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INSIDE OUT

A DEEP DIVE FOR PATRONS

The 2024 cast of *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by Jamie Kraus Photography

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DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
Theatre Company

INSIDE OUT

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A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens
Adapted by Richard Hellesen
Music by David de Berry
Directed by Anthony Powell

NOV 21 - DEC 28
WOLF THEATRE

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PLAY SYNOPSIS

Ebeneezer Scrooge is a cold, isolated, miserly man, and he likes it that way. Especially this time of year—Christmas (Humbug!)—when all the fools of London file into the street to *sing* together and *feast* together and demand time off work and, worst of all, beg charity donations from honest businessmen like Mr. Scrooge. He'll have none of it. If the poor want help, they can go to a workhouse (or prison), and if one more person tries to solicit Scrooge's hard-earned cash, he might beat them over the head with their own collections bucket. He wants to go home, eat a nice, lukewarm bowl of gruel, and sleep through the nonsense. But tonight will not be restful. Just before bed, Mr. Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his late business partner, Jacob Marley, who appears in chains and warns Scrooge he's destined for a similar postmortem fate if he doesn't learn to care for the people around him. Marley announces that Scrooge will be haunted by three spirits, and that they'll offer him his only chance at redemption. Then he vanishes, leaving Scrooge shaking in his slippers. The three spirits take Scrooge on a journey through Christmases past, present, and future. Scrooge witnesses the joy of his youthful holiday celebrations, the way his family and friends cared for him, and he them, and the way his lust for money severed his connections one by one. He sees people in destitute circumstances finding and making merriment for the holiday, despite their lack of resources and their awareness of looming tragedy. He learns all the little painful ways his cruel lack of empathy makes life harder on people and is heartbroken to realize that his death will make the world a gentler place. Humbled, devastated, and overcome with remorse, Scrooge pledges to live his life according to the lessons of Christmas—365 days a year—if only he might be granted a second chance. He wakes up on Christmas morning a new man, dancing with gratitude. He sets immediately to rebuilding his relationships, distributing his tight-held wealth, and performing new acts of generosity every day, for the rest of his life.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Ebeneezer Scrooge: a hard, isolated, penny-pinching man. Bah! Humbug!
Jacob Marley: Scrooge's business partner. Dead as a doornail.
Bob Cratchit: Scrooge's clerk. Husband to Mrs. Cratchit. Father to all the little Cratchits.
Mrs. Cratchit: Mom to all the little Cratchits. Wife to Bob Cratchit. Baker of the Christmas pudding.
Martha Cratchit: the oldest Cratchit kid. Works to support the family.
Peter Cratchit: the second-oldest Cratchit kid. Hopes to become a man of business.
Belinda Cratchit: the middle Cratchit kid.
Edward Cratchit: the second-youngest Cratchit kid.
"Tiny" Tim Cratchit: the youngest Cratchit. Small for his size. Has a pronounced limp. An optimist.
The Ghost of Christmas Past: a spirit.
The Ghost of Christmas Present: a spirit. Caretaker of Ignorance and Want.
The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: a spirit.
Fred: Scrooge's nephew. Persistent, kind, and perpetually upbeat.
Fan: Scrooge's sister. Fred's mom.
Mr. Fezziwig: Scrooge's former boss. A benevolent fellow. Married to Mrs. Fezziwig.
Mrs. Fezziwig: a jolly woman and expert host. Loves to sing and dance. Married to Mr. Fezziwig.
Dick Wilkins: Scrooge's former coworker.
Belle: Scrooge's fiancé.
And a full ensemble of other characters!

PLAYWRIGHT BIOS

Richard Hellesen (Adapter): playwright and dramaturg. His most recent work, the solo show *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground*, starring Tony-winner John Rubinstein, premiered off-Broadway at Theatre at St. Clement's in 2023. As an Associate Artist at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, his plays included the full-length *Necessary Sacrifices*, the one-acts *One Destiny* (over 1500 performances, including at the White House) and *The Road from Appomattox*, and, as co-bookwriter, the 2015 adaptation of Frank Wildhorn's musical *The Civil War*, titled *Freedom's Song*. With composer David de Berry he wrote the book for this widely produced adaptation of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, seen at numerous theatres across the country including (most recently) the Denver Center Theatre Company and Syracuse Stage. Other notable plays include *Kingdom* (premiered at the Denver Center; Stavis Playwriting Award, National Theatre Conference, and a finalist for the PEN USA-West Literary Awards); *Once In Arden* (premiered at South Coast Repertory; Julie Harris Playwriting Award, Beverly Hills Theatre Guild); *Moonshadow* (numerous regional theatre productions; Dennis McIntyre Playwriting Award, Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays); and an adaptation of Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (semi-finalist, O'Neill National Playwrights Conference). His two-dozen produced short plays include five finalists for the Actors Theatre of Louisville Heideman Award and National Award for Short Playwriting: *Four One-Hundredths, Layin' Off the Lizard-Boy*, *Teardown*, *A Speedy And Public Trial*, and *Chopin's Piano*, all produced at City Theatre in Miami (among others). His one-act *Dos Corazones* received a Los Angeles Ovation Award writing nomination and appears in an edition of "Best Ten-Minute Plays" by Smith & Kraus. Two additional full-length plays, *Authenticity* and *Providence Spring*, are currently in progress. Visit www.richardhellesen.com to learn more.

