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Towards a queer theatre for very young audiences in Scotland and the United States

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White in Performance.
Image courtesy of Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, copyright Douglas McBride.

Queer performance practice and production has emerged over the past four decades as an increasingly visible if contentious modality, particularly in relation to theatre for children and teenagers. Kathryn Bond Stockton and Matthew Reason's respective theories of the queer child and the impossibility of theatre for young audiences underpin arguments for the importance of queer themes within performance for young people. This paper looks specifically at Catherine Wheels Theatre Company's production of White (2010) where colour invades a completely white world in a metaphor for diversity, and Emily Freeman's play And Then Came Tango (2012) for elementary school

audiences about a controversial same-sex penguin couple at New York's Central Park Zoo. It is proposed that these plays may serve as examples of queer theatre pioneering progressive narratives specifically for young people. By contrasting the cultural contexts in which these plays have been performed, this paper contends that queer themes must be effectively depicted in cultural content for young people in order to destabilise global stigmas of LGBTQ+ people.

Keywords: TYA, White, queer theatre, And Then Came Tango

The queer child and theatre for young audiences (TYA)

Kathryn Bond Stockton establishes her theory of the queer child in *The queer child: or growing sideways in the twentieth century* (2009). According to Stockton, 'if you scratch a child, you will find a queer, in the sense of someone "gay" or just plain strange' (2009, p.1). To Stockton, all children are queer. All children are queer specifically in relation to the normatively positioned adult as a socio-cultural construct. She explores this constructed idea of the child as 'the act of adults looking back' (2009, p.5). The idea of the child is the adult's projected nostalgia, not a reflection of the child itself. Stockton comes to this theory through the field of queer studies, where,

"Queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick, 1993, p.8).

Stockton draws on ideas of queer temporality, in particular

childhood studies and animal studies, but her approach deviates from typical sociological, therapeutic and legal case studies common in these fields (Nelson, 2011). Instead, Stockton traces the queer child through twentieth-century fictional texts beginning with ‘a Henry James novella from the 1890s, titled *The Pupil*, to a queer turn by Johnny Depp as Willy Wonka in Tim Burton’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)’ (Stockton, 2009) although it is important to note that Stockton’s argument purposefully does not take a chronological approach. Her methodology reveals the queerness of the child through adults’ fictionalisation of children where these fictions reveal gaps between the reality of the child and the adult projection of the child.

Stockton follows a pattern of queer theorists turning their attention toward children (see for example Bruhm and Hurley 2004). Gabrielle Owen’s review of *The queer child* places it in the context of Bruhm and Hurley’s text as the particular essays and theorists ‘represent moments over the past twenty years when queer theory, however briefly, has turned to children as a site for inquiry, a powerful location for questions of identity, sexuality, language, and culture’ (2011, p.101). *The queer child* itself is, according to Owen, ‘the first of its kind’, in its extended scrutiny of the child’s place within queer theory (2011, p.101).

This paper pairs Stockton’s theory with the work of scholar and theatre practitioner Matthew Reason to explore the possibility of addressing queer themes in two productions for young audiences: Catherine Wheels’s *White* and Emily Freeman’s *And Then Came Tango*.

Reason examines the inherent problems in theatre for young audiences (TYA), noting that it is a theatre largely created by adults for children. For Reason, ‘the impossibility of theatre for children requires us to acknowledge the unequal power relationship between adult and child, with

children in our society largely constructed as powerless and vulnerable' (2012, p.25). Young people, particularly when it comes to theatre, have little control over what cultural content they are exposed to, leading to a power imbalance where 'theatre for children is a product made *for* children but is made and consumed in a manner that is far from equal or democratic' (2012, p.17). His argument stems from the history linking TYA and education. Matt Omasta, commenting on Reason's work, describes how this historical relationship has 'led many adults to assess TYA primarily in terms of its pedagogical rather than aesthetic merits' (2013, p.188), leading to a general lack of artistry in TYA. This pervading mediocrity stems from adults considering 'children to be *future* audience members, [while] Reason urges us to regard them as *present* ones' (2013, p.188). Failure to do this leads to theatre that does not intend to impact the present child, instead focusing on pure entertainment value rather than truly considering and respecting the young audience. This lack of respect for the present child may cause young people to associate negative connotations of theatre that persist into adulthood.

