actions become identical with the embodied actions? Tony Olsson and Mats Nilsson were not seen as presenting fictional characters, but as representing themselves.

When I claim that the spectator is able (and used) to distinguish between the different layers of a performer – the personality, the artist, and the fictional role – I do so against a background of 10 years of reception and audience research. However, I have never confronted audiences with a performance, in which the artistic link between personality and role is missing. Nevertheless, my conclusion is that spectators might experience considerable difficulties in separating the role from the personality when there is no recognizable artistic level to set apart the theatrical event from other kinds of experiences. The risk to identify the performers with their characters seems obvious and the specific context of the production makes this assumption all the more likely.

Due to the public debate that followed immediately after the first night of the production, there were hardly any spectators who were not fully aware of the fact that some of the performers were convicts with strong Nazi sympathies. It was also well known that the text was written in accordance with the author's talks with these very convicts. In other words, the audience knew that private opinions of these performers coincided with the lines they spoke on stage. I think this is an important aspect: the fictional characters, which the spectator is supposed to construct out of the exhibitory, encoded and embodied actions, never took shape, because the spectator's creative contribution to this process was impaired, partly by the lack of encoded actions, and partly by the information concerning the context of the performance. Thus, the usual references, which the spectator brings into play, were disconnected and the performers remained on the level of exhibiting their own personalities, including their own political opinions.

The performance tried to allude to a therapy session in a prison. While the prisoners presented themselves and their ideas on stage, the spokesman of the author (who was not a therapist, after all) was represented by a professional actor. I mentioned earlier that Reine Brynolfsson hardly equalled those well-trained prisoners in size, but there is also another, and possibly more significant, inequality between the convicts and the actor. The convicts spoke on their own behalf, but the actor was performing in the theatrical sense, employing exhibitory, encoded and embodied actions. Thus, his arguments were the arguments of a fictional character, following the prescribed script. Even if his private ideas might have coincided with the text he was speaking, he still performed them as a character. This was not the case with the convicts. It could be said that the performance spoke in two different tongues – the direct speech of the convicts and the performed speech of the actor. It is very well possible that a number of spectators had problems with such an uneven dialogue.

There are some more questions to be asked concerning the context of this production: Is there a difference between the convicts propagating their Nazi ideas and other actors doing

so, actors who believe in the ideas expressed by the play they are performing? What makes these convicts on stage different from stand-up comedians, who also talk about their own ideas? Would the effect of the performance be different if all the parts were performed by professional actors? Last but not the least: who is responsible for the disaster this production eventually ended with? I will at least attempt to indicate some possible answers based on my theoretical arguments, although I admit that my personal attitude cannot be completely set aside.

*Sju tre* is not the first production in theatre history in which performers propagated their personal political ideas. Many of the free groups theatre movement in the late 1960s and 1970s expressed their own political ideologies in passionate productions. That their sympathies tended toward the political left hardly made any difference in the eyes of the bourgeois establishment, which put Stalin and Hitler on the same platform anyway. In my opinion, these groups still attempted to create an artistic level, thus opening up a distinction between the symbolic and the exhibitory actions. The spectator was still free to make a difference between actor and character. There are, of course, instances when such distinctions were neither possible nor desirable, for instance in the Soviet agit-prop tours in the 1920s or the communist 'Blue Shirts' of the Weimar Republic. Another parallel, closer in time, are the Neo-Nazi rock groups, propagating their racist ideologies in concerts and on records. For me, *Sju tre* came very close to this latter example.

Stand-up comedians represent another kind of performer, for which the distinction between reality and fiction is often blurred. When Lenny Bruce, one of the earliest exponents of this particular form of entertainment, was arrested and fined for his 'indecent speeches' on stage, the police did not care about 'real' and 'performed' speech. Nevertheless, I would say that a stand-up comedian is not speaking as a private person, but as a stage personality, 'playing' him- or herself. Although the comedian talks about his or her own person, this person is rather the (fictional) character of the show, presented through artistic means. The audience does not react primarily to what is being said, but to how it is brought about, i.e. the artistic skills of the performer. Rather than direct exhibitory actions, stand-up comedians use irony, rhetoric twists and dramaturgical strategies to entertain – no matter if they personally agree or disagree with the story they tell. In other words: the artistic level of communication remains intact regardless of the interaction between the personality of the performer and the figure presented as the 'speaker'.