David de Berry (Composer/Lyricist): a composer, a music director, and an actor specializing in comic roles. De Berry was the resident composer and music director for Sacramento Theatre Company, the theatre for which this

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adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* was originally conceived. He and Hellesen also co-wrote the musical *A Capella*. De Berry composed music for productions at numerous other theatres, including Portland Center Stage and Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

THE MAN BEHIND THE CAROL
CHARLES DICKENS
Early Life

To begin his life with the beginning of his life: Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, and for the next 12 years he was allowed to be a child. The Dickens family moved around according to their fortune: money came and went, and Charles's parents—John and Elizabeth Dickens—were always flirting with bankruptcy. They went from Portsmouth to London and finally to Chatham, where they enjoyed a five-year period of relative stability. During these years, Charles went to school, sang silly songs in taverns for delighted applause, watched huge ships coming and going at the local dockyard, enjoyed Shakespeare at the Theatre Royal, and all in all formed a collection of happy memories that would make the abrupt end of his carefree childhood even more galling.

In 1822, the family moved back to London, and two years later, John's debts caught up with him. Charles, 12-years-old, was put to work at Warren's Blacking Warehouse (a shoe polish factory) to support the family, and two weeks later John was sent to Marshalsea prison. Most of the family went along—it was not unusual for a debtor's family to take up residence in their "cell"—but Charles, suddenly the breadwinner, lived on his own in Camden town. "I was so young and childish," he remembers, "and so little qualified…to undertake the whole charge of my own existence" (Epstein 25). And so, young Charles Dickens, alone in the world and thrust from a life of schoolbooks and youthful aspirations into the miserable reality of urban Victorian poverty, was left to reckon with the aftermath of his childhood and seal pots of paste-blacking from dawn to dusk.

It is this brief era—this unforeseen and humiliating shove down the rungs of privilege—that most haunts Dickens' writing. His stories trace, over and over, the struggle of a child made helpless and desperate by circumstance, and the choices adults make to help…or not.

John Dickens finally secured his own release from the Marshalsea with help from the Insolvent Debtor's Act, but Charles was expected to continue working to help the family stay afloat. One day, Charles was laboring in front of a warehouse window and noticed his father among the ogling crowd on the street, witnessing, for the first time, his son's miserable circumstances. Shortly after, John Dickens showed up at Warren's to take Charles home for good. Elizabeth was dismayed—she wanted Charles to work for the sake of financial security, a fact that the wounded Charles could never forget—but John insisted he be sent to school instead. And so he was, for the next three years, until the family was evicted for failing to pay rent. But at that point Charles Dickens had an education to his name and the luxury of choosing his own profession.

Career

He started as an office boy at a law firm, but within a few years applied for a newspaper job and an audition to be an actor. He missed the audition due to a head cold and took up journalism. As a reporter, Dickens spent much of his time in the House of Commons and House of Lords. He developed a distaste for the pomp of it all, a disillusionment with this government he saw as failing the people it claimed to serve, but he learned to write fast and meet a deadline—key skills for a future author of serial fiction. Dickens' editor saw his potential and encouraged him to submit short stories about London life for publication (Dickens was famous for taking long rambles around the boroughs and had his finger firmly on the pulse of the city). His very first story was printed in *Monthly Magazine* in 1833, and more soon after, most published under the penname "Boz."

What followed, for Dickens, was a period of rising stardom. *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, each published in weekly or monthly installments, vaulted him to celebrity status and afforded him a comfortable middle-class income. But his next novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, wasn't nearly the hit he was counting on. His big American sojourn—bankrolled by publishers on the promise of a novel—produced the unpopular critique *American Papers* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a novel that undersold every prior Dickens story. Dickens had four children. His wife, Catherine, was pregnant with a fifth. His accounts were overdrawn, he was taking out loans, his siblings were milking him for funds, and the specter of his father's debtor's fate hung low over his affairs. On top of it all, his publishers were threatening to reduce his weekly payouts if *Chuzzlewit* installments kept missing sales numbers. Charles Dickens was, in a word, desperate.

As part of his research for *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens visited the Field Lane School, one of the free Victorian "ragged schools" established to educate the most destitute and "ragged" children of England. Dickens was appalled by the filth, the cramped classrooms, the mannerless students, and the rampant illiteracy he witnessed, and wrote to a wealthy friend to immediately secure more funding for improved conditions. But he also admitted the inadequacy of such a gesture—most children worked: they weren't in school at all. He resolved to deliver a "sledgehammer" blow to expose the cruelty of child labor, insufficient education, and poverty. He would write a pamphlet (!) and call it: *An appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child.*

Before Dickens managed to write the pamphlet, though, he poured his sentiments into a speech he delivered to raise money for the Manchester Athenaeum, in which he emphasized the importance of learning and posed

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education as a solution to grievous social ills. He was well received. He was so well received, in fact, that he began wondering *why*. Perhaps a sledgehammer was the wrong tool after all. If people responded so well to the optimism in his fundraising attempt, maybe his pamphlet idea was entirely backwards. Dickens began walking the streets at night as soon as he returned to London, seized by the beginnings of a new story.

By the time Dickens began writing *A Christmas Carol*, there were only six weeks until Christmas. His publishers were unenthused about investing in yet another project—a one-off novella, no less, without serial publication potential—from an author whose value seemed limited to his earlier works. Dickens refused to be daunted. He offered to cover all the costs of publication if the publishers would handle distribution and sales. *A Christmas Carol* had to be finished, edited, illustrated, bound, and advertised before December 25, and Dickens oversaw the entire process. He hired cartoonist John Leech to create the illustrations. He requested the book be bound in red, with gold lettering and gold trim on the pages, and labeled the book chapters as musical "staves." He fixed the price at an affordable five shillings. He hoped it would be enough to convince people of the need to reach out and support the suffering and impoverished...and enough to save him from financial ruin.

