

Risky

Top stunt performers speak out on issues of safety, fairness and the future of their craft.

Business

"Pearl Harbor"

They get thrown down stairs, tossed off buildings, set on fire, and no one knows their names. They risk life and limb to provide a film with jaw-dropping, heart-stopping action and then sit by quietly while the \$20-million-a-movie superstars accept kudos for their 60-foot free falls. They're stuntpeople, and they make it look easy, but it is anything but.

"People think you can become a stuntman just by wanting to be one," says veteran stuntman Bob Minor ("Set It Off," "The Replacement Killers"). "There's a certain amount of natural ability. But you're dealing with people's lives, so it's not something you can just walk off the street and do."

That's a tough concept to sell to members of a generation who are used to getting a second chance at life just by pushing "reset" on their Nintendo Game Boys.

"The new people who are coming into the stunt industry have to remember that they're competing against world-class skiers, third-degree black belts and Olympic gymnasts," says Lisa Hoyle, who recently did a 90-foot high fall for "Charlie's Angels." "There's some real talent out there."

According to Fred Lerner, president of the Stuntman's Association, it also takes intelligence and personality "because you really have a lot of different people you have to get along with: wardrobe, makeup, practical effects, a director, the producer and actors."

Landing that first job falling down a flight of stairs might be easy (if your uncle happens to be a stunt coordinator), but earning membership in one of the major fraternal organizations — such as the Stuntmen's Association, Stunts Unlimited, the Stuntwomen's Association or the United Stuntwomen's Association — is not. To secure his place as the first African-American in the Stuntmen's Association in the early 1970s, Minor had to find a sponsor, collect five letters of recommendation from his peers, give a speech to the group's board explaining why he should be admitted and then, once he was approved, endure a one-year probationary period.

While these organizations provide members with status and a sense of community, they don't negotiate contract terms. Because stuntpeople do not have their own union, negotiations depend on the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and, to a lesser degree, the American Federation of Television &

Radio Artists (AFTRA), and there is growing controversy about how well the former organization represents the interests of stunt performers.

"They give away pieces of the contract that affect us as stuntpeople," says Debbie Evans, who has long been considered the top female stunt driver. "One of the big things is the TV trailers. When we first started out, when they reused our film, we could negotiate for anything we wanted. Usually what we did was go for what we made on the day, plus our stunt adjustment. Now they've cut that back to where we can't negotiate."

Leonard Chasman, Hollywood executive director of SAG, counters that this change in rules was part of a larger mid-1990s deal that required the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) to hire stunt coordinators under SAG contracts. "They had [previously] employed them under what they call production contracts without any union coverage," he says. "One of the quid pro quos of that agreement was to modify our contract with respect to the requirements to negotiate for reuse of stunts. We made that change at that time, and it was approved by the stunt community."

Recently, there have been efforts to prevent stuntmen from receiving residuals from merely rigging stunts and not appearing on camera.

"When you're up on the side of a building or the side of a rock and you're hanging upside down trying to rig something, you are doing a stunt," says Kenny Bates, stunt coordinator on such films as "The Rock," "Armageddon" and the upcoming "Pearl Harbor." "And when you're rehearsing it, you are a stunt performer. So where do you draw the line?"

Bates doesn't know what SAG's role has been in the controversy, but he feels the union has been unresponsive to the community's questions and concerns. "Will the stuntpeople leave [SAG] en masse?" he asks rhetorically. "When they stop representing stuntpeople who are riggers — without a doubt." He claims there are "hundreds of names on a list" — his included — that will apply for financial core status, which would allow them to pay lower dues and negotiate their own wages "if the union chooses to move forward with certain stipulations."