Reason draws upon extensive qualitative research working with elementary school-age children to prove that young people deserve respect and that their artistic content should reflect that. Because 'there exists little field-based, qualitative research which illuminates what the actual theatre experience means *as theatre* to young audiences' (Reason, 2010, p.45), he constructs his own qualitative assessment of the child's experience as a spectator. His research focuses on children's memories and recollections of theatrical experiences through storytelling, anecdotal collection and observation of visual arts workshops. He uses a drawing workshop, which

...[seeks] to uncover a rich and detailed description of how young children respond to, remember and engage with theatre...[by]

adopt[ing] a methodology that would be engaging, reassuring, and appropriate for their levels of understanding, their interests and their particular skills and abilities (Reason, 2010, p.47).

Reason attempts to use his tailored research to observe how to make what he describes as ‘the impossibility of theatre for children’ possible, by proving the young audience’s aesthetic complexity.

Reason builds his observation of the impossibility of theatre for children from similar theories in other forms of cultural content including Jacqueline Rose’s ideas on the impossibility of children’s fiction, and Steven Klein’s broader theories of the impossibility of culture for children where ‘children’s culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children’ (Reason, 2010, p.18). Reason’s observations closely echo those of Stockton, although neither engages directly with the other’s text. His arguments marry easily to Stockton’s queer child theory where the adult / child dichotomy is a problematic hierarchy within theatre and cultural texts created by adults for young people.

Reason’s observations strengthen Stockton’s queer child and bridge the gap between theory and theatrical practice. Coupling Reason’s observations of TYA with Stockton’s queer child reinforces the adult’s projection of an idealised childhood that is in turn presented back to children. Importantly, Reason pulls Stockton’s queer child out of the realm of the two-dimensional fiction of her methodology and into the three-dimensional live-ness of TYA. The theory of the queer child can now be understood as more than Stockton’s critical practice. Through Reason’s methodology of observing the child spectator, Stockton’s theory can be applied to these real children who are queer. It becomes clear through this combination that the queer child lacks

reflective representation within their cultural products, inclusive of theatre, television, film, and fiction / novels to varying degrees. It is also possible to conclude that theatre for young audiences rarely explores the queer child's experience because TYA is constructed by the idealising and normative adult's ideas of what the queer child wants and needs. This content instead reflects the adult's projected idea of who the queer child is in their desexualising, normative innocence. This sanitising of the queer child in TYA and, more generally, children's culture leads to normative and reductive storytelling. Often, Annie Giannini observes, 'when homosexuality is represented in theatre for young audiences, it is treated as a calamity, discretely packaged in plays intended to teach lessons about tolerance' (2010, p.106). The nuanced queer child's absence from cultural content for young audiences reveals the general lack of progressive content available to young people, including an absence of queer narratives, the myth that girls are more likely to watch male protagonists than boys are to watch female protagonists, and the increasingly predominant gender gap within child marketing strategies.

This normative content is the theatre Reason references when he speaks of the 'impossibility of theatre for children' where TYA does not respect the child's capacity to understand complex aesthetics, and does not acknowledge the child's queerness. But the child's queerness does not go completely unacknowledged; there is nuance here that can be explored through Stockton's methodology. She uses cultural texts to reveal the queer child and while most of the texts she uses are primarily fictional adult depictions of children within cultural texts *for adults*, she does engage one text where adults depict children in a film meant *for children*: Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005).