A Christmas Carol, published on Christmas 1843, was an instant sensation. All 6,000 copies sold out within four days. Critics fawned. Theatrical adaptations began almost immediately. Dickens had hoped to make a full 1,000 pounds off the novella, and that's about what he made! Unfortunately, once his publishers deducted the costs of production, his payout amounted to 132 pounds, 4 shillings—not nearly enough to cover his bills or his debts. Still, Dickens' reputation was restored, and off the success of his *Carol*, he was able to sign a new, better publishing deal and begin writing another Christmas story to be published the following December.

Legacy

And did it work? Dickens' hopeful, funny, nostalgic, heartrending, scrumptious sledgehammer? Were the hearts of the masses moved in service of the plight of the needy? One anecdote tells of a factory owner who heard a live reading of the *Carol* and immediately bought turkeys for all his employees. Another factory owner supposedly began recognizing Christmas as a day of rest because of the novella. If nothing else, Dickens helped reestablish the holiday as a season of giving. Dickens' subsequent Christmas novels—*The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life*, and *The Haunted Man*—never achieved the meteoric success of *A Christmas Carol*, but sold respectably nonetheless, and solidified the Dickensian ideal of the holiday: a time for family and feasting, but above all, generosity.

After his *Carol*, Dickens' career was well and truly established. He went on to write eight and a half more novels (interrupted by his own death halfway through the ninth) and started a weekly magazine called *Household Words* that included a Christmas issue every year. Starting in the 1850s, he began performing live readings of *A Christmas Carol*, which he edited down to a tight script with a stronger emphasis on comedy than ghostly terror, and he took his show on the road in Britain and America, earning around $3,000 per night ($50,000 or more in today's money). Dickens was aware of his celebrity and, realizing that his life would be posthumously scrutinized, took to cheerfully burning most of the letters he wrote and received. When he died, he was "hailed as the Shakespeare of the novel" (Epstein 378), and although his work was sometimes criticized by the next generation as simplistic, moralistic, and provincial, by the mid-twentieth century, Dickens was widely recognized as a major player in the English literary canon. Not a single one of his novels has fallen out of print since the moment of their publication.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A DICKENS NOVEL

Common Themes

Childhood: the Dickensian child is sensitive, vulnerable, often idealized, and always in need of protection - much like Dickens was himself when he was sent to work to pay off his father's debt at age 12. Dickens uses child characters to explore the injustices of the Poor Law (Oliver Twist), the prison system (Little Dorrit), and poverty in general (Tiny Tim, David Copperfield, Pip, etc.).

Redemption: a theme especially explored in his Christmas novellas, but almost all of Dickens' books reinforce the power of the second chance: Mr. Micawber's journey from debtor to savior-of-the-day and magistrate in *David Copperfield*; awful Mr. Dombey's happy final years after he goes bankrupt, sells his possessions, and reunites with his neglected daughter in *Dombey and Son*; Ebeneezer Scrooge's miraculous transformation in *A Christmas Carol*. In a Dickens story, no one is beyond help...if they choose to help other people.

Corruption, Crime, Law: perhaps because he used to work in a law office and report on lawmakers, Dickens' work returns to the idea that the system of law underserves its people, either through inadequacy or corruption. Here are just a few examples:

- Scrooge's references to the Poor Law and Treadmill in *A Christmas Carol*
- Mr. Pickwick's unfair arrest and trial in *The Pickwick Papers*
- Little Dorrit growing up in Marshalsea prison in *Little Dorrit*
- The inheritance headache throughout *Bleak House*
- The desperate criminal underworld that wreaks havoc in *Oliver Twist*

Wealth, Class, Poverty: like Dickens, many of his characters find themselves struggling to climb (or suddenly tumbling down) the social ladder. Pip strives to become a gentleman in *Great Expectations*; when David's

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aunt loses her wealth, he must toil his way back to financial security in *David Copperfield*; Oliver is raised in miserable, impoverished conditions, but through his inherent goodness, he keeps ending up in the care of people with means in *Oliver Twist*; Mr. Dombey is obsessed with his own wealth and status and ends up losing it all in *Dombey and Son*.

Common Characteristics

Direct-Address Authorial Voice: especially in his earlier work, Dickens often writes—exuberantly—as if he's speaking directly to the reader. In *A Christmas Carol*, for example, he immediately digresses "Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail." This made the transition to live readings later in his career a natural progression.

Characters Across Age and Class: not only did Dickens write characters of all ages, classes, and backgrounds, he wrote them as friends. David Copperfield, a young gentleman, would be lost without the Peggottys—the Yarmouth fishing family whose members become his lifelong companions.

Set In/Around London: Dickens' long walks through the streets of the city inspired such rich description and served as backdrop to so many of his novels, that today, people take "Charles Dickens Tours" of London.

Mouth-Watering Descriptions of Food: as Norrie Epstein observes in *The Friendly Dickens*, "Food anchors Dickens' novels, placing them firmly in the real world of gravy, pies, puddings, kidneys, roast pig, and chops. The regular appearance of meals and teas orders his chaotic fictional landscape, making it seem more like our own. His characters eat, therefore they are" (74).

CRITICS RESPOND TO *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* IN 1843

The Illustrated London News: "How shall we convey to our readers the surpassing beauty with which the accomplished author of this seasonable little volume has worked out—or, as he sportively terms it, raised—'the Ghost of an Idea?' By selecting some of its *spiritual* yet substantive truths—its impressive eloquence, or its unfeigned lightness of heart—its playful and sparkling [humor] or its under currents of thought—its gems of world knowledge, or its gentle spirit of humanity—all which light up every page, and, of a truth, put us in good humor with ourselves, with each other, with the season, and with the author?"

The Planet: "'Boz,' in this little work, has done his best to arouse the humanity of his readers, and revive the generous feelings that were wont to be displayed at Christmas."