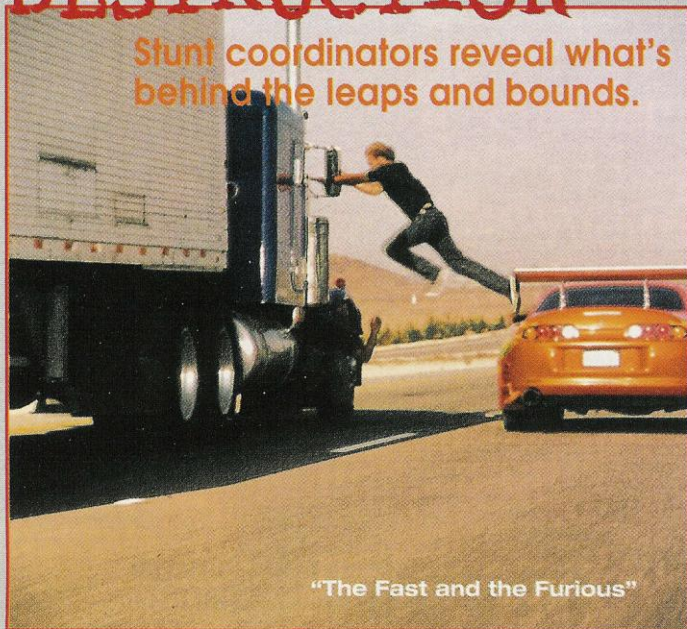
This is all news to Chasman: "No member of the stunt community has ever talked to me about that," he says. "I'd be very happy to talk to them."

Some fear that in the near future dangerous action scenes will simply be

By **Todd Longwell**

SUMMER OF DESTRUCTION

Stunt coordinators reveal what's behind the leaps and bounds.



"The Fast and the Furious"

"Tomb Raider" (Paramount)
Stunt Coordinator/Second Unit Director: Simon Crane
Stunt Personnel: Lee Morrison (a man, doubling Angelina Jolie)
Takes: 2

Setup: A motorbike-driving Lara Croft battles 20 henchmen in Croft Manor. "[The henchmen] are wearing nightvision goggles," says Crane. "The lights come on. They're blinded, and they fire their guns, which sets off a chain reaction."

Stunt: Morrison jumps a motorbike 60 feet over an exploding Range Rover while firing a machine gun with one hand.

Shot: "[Morrison] was 16 feet in the air, the ceiling of the room was 18 feet high, and the room was only 100 feet long," says Crane. "If he had gotten carried away — he could've been in trouble."

Surprise: Morrison came up short: landing on the roof of a British Mini and riding down the hood. "That was an accident, but it looked very good," says Crane. "We did the stunt twice, and the second time he didn't touch it. I don't know which one they're going to use."

"The Fast and the Furious" (Universal)
Stunt Coordinator/Second Unit Director: Mic Rodgers
Stunt Personnel: Christopher J. Tuck, Tim Trella, Dan Wynands
Cameras: 7
Takes: 1

Setup: "They (the characters played by Vin Diesel and Paul Walker) do a quarter-mile drag race over railroad tracks playing chicken with a train," explains Rodgers. "They think they've made it, then all of a sudden, a truck's pulled in front of them."

Stunt: An Eclipse driven by Tuck swerves under a Challenger driven by Trella as the car flies off a pipe ramp and smashes into a semi. "It's like a one-and-a-half revolution, 100-foot jump," says Rodgers. No explosions were used in the shot, but special-effects coordinator Matt Sweeney guffed and scored the semi so it would "disintegrate" when the car hit. Both vehicles carried a camera, and stuntman Wynands rode beside them on a camera bike, capturing the action from another angle.

Shot: "Halfway through, they decided to blow the T-top off," recalls Tuck. "So I went into this thing with no cage, no nothing — totally exposed, head-to-toe." And it was a close call: "There were skid marks on the road because I had to make such a bold move to miss the car over me. If I had kept my same line (on the road), it would've landed on me."

"Pearl Harbor" (Buena Vista)
Stunt Coordinator/Associate Producer: Kenny Bates
Stunt Personnel: 50
Extras: 250
Takes: 1

Setup: Japanese pilots flying Zeros launch a surprise attack on a Hawaiian airfield, strafing unsuspecting Army personnel. "It's a wide shot on the tarmac. We're looking down the line of 16 to 20 planes on the left side of the frame and have transport planes and trucks on the right," says Bates.

Stunt: "It was the biggest explosion I've ever seen in my 20 years in the business," says Bates, who has a degree in fire science. "A Zero enters from out of frame and slides from right to left on

created on computers, making the issue of union representation of stunt performers moot. While the era of the indestructible "synthespian" is not yet completely upon us, it is already possible for producers to reuse gags with the aid of computer-generated imagery.