During the public debate following the premiere of *Sju tre*, but before the fatal shooting of the two policemen, a rumour was circulated in the press that the Volksbühne in Berlin had intentions to produce Norén's play, but – and this was underlined immediately – without prisoners. So far, I have not heard more about these plans, but the question remains, what difference would it make to perform the play with 'real' actors? If the actors were to succeed in presenting the convicts as theatrical characters, it might be possible that the debate about prisons as nurseries of reactionary ideologies – which the author allegedly had intended – would actually reach out to the public. Although I am not sure about the balance of the arguments in the script, I nevertheless can imagine that the focus of such a production would be different: away from the performing convicts towards the issues performed.

There is no doubt that the appearance of prisoners on a public stage attracts attention. This was also the case when convicts at San Quentin in California and Kumla in Sweden produced Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' under the artistic guidance of the Swedish

actor Jan Jönsson. In particular, the disappearance of the prisoners from Kumla during a tour of the production was turned into a spectacle in the media, although the runaways were caught before they killed anybody. These prisoners were, however, not ‘playing’ themselves, but acting in Beckett’s play, which had a specific meaning for people waiting for their release from prison. In these cases – as in many other instances when theatre is ‘used’ in prisons – the therapeutic aim is obvious. The aim is to give these ‘unseen personalities’ a clearer picture of their identities and theatre is but a tool in these efforts. Nevertheless, even when the aim is limited and the purpose fully acceptable from the social point of view, some non-desirable effects might easily be produced. Psychologists have pointed out that the experience of sudden ‘fame’ is especially difficult to deal with for people in difficult circumstances such as prison life. The newly acquired attention easily encourages dreams of other exemptions, of quick ways out to freedom, of sudden possibilities to change one’s entire life. This problem has been discussed, especially after the murders in *Malexander*: who is to blame, who is responsible?

In my view, it is too easy to point out the prison authorities, which permitted the engagement of the convicts, as the only ones responsible for the tragic failure. I felt upset by the few public statements released from the management of the Riksteatern, saying that the theatre itself had no responsibility at all. Moreover, the management, including the president of the board, maintained that the production was an ‘artistic’ success, regardless of what happened after the last performance. I hope to have shown that the artistic impact of the production is highly questionable. Contrary to the view of the theatre management I want to stress the utterly dubious role the convicts played in this production. The experience of their symbolic significance in the public debate could very well be the seed for the confirmation of their own personal and political beliefs, as reflected in their planning of the robbery and their lack of respect for other people’s lives. I do not want to rule out a strong link between the incomplete theatrical actions of these convicts, their psychological strengthening through public attention, and their behaviour in the non-theatrical context. For me, the question of responsibility is far from being answered sufficiently. Theatre remains a moral issue.

#### **An American perspective (Janelle Reinelt)**

I arrived in Sweden in August of 1999, during the period of the most intense discussion and debate about the Norén case. The situation was on the minds and lips of every theatre and academic person I met and, during my visits then, and again in September, I realized how thoroughly this production and its consequences had provoked the Swedish public to a serious encounter with aesthetic, ethical, and political issues. In my own work, I was researching public events in the United States and the United Kingdom that crossed the border between the ‘theatrical’ and the ‘real,’ resulting in a theatricalization of aspects of national life, national identity, and racial politics.<sup>d</sup> It became clear to me that *Sju tre* was a catalyst for staging race and nation in Sweden.

In what follows, I sketch out the interrelationship between aesthetic, ethical and political issues that came to be embodied in the theatrical events surrounding *Sju tre*. These events are not limited to the actual performances of the play. The robbery, murders and their aftermath, including the trial, became a national affair in the wake of public debate – spectacles of a heightened theatricality that ‘staged’ contemporary contradictions in Swedish national life.

A review of the public debate in the press and media reveals a number of closely related, interlocking issues; however, they suffer from an inevitable conflation. For the purposes of our discussion, I think it necessary to consider separately three aspects of the situation: (1) issues arising from the performance itself, its meanings and effects, its dramaturgy; (2) issues concerning the ethical and political responsibility of Norén and also of the producing theatre (Riksteatern); (3) issues arising from subsequent events (the robbery, murders and trial), the media coverage and its effects.