The Morning Post: "It is by no means easy to give an account of the matter of the book. It is not comedy, nor tragedy, nor simple narrative, nor pure allegory, nor sermon, nor political treatise, nor historical sketch; but it is a strange jumbling together of all of these, so that one knows not what to make of it. It has all Mr. Dickens' mannerisms, and is for so far (to us) displeasing and absurd; but it has touches of genius too, mixed up with its huge extravagance."

Fraser's Magazine: (review by William Makepeace Thackeray) "Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness."

A STORY OF ADAPTATIONS

Unauthorized dramatic adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* began immediately after its publication. Dickens, a would-be actor, was underwhelmed by most of the performances he saw and annoyed that he received no cut of the proceeds, but he apparently chose to accept them as free publicity. Illicit editions of the novella—including crude renditions of John Leech's original artwork—also made their way onto the market, inspiring Dickens to take legal action against this copyright infringement. In the century or so since *A Christmas Carol* entered the public domain, it continued, and continues, to be adapted.

- **Dickens' Live Readings:** Dickens himself edited his novella into a public performance, which he performed, on tour, towards the end of his life.
- **Radio Plays:** most famously, a 1939 broadcast starring Lionel Barrymore as Scrooge.
- **Graphic Novels/Comics:** at least ten renditions of the *Carol* have been published in comic format, starting in 1948.
- **Patrick Stewart's One-Person Show:** in 1988, Stewart adapted the novella into a one-person show in which he played over 30 characters. Stewart observed that, very coincidentally, he and Dickens made many of the same cuts to the original text to prepare it for performance.
- ***Scrooged*:** also in 1988, Bill Murray starred as a selfish, Scrooge-like TV executive in this modern take on Dickens' tale
- **The Annual Christmas Play:** theatres across the U.S. and the world choose to mount a production of *A Christmas Carol* every December, including the Denver Center Theatre Company since 1990.
- ***The Muppet Christmas Carol*:** a 1992 film adaptation starring The Great Gonzo as Charles Dickens, Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit, and live actor Michael Caine as Ebeneezer Scrooge.

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- **Disney's *A Christmas Carol*:** in 2009, Disney came out with a motion-capture animated version of the *Carol*
- ***The Man Who Invented Christmas*:** a mostly fictional 2017 film, based on the nonfiction book by Lee Standiford, following Dickens as he writes the *Carol* and converses with his characters, who appear vividly before him.

This Adaptation: in 1987, playwright and dramaturg Richard Hellesen teamed up with composer David de Berry to assemble a fresh dramatic adaptation of Dickens' novella. Compared to other adaptations, this one involves far more carols, takes up the mantle of Dickens' direct-address narration style (and thereby keeps working class and poor people, as the narrators, at the heart of the story), and aims to find the humanity underneath the sometimes caricature of Scrooge. As Hellesen observed: "One of the things I love so much about this Denver Center production is its humanity, because it's extremely easy to make Scrooge one-dimensional, or a stereotype… I think the harder challenge for the actor is to humanize him to the point where you are sitting in the audience saying to yourself, 'You know what? I kind of…sort of…actually see where he is coming from. And that moves us a little closer in his direction." *A Christmas Carol* is one of Hellesen's most-produced scripts and is the version performed annually at the Denver Center since 2005.

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE YEARS

The Origins of Christmas

Many Christmas traditions are the result of cultural blending…and strategic appropriation by the Church. Preserving and incorporating non-Christian customs proved an effective method of coaxing people towards Christian conversion. Pope Julius I, for example, likely designated December 25 as the official birthdate of Jesus to attract converts, who might otherwise be celebrating Roman Saturnalia during this time. Ironically, many of these incorporated customs were fiercely resisted in later centuries by Christian authorities who condemned the feasting and partying and masquerading as immoral pagan idolatry, even though the transfer of traditions had bolstered the growth of Christianity. The holiday continues to evolve, but its roots in ancient celebrations are still easy to trace:

- **Saturnalia**: a Roman holiday honoring the god Saturn around the time of the winter solstice. Revelry including mock kings, disguises, feasts, hanging ornaments on nearby trees, and a day when servants and masters stood on equal ground.
- **Kalends:** the Roman new year celebration, held at the beginning of January. Involves decorating homes with greenery and lights to preserve the gifts of summer in the darkest time of the year. Kalends also included a custom of gift-giving between friends and family.
- **Yule:** a winter solstice festival originating in Scandinavia and celebrated by pre-Christian Germanic (Norse, Anglo-Saxons, etc.) and Celtic people across Europe to mark the return of light. Traditions like the Yule log, the Yule goat (now associated in some countries with Santa Claus), feasting, bonfires, remembering the dead, and hanging holly and mistletoe became part of the Christmas holiday. "Yule" even grew to be used by Christians as a name for Christmas.
- **Karachun**: a Slavic winter solstice holiday in honor of the god Chernoborg. Similar to Halloween and associated with decay/darkness. Followed by the triumph of the sun god the following day, who brings back the light. The holiday involved lighting fires in cemeteries to keep loved ones warm and may have contributed to the association of ghosts and spirits with Christmas.

The Reinvention of Christmas

Christmas, when Charles Dickens was a child, was not the cornucopia of celebration, gift giving, paid-time-off, caroling, decorating, and merriment we recognize today. Actually, it had fallen out of fashion. Holidays in general were on the decline: in 1761, the Bank of England observed 47 of them. In 1834, it closed its doors for only four.

The first big push against Christmas came from Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector of England during the interregnum, from 1653 to 1658. As a Puritan leader, Cromwell derided traditional English Christmas as a time of hedonistic excess and pagan superstition. By legal decree, there would be no more pageants, no more masques, no more banquets, and *certainly* no more mince pies ("an abomination, idolatry, superstition, and Popish observance"). But when the monarchy was restored, Christmas was not similarly revived. It had thoroughly fallen out of practice in London, and although some country folk still sung carols and held small feasts—these are the celebrations Dickens refers to with such infectious nostalgia—the holiday seemed like an artifact for the history books. When the utilitarianism of the Industrial Revolution swept the realm, workers lost the right to spend Christmas Day at home, and the holiday seemed done for good.