"I don't know how cost-effective that is at this point," says Lerner, "[but] say they decided to put Tom Cruise's face on my body doing an 80-foot high fall. Rather than have somebody come out and do an 80-foot high fall and have to pay big money for it, they can reuse it from some other picture, put in the background they want, put his face on me and then pay me just \$617 for the stunt."

A more pressing issue for the community is the placement of a black face on a white body — not with computers but with make-up. The practice, known as a "paint down," was thought to be a thing of the past, but there are reports that it is being revived with increasing frequency.

"I went to the NAACP and spoke before the president, Kwesi Mfume, about the situation," says Kelsee Devoreaux, who's doubled such stars as Janet Jackson and Jada Pinkett. "He was like, 'What? You're telling me there's some Al Jolson stuff going on?'"

"There's a rule they have at SAG," says LaFaye Baker, who estimates that she and Devoreaux are two of six African-American stuntwomen working regularly. "You have to locate or contact at least three people of that particular race, and if you cannot find someone that's qualified to do the stunt, then you can go outside [the ethnic group]. Sometimes, they don't call three people."

One of the more high-profile cases was when white stuntwoman Debbie Evans was hired to double actress Thandie Newton — who has a Zimbabwean mother and an English father — for a high-altitude car chase in "Mission: Impossible II."

"A lot of African-American stuntwomen I know didn't even get a phone call asking, 'Can you do it or not?'" says Devoreaux.

"They weren't there," argues the film's stunt coordinator, Brian Smrz. "It was on the edge of a cliff. My No. 1 job is to keep things safe. I don't care what color someone is. I'm going to use whoever is best for the job. There's no controversy in this business. If you were to ask who is

best for the driving as far as women [go], you'll get either Debbie Evans or (her sister) Donna Evans. Any less than that, and I'm not doing my job."

Veteran African-American stuntman Greg Elam, who trained Baker and Devoreaux at his Carson, Calif., stunt school in the late 1980s, believes that when it comes to specialized gags, it may indeed be impossible to find a stuntperson that matches the race and gender of the performer, but every effort should be made nonetheless. "Sometimes we assume that a person may not have those skills," says Elam, "when indeed they could have those skills plus."

And things can go wrong with even the most experienced stuntperson at the wheel. In September 1997, Minor suffered serious head injuries while executing a car turnover gag for "Blues Brothers 2000." "Everything was set up perfectly," recalls Minor, who spent two years away from the business to fully recover before working again. He recently completed a gig as stunt coordinator on John Singleton's upcoming film "Baby Boy." "It was just one of those things. There's always the risk of danger, even when you do things right."

Recent technological advances have made stunts safer but not failsafe, according to veteran stunt specialist Jeannie Epper, president of the Stuntwomen's Association. "Things can go wrong," says Epper. "Cables can break. Air bags — if they're not taken care of properly — can split at the seams. So many things can happen."

But, to stuntpeople, that's just the way life is: "When you're driving down a road at 30 miles an hour and someone else is driving the other way at 30 miles an hour and there's only three or four feet between the two cars, that's a stunt basically," says Mic Rodgers, longtime double for Mel Gibson (1984-97) and stunt coordinator on such films as "Twister" and "The Fast and the Furious." "People take risks every day. We just happen to do it on film and on demand. When they say go, you've got to go. That's the hard part." □

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World Stunt Awards Nominations



On May 20, at the Santa Monica Air Center's Barker Hangar, the Inaugural World Stunt Awards will take flight. Director John Woo will be honored with a special Action Movie Director Award. Action icon Arnold Schwarzenegger will receive the Taurus Honorary Award for recognizing the work of stunt professionals over the years, and stunt legend Hal Needham will receive the Taurus Lifetime Achievement Award for his body of work over the last five decades. The event will be telecast June 16 on ABC.