The fundamental aesthetic issue arising from the initial performance was the relationship between the stage fiction and reality. To the extent that Norén had written and devised (with the prisoners) a 'play', it was considered a fiction, but to the extent that the prisoners represented themselves and spoke of their own convictions and beliefs, it became an act of propaganda, of speech making. The theatre gave two Nazi prisoners a platform for their point of view, and seemed to condone it by producing it. The extremity of the prisoner's beliefs took the performance to the very limits of what is allowed in public life: downplaying the Holocaust, for example, or insisting on the value of racial purity and desiring to expel immigrants. These things map the borderline of good and evil; even a secular democracy finds such advocacy intolerable – especially in the form of an incitement to action. In fact, political journalist Erik Sidenbladh responded to the performance by filing a criminal complaint against the performers for the hate crime of their actions on stage. He took literally the performativity of the enactment: the actors performed a hateful act on the stage (a literalness J.L. Austin would have appreciated).<sup>5</sup>

The public discourse about this issue came mostly, naturally enough, from theatre critics – but not exclusively. The more traditional theatre critics, such as Tomas Forser and Leif Zern, based their severe criticism of the production on arguments about the violation of the necessary fiction of the stage. Both argued that the distance from reality afforded by a fictional frame allows people to think and feel without coercion, but that *Sju tre* destroyed that distance and therefore violated the audience.<sup>5,6</sup> On the other hand, Lars Ericsson, a philosopher and art critic who tends toward a post-structuralist point of view, responded to these arguments in *Dagens Nyheter* by invoking the difficulty of maintaining any meaningful distinction between fiction and reality:

Can a person who performs on a stage be said to be 'authentic' at all? Doesn't a person who plays himself get fictionalised by the context? And what does it finally mean to 'play oneself'? Isn't there usually a grey zone between the acted and the real, the fictive and the actual? In my eyes, phenomena like docu-dramas, original copies, and infotainment indicate this. Identity perhaps always wears a mask.<sup>7</sup>

These arguments revolve around the definition of 'theatre' as fundamentally different from actual life, and the performance is attacked for disturbing the boundary. The defence of the performance, in this case, is the view that theatre and life are never neatly separated anyway, and that it is a nostalgic error to claim otherwise. Characterized in this way, the disagreement is between a traditional and a post-modern theory of theatre. However, even if the second view seems more persuasive, it does not diminish the problems raised by the first. That is, even if art and life are irremediably mixed in artistic representation, the causes for concern among those for whom the boundary issues are primary still exist. The relationships between action

and advocacy among those involved are the underlying causes for concern. To the extent that the two performers had a history of participation in Nazi activities and to the extent that they demonstrated through their performance an advocacy of these ideas, the problem will not go away just because it is difficult to distinguish the role from the person. In fact, the history of 'real' people becomes part of the 'narrative past' of the performance, and the act of advocacy on stage is performed in the moment, whether in character or not. An interpretative argument must be made about what in real life/real stage time was performed, and how its meanings were understood. (For example, was the presumed advocacy the only element or were there counter elements of irony or critique? And what do the spectators perceive about the nature of the performance's effects?)

A related aesthetic question concerned the 'form' of the drama, or rather, its dramaturgy. Detractors argued that the drama was flawed because an adequate answer to the expressed Nazism was not found within the drama. Henrik Sjögren writes that Norén 'gets stuck and can't find a way out,'<sup>8</sup> and Anders Ehnmark writes that the play 'broke down in the second act.' More conservative critics, Per Svensson<sup>9</sup> and Tomas Forser,<sup>5</sup> make such aesthetic judgements when they complain about the boundary problem: to blur the boundaries is a kind of dramaturgical failure. In an insightful essay, Anders Johansson reviews these debates. He points out that a presumption of the moral superiority of art underlies these arguments – that the outcome of performances should be morally good, and so, by definition, a performance that does not offer a strong counter to Nazism is a failure. To defend the play within this paradigm, one is forced to argue, as Roger Fjellström does, that Nazism is refuted within the frame of the play, that a Christian message of love and conversion counter-balances the message of hate.<sup>10</sup> The weakness of this line of reasoning, well rehearsed by responding critics, was indeed refuted by the criminal events that subsequently took place. Johansson argues that the presumption of necessary moral clarity is itself at fault. In his view, the second act 'breakdown', when the Christian message seems weak and ineffectual against the strength of the Nazi advocacy, dramatizes exactly that collapse. It is a contemporary social dilemma and has no immediate remedy. 'Hence, at the same time as Nazism makes a well-formed whole impossible, it is an essential part of what is constituted in *Sju tre*. The life of the drama is conceived in the distance between ... understanding and hatred, the love and the violence, humanism and Nazism, the audience's goodwill and the subject's unpleasantness, the theatre and reality – in short, between the will to form and the content's reluctance.'<sup>11</sup> The failure of the drama is thus a failure of the times – a pressing social matter of major proportions.