Outspoken mourners wrote essays and books, hoping to preserve the good-old-days. Charles Lamb described "the happiest time of the year" in *A Few Words on Christmas*, William Sandys published an anthology of Christmas carols, collected from across the kingdom, and Washington Irving wrote an account of a traditional English Christmas so scrumptious that one of his chief admirers—Charles Dickens—began emulating his sentiments. Dickens wrote about family gatherings, goodwill, fellow-feeling, and, of course, feasting, games, and mistletoe. Christmas made its way into his essays and his popular fiction, including a famously charming chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*, and, of course, *A Christmas Carol*.

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By the mid-1800s, the holiday began making a comeback. In 1833, the Factory Act guaranteed workers a day off for Christmas. Around 1840, an illustration of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with their Christmas tree (a tradition new to England, possibly brought by the Prince from Germany) inspired many middle-class Victorians to follow suit. Christmas was sliding back into public interest. The shift from wild public revelry to private family celebrations convinced even the Christian clergy to welcome the renewed holiday spirit. *A Christmas Carol* was received with such enthusiasm that Dickens set out to publish new Christmas stories annually.

Historians debate whether Dickens was merely capturing the changing interests of the age or whether he was, in fact, one of the main reasons English Christmas returned with flair. Regardless—and despite the fact that Dickens was altogether more concerned with child welfare and workers' rights—he is remembered in today's literature as "the man who invented Christmas."

Celebrate Christmas Like a Victorian

Once Christmas was back in vogue, the Victorians brought back beloved old traditions and invented a few new ones while they were at it.

Caroling: in the Middle Ages, vernacular carols—that is, written in the commonly spoken tongue, rather than biblical Latin—grew popular in Europe and were incorporated into Christmas pageants. Songs from this time include "The Holly and the Ivy" and "Deck the Halls." The Reformation period in England brought about religious carols like "Joy to the World" and "O Come All Ye Faithful." By the Victorian era, many carols were forgotten after years of shunning Christmas festivities, but the return of the holiday to popularity brought about several Christmas carol anthologies; the tradition was preserved and revived.

Christmas Cards: the Victorian era is thought to be the origin of the Christmas card! New Year's and Valentine's Day were already card-exchanging holidays in England, and the first known commercial Christmas card was printed in 1843, depicting a family gathering and two acts of charity. By the 1880s, the Christmas card tradition was in full swing, and cards were decorated with lace, seashells, tinsel, and even seaweed.

Christmas Tree: an evergreen coniferous tree decorated with food and small gifts for the family. The modern tradition came to England by way of Germany. Prince Albert, born in Germany, had a Christmas tree set up for the royal family in the 1840s, and the country followed suit.

Dancing: group dances—a great choice for a holiday ball—involved a set series of moves to a song of choice. Couples' dances were popular in Victorian times but scandalous when first introduced because two people dance in an embrace, rather than side-by-side.

Feasting: this tradition, of all traditions, was hardest to suppress by the opponents of Christmas celebration and was therefore a long-standing staple of the holiday in England. The Victorians made several updates, including adding roast turkey to the menu, possibly thanks to Mr. Scrooge.

Games: popular entertainment during the winter, when the sun set early in the evening. These were popular with adults *and* children, until modern entertainment relegated them to children's play.

- **Blindman's Buff:** a version of "tag" wherein the person who is "it" is blindfolded. Whoever is caught is the new "it."
    - **Queen of Sheba (a variation)**: where someone is placed in a particular chair, and the blindfolded person must find them and kiss them. The person in the chair was supposed to be one of the most attractive young adults in the room but was often swapped for an elderly relative at the last second.
- **Forfeits**: one person—the judge—leaves the room. Everyone else places one personal item each in a box: a "forfeit." The judge returns and chooses one item from the box. Whoever forfeited that item must do whatever the judge assigns them to do to get it back (dance/hold your breath/tell a funny or embarrassing story/etc.).
- **Yes and No (Twenty Questions):** one person thinks of a noun—a person, place, or thing—and the other players try to guess it by asking only questions that have "yes" or "no" answers.
- **Hunt the Slipper:** stand in a circle, facing in, with one person in the middle. The people in the outer circle pass around a slipper behind their backs, and the person in the middle has to guess who holds the slipper at any given moment.

Ghost Stories: a great way to fill the hours after an early sunset and honor the spookiness of the darkest time of the year. What began as an oral storytelling tradition around the winter solstice turned into a trendy commercial success in Victorian England with the invention of the printing press. Editors decided to use the old winter-holiday ghost story tradition to entertain the masses. The periodicals that published the stories were generally affordable across class lines, and the stories took place in upper- and lower-class settings alike. In the United States, ghost stories for Christmas never caught on, in part because Irish and Scottish immigrants helped to establish Halloween traditions, solidifying autumn as the ghostly time of year, in lieu of Christmas.

Gifting: the revival of Christmas in the Victorian era came with an emphasis on acts of charity. Middle-class citizens would often distribute boxes of food and money to local people in need on December 26—Boxing Day. This became an official British holiday in 1871. Gifts to friends and family were traditionally exchanged on New Year's Day. This shifted to Christmas mid-Victorian era.

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Twelfth Night: a favorite of Charles Dickens. England (and other European countries) used to celebrate 12 days of Christmas, starting on December 25 or 26 and ending on January 5 or 6. The final night was called "Twelfth Night," and involved one last push of revelry. Celebrations included feasting, extravagant cakes, mock kings, and disguises. This holiday was on the decline in Dickens' day—industrialized England didn't have time for 12 days of celebration—but Dickens himself liked to host lavish Twelfth Night feasts throughout his adult life.