BEST AERIAL WORK

"Charlie's Angels" — Joey Box, Marla Casey, Shauna Duggins, Donna Evans, Dana Hee, Ming Liu, Michiko Nishiwaki, David Paris (pilot), Eileen Weisinger
"Gone in 60 Seconds" — Chuck Tamburro, John Tamburro
"Space Cowboys" — Craig Hosking

BEST WORK WITH AN ANIMAL

"All the Pretty Horses" — Richard Bucher, Mike Watson
"Gladiator" — Stuart Clark, Randy Miller, Sven-Ole Thorsen
"The Patriot" — Richard Bucher, Lance Gilbert

BEST DRIVING

"Charlie's Angels" — Rick Seaman
"Charlie's Angels" — Tanner Gill
"Get Carter" — Corey Eubanks, Al Wyatt Jr.
"Gone in 60 Seconds" — Chuck Picerni Jr., Eddie Yansick
"Shaft" — Roy T. Anderson, Harry Harris III, Jalil Jay Lynch

BEST FIGHT

"Charlie's Angels" — Al Goto, Steve Ito, Felipe Savahge, Mike Smith, Jerry Trimble
"Gladiator" — Stuart Clark, Sven-Ole Thorsen
"Romeo Must Die" — Lloyd Adams, Aubrey Culp, Clay Fontenot, Gaston Howard, Ernest Jackson
"Shanghai Noon" — Andy Cheng
"Shanghai Noon" — Bradley James Allan, Charles Andre, James Baker, Eric Bryson, Lauro Chartrand, Andy Cheng, Jim Dunn, Marny Eng, Jim Finkbeiner, Corry Glass, Reg Glass, Tom Glass, Alex Green, Buddy Hamilton, Dave Hospes, Mike Langlois, Bill Lawrence, Roger Lewis, Chung Chi Nicky Li, Brad Loree, Dave McKeown, Mike Mitchell, Shawn Orr, Gerald

Paetz, Fred Perron, Jerri Phillips, Jim Randle, Ron Robinson, Trish Schill, Greg Schlosser, Jim Sheild, Mike Vezina, Kim Weisner, Brent Woolsey, Gang Wu, Shane Wyles, David Yuen

BEST FIRE WORK

"The Gift" — Erik Cord
"Hollow Man" — Phil Culotta
"The Ninth Gate" — Jean Pierre Suchet
"Reindeer Games" — Ernest Jackson
"U-571" — Robert Lahoda, Jaroslav Psenicka

BEST HIGH WORK

"The Cell" — Jill Brown
"Hollow Man" — Lincoln P. Simonds
"Shanghai Noon" — Andy Cheng

BEST SPECIALTY STUNT

"Charlie's Angels" — Shauna Duggins, Donna Evans
"The Perfect Storm" — Pete Turner
"Ready to Rumble" — Scott Workman
"Shanghai Noon" — Brent Woolsey
"X-Men" — Steven N. McMichael

BEST WORK WITH A VEHICLE

"The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle" — Rick Blackwell, Tim Chitwood
"Me, Myself & Irene" — Denney Pierce
"Scary Movie" — Yves Cameron, Leslie Spongberg
"Shaft" — Jalil Jay Lynch
"Reindeer Games" — David Jacox, Jacob Rupp

BEST WATER WORK

"The Perfect Storm" — Dana Dru Evenson, Tim Rigby, Jennifer Watson, George Wilbur
"The Perfect Storm" — Mike Brady, Sean Graham, Pete Turner
"The Perfect Storm" — Sean Graham

BEST STUNT COORDINATOR OR SECOND UNIT DIRECTOR:

ACTION SEQUENCE

"Gone in 60 Seconds" — Johnny Martin, Chuck Picerni Jr.
"Mission: Impossible II" — Billy Burton; Brian Smrz
"Nurse Betty" — Charlie Brewer
"The Patriot" — R. A. Rondell
"Rules of Engagement" — Buddy Joe Hooker

FEATURE FILM

"Charlie's Angels" — Andy Armstrong, Vic Armstrong
"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" — Yuen Woo-Ping
"Mission: Impossible II" — William Burton, Brian Smrz
"The Patriot" — R. A. Rondell
"The Perfect Storm" — Doug Coleman

Real Double Troubles

Race and gender remain controversial in the stunt world.

Today, ensuring that actors are doubled by people of the same race and gender is a top priority, but back in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the stunt community was an exclusive white man's club. The only minority characters who appeared on-screen in large numbers were Indians, and they were rarely portrayed by actual Native Americans. Even Mohawk Jay Silverheels (Tonto of "Lone Ranger" fame) was doubled by a "paleface," Wayne Burson.