These debates about the performance's aesthetics, it will be seen, cannot be wholly separated from the ethical and political issues involved in the question of representing Nazism. Even Johansson's impassioned plea to give up the notion that drama/art must be morally good, makes an argument based on the good – that it is ethically and politically appropriate to dramatize the impasse of contemporary Swedish society in confronting an upsurge of Neo-Nazism. We could say he makes a form of moral argument himself.

Turning, therefore, to the second issue, whether we accept Johansson's view of theatre as necessarily amoral, or whether we insist that it is supremely moral, there remains the stubborn question of the artist's responsibility for his/her own creations. While democracy celebrates freedom for the artist, and indeed freedom of expression in general, the artist's paradox is that good intentions can exist alongside unintended results – the artist remains

responsible in any case. Norén was deeply disturbed, first by the unexpected hostile reaction of a large section of the public to the performances, and then, of course, by the violent events carried out by the prisoners. His initial attitude might best be described as astonishment. His was an attempt to open a dialogue with those members of society who are most shunned, most abject, most rejected by established and conventional morality. Precisely because these people exist, and in numbers, there must be a way to enter into a human interaction with them, according to Norén. He had hoped that he 'would be met by a quite wide understanding and an affection for, as I think of it, the important work we have done,' and he regretted that it produced the reverse, 'for by that [response] one does not reach any understanding of what one wanted to bring forth.' In retrospect, it is impossible not to wonder if Norén is hopelessly naive, or whether he was being disingenuous, but if we take him at his word, mindful of the time of this interview (3 May, 1999 – before the robbery and murders), then the argument must shift to Norén's levels of knowledge and comprehension of racism, National Socialism, history, and contemporary Swedish events; in other words, the account of his responsibility must embrace context as well as intention. Unfortunately, Norén did not speak extensively about the production at any time, before or after the events that followed the show's closing. He eventually resigned from Riksteatern, together with producer Isa Stenberg, on 6 August 1999 (as it happened, the same day Mats Nilson was caught and identified in the press as an accessory; Nilson was later charged as an accomplice to the Kisa robbery). Hounded by the press, Norén disappeared from public view for a time, eventually returning to the staff of the theatre, together with Stenberg, in late September. During a visit to Stockholm in March 2000, I saw the opening night of Norén's next play, *Skuggpojarna* (*Shadowboys*), which dealt with men imprisoned for paedophilic crimes. This time, the prisoners were all actors. The press was relatively dispassionate, if somewhat critical – things were back to 'normal.'<sup>f</sup>

The theatre that produced *Sju tre*, Riksteatern, is one of the national institutions of Swedish culture. It is a touring theatre, with a venue just outside of Stockholm. Like the Royal Dramaten, the Riksteatern carries the banner of a national cultural art house. Thus, issues about national arts policy, legitimization and authorization accompany its repertoire. Tomas Lyrevik, managing director at Riksteatern, was quiet during the first public outcry over the production, refusing, presumably, to respond to the furore on grounds of artistic freedom. This reticence itself angered critics. However, eventually, Lyrevik supported Norén at a public press conference held two days after Norén and Stenberg resigned. He said, in part, that the 'board of the Riksteatern and the whole management group stand totally unified behind him. We are proud to have given space and resources to his artistic work.' Behind the scenes, the situation was in fact more complex, where, for example, stage hand union leader Kent Malmström declared publicly that there should be no Nazis in any work place. In short, the theatre management assumed a predictable line of defence behind their repertoire and their personnel, and declined to enter into a serious discussion of issues, such as the responsibility or lack of it among the theatre's Board for anticipating the issues arising in producing such a show, or such as the meaning of its position as national venue in light of the highly inflammatory nature of the content of the production, or the possible other alternatives (to not producing) that might have been explored or followed, or which might be in future situations. For example, and very obviously, the presence in the publicity of an indication of the controversial nature of the performance, an extensive programme which historicized the material, and/or a series of