THE VICTORIAN ERA

The Victorian Era, from 1820 to 1914, roughly coincided with Queen Victoria's reign and was characterized by: 1) Britain's imperial expansion, especially in Asia and Africa; 2) a rigid class structure, and, of course; 3) the first Industrial Revolution, which pumped money into the economy, lining the pockets of the wealthy, but left 70-80% of the population—the working class—out.

Readily available, efficient energy sources, cheaper production of metal alloys like steel, inventions like combustion engines and the spinning jenny (a loom), and rapid improvements in transportation and communication all compounded to send Britain on the path to industrialization. It was the first country in the world to undergo this shift, and initially forbade the export of machines in order to protect its global economic advantage.

Although mechanization made farming more efficient, food more plentiful, and mass-producible goods more affordable, quality of life for many citizens decreased. Small farmers were outcompeted. The huge influx of job seekers to city centers caused deteriorating sanitation and epidemics of cholera and typhus. Demand for cheap labor led to the exploitation of the underage workforce—20-50% of British miners between 1800 and 1850 were children—and the health hazards of mining and factory work, combined with smog from coal smoke, posed constant risks. But the national economy boomed.

Charles Dickens refused to see his changing country through the lens of progress. He dedicated his life and his work to unveiling the cruelties of industrialized society. He sought out the humanity struggling within new structures of oppression and, through his work, insisted on its rescue.

Prisons and Workhouses: A Looming Threat

"Are there no prisons? ...And the workhouses—are they still in operation?
...The Treadmill and the Poor Law—are in full vigor then?"

"Very busy sir"

—A Christmas Carol

In 1834, Britain passed its new Poor Law, ensuring—supposedly—that folks in need could find the help they required...at a reduced cost to the well-off population. And what was this "help?" Workhouses. The law required that any group of parishes that did not yet contain a workhouse build one. Any person in need of government assistance was required to leave their home and move into the workhouse. Families were often split and housed in separate sections. Workers wore uniforms and ate whatever the workhouse provided, which was generally monotonous, often not enough, and sometimes literally rotten. Proponents lauded the legislation as a way to encourage poor people to support themselves. Opponents—and there were many—called workhouses "prisons for the poor." Workhouses became a looming danger for impoverished people, especially the sick, elderly, and orphaned, who were funneled off the streets and through the workhouse doors, essentially because they had nowhere else to go.

Debtors' prison was the second heavy threat hanging over the heads of Victorian England's poor. A person arrested on charges of an unpaid debt—20 pounds or more—would spend a week or so in a "sponging-house," where they had the opportunity to raise funds to pay off the debt in question. If no family was forthcoming with the necessary cash, the person was carted off to a debtors' prison like the Fleet, the King's Bench, or the Marshalsea (where Charles Dickens' father was imprisoned and where Dickens' Little Dorrit character is born). If the father of a family went to debtors' prison, other family members often lived there too, but were allowed to leave during the day to earn money, in hope of paying off the father's debt. These prisons were famously corrupt and run for profit. Inmates were required to pay their own room and board. Bribes were commonly required to secure basic quality of life improvements—jailors could chain inmates up and then charge money to unshackle them. Sickness spread rapidly in the overcrowded conditions, and death by starvation was not unheard of. Fundamentally, it was a cycle of exploitation wherein abuse, starvation, extortion, and all-around deplorable conditions resulted directly from the drive for profits.

For all that, a prisoner could count themself lucky if their jailhouse did not contain a treadmill. This giant wheel was invented around 1818 as both a punishment for the "idle" imprisoned population and a tool for grinding grain or moving water, and was, in essence, a Stairmaster with no off button. Its efficiency as a tool for industry was negligible, but as an instrument of punishment, it was widely employed. Prisoners were required to climb the rotating steps on the outside of the wheel to exhaustion or beyond (after playwright and poet Oscar Wilde was arrested, he was assigned to the treadmill six hours a day and nearly died). Slowing down was impossible, and a misstep could result in injury or death. Frequent treadmill use resulted in hernias, loss of milk supply in breastfeeding women, and in combination with poor nutrition, it accelerated starvation.

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Charles Dickens was haunted by his brush with the cruelty of England's workhouse and prison system. His literary work returns, again and again, to the helplessness and injustice of essentially innocent people—children especially—being forced into systems of exploitation. Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit, and David Copperfield are all thrust into workhouses, prisons, or hard labor through circumstances well beyond their control. Dickens himself was terrorized by the idea of winding up in debtors' prison like his father. When his books did not sell well, he was willing to take desperate measures—taking the production process of *A Christmas Carol* into his own hands, for instance—to ensure his finances would rebound as swiftly as possible.

Food: A Measure of Inequity

Here are examples of what dinner might have looked like for two very different Victorian families:

Upper Class Family

- Multiple courses: five, at least. And don't fret about the time and effort—the servants will take care of it!
- Meats: every day, naturally. Roasted poultry, beef, or fish, sometimes all at once.
- Fruit and vegetables: well...what's in season? Watercress? Beans and peas? Turnip and broccoli? Cherries, apples, plums, gooseberries—summer is the most plentiful time of year, of course, but not to worry, there's always something delicious on the table.
- Other treats: pickles, lemon ice, cream and jam rolls, pudding, cake.
- To drink: wine, coffee, tea, beer—your choice, or sample them all.
- Nutrition: thorough!