"Studios would call in stuntmen, and they'd interview a few to double an actor who was Indian and pick the one closest to looks and stature," recalls John Hagner, veteran stuntman and founder and CEO of the Hollywood Stuntmen's Hall of Fame. "When stuntmen were needed in a bunch, they'd make them up with brown makeup. Before spray paint, they used to use large brushes to paint the men."

If an African-American actor needed to be doubled, it was often the same story with different color paint. And when a female character was involved in a dangerous action

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Real Double Troubles*Continued from page S-4*

sequence, a white man would usually don a wig and dress for the scene. Stuntwomen did exist, but not in large numbers. "There were no more than a dozen back in the late '30s and early '40s," estimates Hagner, listing Mary Wiggins, Babe DeFreest, Helen Thurston and Polly Burson among them.

As the civil-rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, opportunities began to open up for minority stunt performers but not substantially, as Black Stuntmen's Association founder Eddie Smith recalls: "I'd be on a show and a white stunt guy would come out and say: 'I had a pretty good week. I guess I'll go down to Palm Springs.' And I'd say, 'Damn, I ain't made enough money to get on the Red Car and go to Watts.'"

The classic catch-22 prevailed: You needed experience to get the job, but you couldn't get experience unless someone hired you. "That was always the excuse: Nobody had the talent," says veteran African-American stuntman Bob Minor.

Things came to a head in 1970 when Roydon Clark, a stunt coordinator and longtime double for James Garner, had white stuntman Jerry Brown painted black to drive a stagecoach

for co-star Louis Gossett Jr. on the Warner Bros. feature "Skin Game." "It was a safety issue, not a black-and-white issue," says Clark today. But, he acknowledges, "my decision almost cost me my career."

Hearing of the situation, Smith complained, saying that there was a black man qualified — Tony Brubaker (later, a top stuntman) — who had spent several years riding and driving coaches on a studio ranch. The NAACP got involved and pickets and headlines followed. While the ensuing firestorm was painful for all involved, the end result was positive. Warner Bros. offered the free use of their studio on Wednesday nights and weekends, and Clark and other white stuntmen donated their time to teach aspiring black stuntmen how to fight, fall, ride and drive for the big screen.

Soon Smith's phone was ringing with requests for black stuntmen, but he was careful to caution those he sent out on jobs: "If you can't do the job, don't do it, because it just takes one guy to screw it up for everybody. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse whatever you want to specialize in and be ready."

Meanwhile, women were fighting their own battle for acceptance. "It just came to a point where we realized we were not in the Dark Ages anymore and said, 'Give us a shot, and let us try at least,'" says Jeannie Epper, who co-founded the Stuntwomen's Association in 1968. "It took a while, because you had men trying to protect women. You also had men who didn't want you in the woman's clothes because they didn't want you to get the job. Then we had to

really get our actresses to say, 'Hey, we don't want some hairy-legged guy doubling us.' And we began proving that we could do what we said we could do."

In the years since, the ranks of nonwhite and female stunt performers have grown considerably, but they continue to be at a disadvantage simply because stunt-heavy action films tend to be built around white males. "There are a lot of comic-type roles written for black actors," says Minor, "but most of them — especially the TV series — don't come with action."

And some say there's still a glass ceiling for women when it comes to getting hired as stunt coordinators. "There are only three to five women who stunt coordinate and not even on a regular basis, because you don't get the opportunity," says Donna Keegan, a veteran stuntwoman and coordinator ("Halloween: H20") as well as an Emmy-winning director. "People look at it as a man's position, but more times than not I work for men who have fewer credits than I do."

Nonetheless, Lisa Hoyle, who recently did a 90-foot high fall for "Charlie's Angels," has found that male stunt coordinators willingly hire stuntwomen. "I find we're treated just as equally as the stuntmen. As long as you have the talent and the ability, a stunt coordinator has no problem hiring a woman to do the job."