post-show discussions of the issues with intellectuals and artists would have gone a long way to provide a context within which the performance and the theatre itself might have been deemed responsible by a large section of the public, even if still abhorrent in terms of its content. Unfortunately, neither the theatre management nor the director himself were able to rise to the challenge this would have entailed.

Turning to the third issue, the events in *Kisa* and *Malexander* immensely complicated the so-called artistic debate, and the subsequent enormous press coverage also changed the intensity as well as the scope of these matters. In the play, John says to Tony, one of the Nazi prisoners who wants to expel all foreigners: 'What you call foreign can't be shut out. It is already here within ourselves. It isn't possible to sort out the one from the other and say: this is us, that is they. It is already here, within ourselves, we're also strangers, the foreign is us.' Ironically, the argument about immigration control merges with artistic arguments about form and content: there is no clear distinction between fiction and reality which makes fiction (art) a privileged, uncontaminated sphere; and, likewise, it is useless to try to separate out elements of society (such as immigrants or even Nazis) from public discourse because the society itself has produced, and has embedded in it, the very attributes it is trying to exclude.

'Art', whether theatre or any other artistic expression, is itself a social practice, an action that partakes in the social, political and historical matrix of the construction of the reality of a nation or community. It intervenes in, and constructs, public life just as do political speeches, newspaper journalism, public rituals, such as parades or coronations, town hall meetings or church services. It is a mistake to treat theatre or any other art as outside of questions of good and evil, political judgements, social justice, or any other evaluative issue facing society. The production of *Sju tre* made a variety of interventions into the public life of Sweden, especially prominent because the level of controversy brought it to the attention of a wide segment of the population, not just the arts community. To my mind, exactly what it 'staged' was the mutual penetration of art and life, and therefore the necessary accountability to the public for what was performed.

Instead, then, of the artistic value of the 'drama,' or the freedom of the artist to explore and create, the pressing questions result from revealing social contradictions and widespread and heated public debate. To rephrase this, it could have been justified to put real Nazis on stage and allow them to expound their beliefs – *if* the result was that a democratic process of reasoning, thinking, argumentation, and public discourse allowed, indeed forced, the Swedish public to engage with these contradictions. A more politically sophisticated director and theatre management would have contributed constructively to this process.

I believe 'responsible' artists should argue this case – should in fact argue that, at this moment, it is fitting and important for a national theatre to take up the representation of the racial contradictions facing Sweden and the rest of Europe. This past year saw the election of Jörg Haider and the incorporation of his party into the government of Austria. The social democracies of Europe are all facing the historical past of National Socialism in light of its possible growth and resurgence in a contemporary United Europe. France has Le Pen, Belgium has Filip Dewinter and the Vlaams Blok party, and Sweden is one of the leading producers of 'White Power Music' (*Vit makt-musik*).<sup>8</sup> The tension is between the very principles of democracy based on freedom of expression, liberty of association, rule by election and open political processes, on the one hand, and, on the other, the outrage of the Nazi ideology of

exclusion, coercion, and various forms of 'ethnic cleansing'. Immigration and its political and social consequences have been an instigating feature of the political, even parliamentary, gains of far-right parties in western nations. The notion of 'hate crimes' was developed to try to draw specific distinctions about the limits of the concept of free speech and expression. Performance offers a key testing ground for the contradictions between freedom of speech and abuse of freedom, community responsibility and individual conscience.