Working Class Family

- No oven: cook over an open fire or over steam from the neighborhood laundry boiler, buy a hot meal (if you can afford it—not often), or just eat your food cold.
- One pot: remember to dump the bathwater before you cook the stew.
- Insufficient utensils: do you have enough forks for *all* the children?
- The meal: bread, potatoes, butter, and cheap meat—maybe broxy (diseased sheep) or mutton. Bacon, if you made a little extra this week. Honestly? In this economy? Meat might be once-or twice-a-week at most.
- To drink: beer or tea. Avoid plain water—it's not worth the cholera.
- Nutrition: sub-par. You'll be short and weak and your kids may have rickets, but, with luck, you might not starve.

*As an adult, Scrooge is a well-off member of the middle class—certainly more prosperous than a working class family, but perhaps not raking in the same income as a duke. His food choice—gruel and more gruel—is incongruous with his means. Even the Cratchits, with their meager wages, pull together a feast to remember on Christmas Eve. In other words, Scrooge could eat well, and he elects not to (pinching every penny), which, in a Dickens story, is a crime against a life well lived.

Old Currency, Explained

Britain used the "old money" system until 1971 when it changed over to its modern decimal system (meaning that today, there are exactly 100 pence in a pound, but a century ago, there were 240). In Dickens' time, coins worked as follows:

1 Farthing = ¼ Penny
1 Halfpenny = ½ Penny
1+ Pennies = "Pence"
1 Threepence = 3 Pence (aka "thruppence")
1 Sixpence = 6 Pence
1 Shilling = 12 Pence (aka a "bob") = Roughly $5 today
1 Half Crown = 2 Shillings, 6 Pence
1 Crown = 5 Shillings = Roughly $25 today
1 Pound = 20 Shillings (aka "quid") = Roughly $100 today
1 Guinea = 21 Shillings

**The currency conversion from 1843 to 2024 is a very rough estimate and might not reflect accurate purchasing power, since different goods had different relative costs. For example, 10 shillings is about equal to $50 today, but would have covered 1 week's cheap rent in Victorian London.*

Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit, makes 15 shillings per week—a common clerk's salary at the time. For reference, these were the average costs of goods in the 1840s:

Books: around 10 ½ shillings (almost a full week's salary for Bob Cratchit), but novels were often published in 3 to 4 volumes, so to read the full story, it might cost over 40 shillings (about 3 week's pay for Bob). Serial novels, published in monthly or weekly installments, could be bought for about a shilling a month—this often amounted to 20 shillings or so, about half the price of a regular, multi-volume novel, by the time the final installment came out (about 1 pound in total).

- ***A Christmas Carol*:** 5 shillings. Dickens purposefully fixed the price low, hoping it would sell widely.

Housing: 6-14 shillings per week for 1 to 3 rooms in poor and working-class neighborhoods in London. 7-25 guineas per week for a house in a wealthy area of the city.

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Clothing: the Industrial Revolution made clothing easier to produce, and therefore more affordable. A men's workday suit that might have cost 8 pounds pre-industrialization might cost 2 pounds after. Still, 2 pounds (40 shillings), would have been nearly three weeks' pay for Bob Cratchit.

Bread: a 1lb loaf changed price over the course of the 19th century, varying from a Farthing or Halfpenny all the way up to Threepence (that's a full shilling for a 4lb loaf!).

Beer: a quart for 1 penny.

Novels: They'll Rot Your Brain?

Although novels were increasingly popular (thanks to rising literacy rates and the wide accessibility of serial novels in Victorian England), reading fiction was considered, in many circles, an indulgent pastime. Women were the primary consumers: "the feminine need for novels" was contemptuously compared to a drug addiction or an over-eating disorder. English poet/philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed "novel reading spares the reader the trouble of thinking, it saves him from the boredom of vacancy, and establishes a habit of indolence." But much like a great TV series or a dialed-in Instagram algorithm today, the delight of the novel decidedly overrode its Victorian-era detractors. The popularity of the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charles Dickens is testament to the resounding and lasting success of the Victorian novel.

Changing Concepts of Childhood

Pre-Victorian era, there was a pervasive idea that since—according to some interpretations of Christian doctrine—all people were born with sin, all children were, therefore, innately, primally sinful. Poet Isaac Watts, in his 1715 publication, *Divine Songs for Children*, urged kids to read the Bible and learn obedience with haste, so that they might cure their inborn devilish nature. William Wordsworth, who famously remembered childhood with wonder in his earlier poems, later characterized children as "a Growth from sinful Nature's bed of weeds." In 1810, the nonfiction book *The Infant's Progress: From the Valley of Destruction to Everlasting Glory* was a bestseller, its title and premise reflecting the sentiment of the time: children needed to be saved from themselves, rather than protected from the world.

In opposition to the Child of Sin was the idea of the Romantic Child, a sort of embodiment of innocence and godliness. This nostalgic child-concept was immune from the suffering and failings of adulthood, but essentially unnuanced. The idea emerged in the 1700s, before which children were thought of as little adults, and childhood was a concept of time-of-life rather than experience-of-life. Wordsworth's earlier poems depicted children "frolicking" in nature, and adults overcome with "childlike" wonder—it was childhood through the lens of fond and sentimental adult memory.

The Victorian era brought a layer of complexity to the mix with the proposal that children have a nuanced psychological life and are vulnerable to pain and trauma that *impacts the adult they becom*e. Victorian children were people in development, and they were vulnerable. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, a young girl cuts off her own hair and then suffers the social and emotional consequences. This scene of childhood psychological suffering inspired psychiatrist Leonard Guthrie's lecture series on the importance of respecting and understanding pain in children. Dickens' *Domby and Son* depicts the tragic results of an over-pressured, cruelly imposed education on sensitive young minds, and prompted doctors to study the effects of such "brain-forcing" in English students. The coming-of-age story was a popular and evolving genre in the Victorian era, rooted in the assumption that the experiences of the child are formative to the life of the adult: *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, follows an orphaned girl throughout her often-painful childhood and into the adult struggles and successes that follow, and Dickens' *David Copperfield* traces the protagonist's life from birth through troubled childhood and into bittersweet adulthood, posing traumatic childhood events as instrumental in shaping the man young David becomes.