And Minor believes that's how things should be for the entire stunt community: "Everybody is created equal. Everybody should be treated equal." — *T. L.*

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Talk the Talk

A handy stunt rigger's glossary

With the help of veteran stunt rigger Dennis Scott, The Hollywood Reporter explains some of the tools and terms of the stunt trade.

AIR RAM: Powered by pneumatic (compressed air) pistons, this device launches stuntpeople skyward. Triggered by contact or at the push of a button, air rams first appeared on the scene in the 1960s and have been refined considerably over the years. "The early ones were like stepping on cans of dynamite," says Scott.

DECELERATOR AND DESCENDER: Two similar devices that enable a stuntperson attached to a wire to do high falls without an air bag. Kenny Bates, who developed the Decelerator with the late stunt legend Dar Robinson, explains the difference: "A Descender is a controlled rate-of-speed fall. A Decelerator is a complete free fall." Near the end of the fall, the Decelerator kicks in and slows them to a stop.

GAG: A stunt

GEL: The fire-retardant goo put on stuntpeople before they're set on fire — an application which has been compared to getting slathered with refrigerated Crisco.

PIPE RAMP: A ramp made from pipe used for car turnovers and jumps

PORT-A-PIT: A large, foam-filled pad — 16-inches thick — used for low falls. "I've gone 30 feet into double pads," says Scott, "but you wouldn't want to go more than 15 feet into a single pad. Anything over that, you should have an air bag."

RATCHET: A pneumatic piston-and-pulley system that attaches to a harness on a stuntperson's back. When triggered, it can pull the subject dozens of feet in the air at lightning-fast speed, then set him down safely on the ground. Often used to simulate the effect of an impossibly strong shotgun blast or an explosion. Also used to turn over cars. — T. L.

Summer of Destruction

Continued from page S-3

fire. There are 15 bombs, and eight to 10 of them are 55-gallon drums laced with explosive wires, so when they blow, they throw out about a 150-foot fire ring."

Shot: "I'd take a group of stuntpeople and put them closer to the bomb," says Bates. "It dissipates pretty quickly, but it does get very hot very fast. If you were to stay still and a bomb went off, you'd get second-degree burns. But as long as you're rolling, you have the opportunity to walk away from it without a suntan."

"Rollerball" (MGM)

Stunt Coordinator: Jamie Jones

Stunt Personnel: Gaston Howard

Cameras: 5

Takes: 5

Setup: Running from the bad guys on a pitch-black night, Ridley (LL Cool J, doubled by Howard) jumps a motorcycle over a drawbridge. "From the start position, it just looked like you were riding at a wall," recalls Jones, who previously worked with Howard on "Romeo Must Die."

Stunt: "Distancewise, it was 65 or 70 feet," says Jones. "That's not a huge jump, until you add that you can't see. When he landed, he didn't even know he was going to land."

Shot: "They were using a light intensifier for the camera," says Jones. "So we could use no light. The headlight of the motorcycle had this red gel on it. If you were 15 feet away, you'd hardly be able to see it with your eye, but the camera could."

"Windtalkers" (MGM)

Stunt Coordinator: Brian Smrz

Stunt Personnel: 50

Extras: 800

Bombs: 200

Cameras: 12

Takes: 1

Setup: U.S. troops during World War II land on a beach and attempt to take a hill held by the Japanese.

Stunt: A 75-second sequence spread across a quarter mile of beach, shot like a sporting event, with soldiers blowing up and catching fire.

"The main camera was on a helicopter that started on the U.S. advancing. Eventually it goes behind Japanese lines," says Smrz.

Shot: "We had radio guys in the field with cameras," reveals Smrz, "As well as cameras hidden in the hillside and in vehicles advancing with the American troops."

"John Woo really wanted to go for a more real look. In reality, if a bomb goes off, you either blow apart or disintegrate." — T. L.

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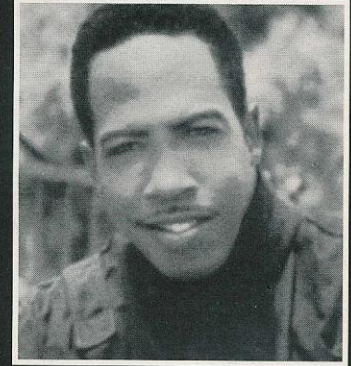


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