Seeing *Sju tre* inevitably meant being involved in a subversive activity that not only challenged one's participation in the arts community but also one's ethical and political responsibility in public life. By presenting what is otherwise ordinarily re-presented in the theatre, Norén and his collaborators actualized critical issues by staging a critical situation, although within an institutional setting for a theatre audience. This made the performance highly indecisive. Like all public events, *Sju tre* relied on the democratic privileges of liberty of association and freedom of speech and yet it allowed Nazi assertions to be an integral part of its dramaturgy. The anti-democratic speakers and speeches became, therefore, parasitic on the liberties that allowed their communication. However, as long as political speech meets a complex audience, its meaning will inevitably be subject to a trial of meaning and purpose.

### Conclusions

From Ola Johansson's spectatorial perspective in the first part of this essay, the public opinion of the audience, despite its tacit role in the performance, counteracts the effect of the extremist expressions on stage. It is probably because of the right to have the last word that an audience can and will allow experiments like *Sju tre*.

By questioning the theatricality of the performance, Willmar Sauter points out a weak spot of the production: the unbalance between Nazi propaganda and the performed defence of democratic values. Thus, the responsibility for the consequences outside the theatre is seen in the aesthetic choices of the production.

From the perspective of Janelle Reinelt, the most important lesson to gain from the Norén affair is the imperative for theatre artists both be confront the most difficult and important issues of their time and also to shoulder their responsibility for political and social engagement with their communities.

*Sju tre* is an example of how various cultural contexts can be incorporated into a theatrical event. This is certainly also the case with much other theatre, it is just that *Sju tre* is such an extreme example. The theatre is a public confluence with a potential to put the cornerstones of modern society on display and enact intricate conflicts between cultural, judicial and political issues. In light of this broader view, it becomes clear that there can be no sharp, analytical dividing line between theatre and society. Hence, what happened during, and after, the production of *Sju tre* are two aspects of the same crux, even if the ultimate responsibility for the Norén affair remains an issue for future discussions.

### Notes

- a All lines from the play have been taken from articles by Roger Fjellström, a philosopher at Umeå University and a strong defender of Norén, who got hold of the

- manuscript before it was classified, i.e. before the bank robbery and police killings in May 1999.
- b This decisive question also applies to the audience. As far as I am aware, very few spectators left the performance in protest during the production period. It was most likely the case, however, that most spectators applauded with a thorn in their palm, as one reviewer put it.
  - c Consider the intolerable and yet conceivable possibility that a group of Neo-Nazis would have bought all the tickets for one of the performances; that would most likely have made it impossible to carry on with the production. Hence, if a diversified audience was a condition for the staging to be justifiable, that condition was nevertheless contingent upon the trust that the 'right' kind of audiences would attend all the performances.
  - d In particular, in the United States, I have written about the work of Anna Deavere Smith, an African American writer/performer who has fashioned one-woman shows about public events of grave importance, such as the aftermath of the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles (*Twilight, L.A. 1992*), and in 1989, the riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn following confrontations between black and Jewish communities over the death of a young member of each group (*Fires in the Mirror*). Recently, I have written about the Stephen Lawrence case in England, which began in 1993 with the murder of a black teenager by five white youths, and culminated in 1999 in a public inquiry that found the London Metropolitan police institutionally racist and the investigation into the murder hopelessly flawed. No one has been convicted to date. The events have since been dramatized in the form of a documentary play, two television drama-documentaries, and a news documentary. See 'Performing Race: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*,' *Modern Drama*, 39(4), Winter 1996, pp. 609–617 and 'Tracking Twilight: The Politics of Location,' *TheatreForum* 6, Spring 1995, pp. 52–57. The Stephen Lawrence material is as yet unpublished.
  - e This charge was not, however, sustained in court. Austin's theory of performativity holds that 'in the case of performative utterances (I swear, I do [marry], I bequeath) it seems clear that to utter the sentence ... is not to *describe* my doing ... it is to do it.'<sup>4</sup>
  - f Norén has been making work about the downtrodden and the despised for some time. His most celebrated play was *Personkrets 3:1* (Street People's Play) which considered the drug addicts and homeless people who live at the margins of the central square in Stockholm.
  - g In May 1999, there were 322 such titled CDs for sale on the internet, among which 27 bands were Swedish. In 1996, Swedish police found that one of the recording companies, 'Ragnarrock Records,' had sold 70,000 records (*Dagens Nyheter*, 09/10/99).

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