The horrendous working conditions of the Industrial Revolution and their impact on children—who often worked the most inhumane, dangerous jobs due to their ability to fit into tiny mine shafts, up chimneys, and under machines—brought child labor under scrutiny in the 1800s. This, combined with the changing understanding of children and childhood (in literature, science, and British society at-large) led to legislation like the Factory Act of 1833, which barred children from working through the night or more than 12 hours per day, mandated a meal break, established a minimum working age of nine-years-old, and required a "certificate of strength" from a physician as a prerequisite for employment for children under 11-years-old.

Charles Dickens was an outspoken advocate for the rights and protection of children. Throughout his work and his life, he fought to awaken the adults of England to the importance of childhood as a formative and protected period of life—and to the tragedy of a childhood ended early, as his was. *A Christmas Carol* is no exception: it travels back in time to the crucial moments of Scrooge's youth and demonstrates how loss and loneliness molded Scrooge into the misanthrope he's become. But Dickens proposes a hopeful model of reform in his emblematic Mr. Scrooge, who manages—with help from several ghosts—a complete change of heart. Scrooge is transformed into the kind of man he might already have been, if life had gone differently: the kind of man who steps up to ensure that Tiny Tim has the childhood that Scrooge himself did not have, the happy childhood that all Dickensian children deserve.

READING LIST

Want to learn more? Here are some great books to look for:

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- *The Annotated Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and Michael Patrick Hearn
- *The Friendly Dickens* by Norrie Epstein
- *Encyclopedia of Christmas* by Tanya Gulevich
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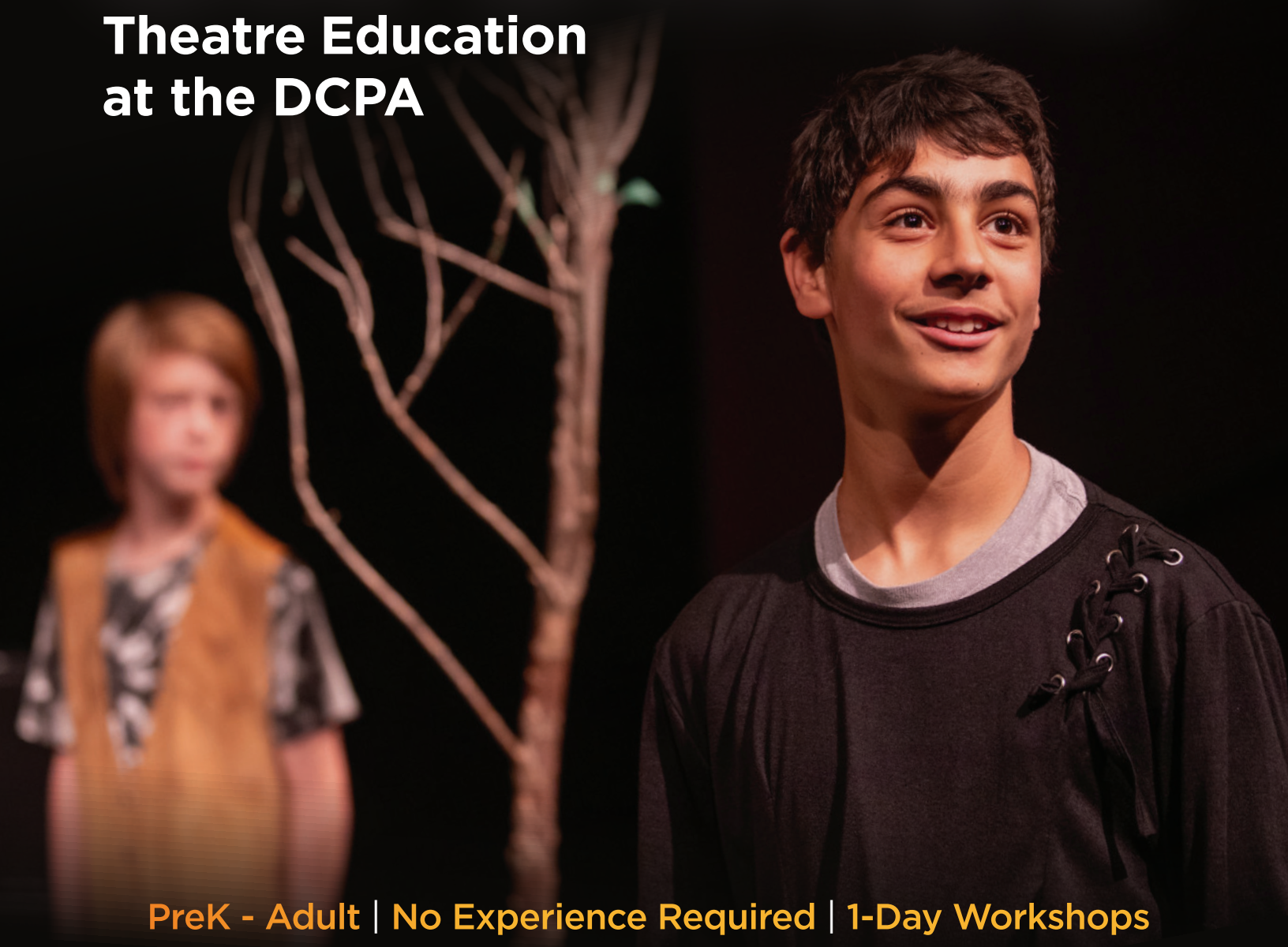

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