Stockton reads Burton's film in the conclusion of *The queer*

child as ‘the manufactured white child’s dream of the factory (he might run) that manufactures dreams’ (Stockton, 2009, p.57). Stockton positions the film as a success story for the ambitious child, specifically the ambitious queer child. Here, we might be seeing the queer child at work in a film made for children, by adults. The film clearly depicts Stockton’s archetypes where Johnny Depp’s Wonka is the ‘grown queer child’ who interacts with the unassuming ‘innocent child’, Charlie (Stockton, 2009, p.238). Wonka’s queerness is reflected in his factory and his love for chocolate where the ‘mystery of manufacturing [is] akin to the mystery of sex itself’. (Stockton, 2009, p.238). The metaphor deepens in flashbacks to Wonka’s childhood, fictionalised by Burton and August. Growing up with a dentist father, Wonka must hide his love for chocolate, his mouth confined by a muzzle-like set of corrective headgear and braces. His father finds his precious chocolates and ‘throws the “evil candy” into the fireplace where he burns it; so candy is the sign of the boy’s forbidden pleasure(s)’ (Stockton, 2009, p.243). Stockton positions Wonka, both as child and as adult, as a representation of the queer child with his love of forbidden and luxurious chocolate as a metaphor for that queerness. The insular world of chocolate and sweets Wonka has created, represents the queerness that has both isolated him from the world and endeared him to it. His queered love of chocolate is also what has made him a successful capitalist manufacturer. His successful position emphasises the possibility for the downtrodden queer child to rise above their strangeness, channel it into something they love, isolate themselves, and only then can they become successful adults. Charlie as the potential heir to Wonka’s factory, can bring the business out of isolation because he is the epitome of the innocent.

While *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* succeeds in representing queerness to children, it only succeeds in this through metaphor, through a character who is only revealed as a queer child through his queerness as an adult, and

perpetuates that the queer child must isolate their queerness. It can be posited that the queer child, in instances when they are represented in cultural texts for children / by adults, is only depicted through acceptable representations of queerness, again reinforcing that Reason's impossibility of TYA extends to other areas of cultural content for children. These acceptable representations of queerness include metaphor (like chocolate in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), the queerness of adults (like Depp's Wonka) in lieu of representing queer kids, and in reductive messaging, all aiding in sanitising the queer child's predicament.

This filtered queerness is most recognisable in Disney movies and the notion of Disneyfication. Disney movies notoriously 'Disney-fy' stories to make them more palatable for young audiences. Henry A Giroux claims, 'this is a media apparatus in which the past is filtered through an appeal to cultural homogeneity and historical purity, which erases complex issues, cultural differences, and social struggles', and pushes 'the belief that happiness is synonymous to living in the suburbs with an intact white middle-class family' (1994, p.66), that is also most likely, confined to heterosexual nuclear family structures. When creators sneak queerness into cultural content for children, particularly mainstream media, it tends to be sanitised. Here, Reason returns with the expansion of the impossibility of TYA to children's films.

Interestingly, there does seem to be one medium that has resisted this sanitisation; children's picture books and literature for young adults. Curiously, Stockton's queer child appears to be more easily reflected in this medium, simply judging by the amount of existing content. Queer children's picture books have only recently begun to move beyond didactic narratives written solely to educate about difference, to reflect young people's realities, but there are

long lists of examples from the classic *Heather has two mommies* (1989) to *10,000 dresses* (2008), and *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress* (2014). Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd's *Over the rainbow: queer children's and young adult literature* (2011) curates essays on the history of queerness in children's literature, beginning with the classical canon, moving into a post-Stonewall world where queer themes become more overt, and finally into the experience of the readers and writers of queer children's literature. Despite the long history of queerness in children's literature outlined by Abate and Kidd in the English canon, these queer children's books have faced their fair share of backlash, making it on banned books lists (in both the US and the UK since the 1980s), and battling public opposition, but they remain in distribution and on many school curriculums. Theatre's attempt to depict the same content has been a comparatively recent endeavour, yet it has come across similar, if not more vigilant, controversy.

Toward a younger audience

Theatre for young audiences targeting elementary and middle school age groups has not begun regularly to depict queer tellings of LGBTQ+ stories. The problem with plays for young audiences and portraits of LGBTQ+ characters is not that they subscribe to a heteronormative discourse. The problem is that they barely exist, or that they are not widely known, nor produced. Reason's impossibility of TYA can be taken literally in this case. Within TYA, Manon van de Water has noted that 'representation of LGBTQ issues and characters in Theatre for Young Audiences is glaringly absent, erasing and negating non-heteronormative sexual orientations of children and youth' (2012, p.81). This paper discusses two plays (of the few which tackle this subject matter), which are slowly gaining recognition and may perhaps blaze a trail for a new queer narrative for young

people. These are the Scottish Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) production *White*, and Emily Freeman's unpublished play for elementary school audiences *And Then Came Tango*.

White is an original play for ages 2-4 created by the Scottish children's theatre company Catherine Wheels in 2010 and later produced in New York City at the New Victory Theatre in 2011 and in 2015. Children's theatre scholar Ben Fletcher-Watson has claimed that '*White* may be the most successful non-commercial theatre for early years (TEY) production to date, in terms of audience figures' (2014, p.38) having been performed more than 1000 times globally since its première at the 2010 Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

This highly visual story uses clowning and physical storytelling to introduce its young audiences to Cotton and Wrinkle, two friends who live together taking care of their birdhouses in their completely whitewashed world, 'but high up in the trees, all is not white. Colour appears. First red...then yellow...then blue' (Catherine Wheels, n.p.). At first, Wrinkle and Cotton are wary of the emergence of colour in their formerly monochromatic world, but they eventually become fond of the new colours and embrace the full colour wheel into their simple lives.

Wrinkle and Cotton speak to each other in simple sentences: 'Good morning, Wrinkle' (Manley and Cameron, 2010). They go about their routine in their white world, dusting and cleaning the birdhouses. If they find anything colourful, they must 'put it in the bin', a metal bin close to the audience. They eat breakfast, sweep the floor and clean the birdhouses until white eggs begin to fall from the sky. It is clear that it is Wrinkle and Cotton's job to take care of these eggs. One by one, Wrinkle and Cotton catch them and they are deemed either 'boy', or 'girl', except for the one pair of 'twins', and one egg they deem is just 'egg' (Manley and Cameron, 2010).

But a final surprise egg falls; this egg is red. They have never encountered a coloured egg before; it is important to note that they do not assign a gender to this particular egg. Wrinkle forces Cotton to 'put it in the bin', along with the rest of the colourful objects they've encountered. But overnight Cotton sneaks out of their white tent, takes the red egg out of the bin, and places it in a birdhouse. The next morning, Cotton finds that the red egg has made the inside of that birdhouse completely red. They begin to find more colours around their white world: their comb turns yellow, their duster turns green, and the bobble on Wrinkle's hat turns pink. They slowly find that the other birdhouses have turned different colours. They finally open the bin which explodes with colourful confetti, and they end the play with the simple phrase, 'Welcome colour!' (Manley and Cameron, 2010).

While the child audience may not grasp the full extent of the theatrical metaphor pointing to the LGBTQ+ community, the subtle and implicit reference to a queer narrative remains powerful. The audience might not make the connection from the colours which are introduced, to the rainbow, and in turn to the rainbow flag as a symbol for the LGBTQ+ movement, but they might understand the metaphor for queerness and difference, when colour is introduced to a monochromatic world. Here, white represents heteronormativity, and colour can be said to be queer.

The play explores queerness overtly when Wrinkle and Cotton first catch the white eggs falling from the sky. They immediately assign binary genders to the first two eggs. However, the egg after the twin eggs does not get an assigned gender. They take a moment to contemplate the egg then they deem that it is just 'egg'. Here, Manley plays with the audience's preconceived notions of accepted binary genders. Just as 'person' is the non-binary vocabulary to replace either 'man' or 'woman'; 'egg', in this world, is the non-binary vocabulary to replace 'boy' and 'girl'. This egg

becomes an introduction to a non-binary gender category in the world of *White*. Later in the play, when the red egg falls, it does not receive a gender assignment at all, whether 'boy', 'girl', or 'egg' (Manley, 2010). This allows us perhaps to read the colourful egg as defying the gender binary entirely in its unassigned ambiguous nature; this is a *queer* red egg. This simple use of gender assignment might clue parents explicitly into the queer connotation and allow them to facilitate discussions with their children about the LGBTQ+ connections to the themes of the play. *White's* queer narrative resonates with even very young audiences, introducing seemingly inappropriate topics through simple metaphor, and activating Stockton's queer child through more than metaphor.

White establishes a queer discourse with the vibrant colours in the normative white world, until the characters question these positions through the presence of a colourful egg that Cotton cannot bear to leave in the bin. While the themes of diversity and acceptance are implicit rather than explicit, as the mode of storytelling for TVY tends to necessitate, children interact with otherwise complex adult themes through a simple gesture of colour, boiling down a complex issue to a direct physical metaphor that children can understand.

Queerness rarely, if ever, reveals itself explicitly in cultural texts for young audiences. When this queerness does surface outside of metaphor or veiling of any sort, it meets controversy and censorship exemplified in the cancellations of plays with explicit, not implicit or filtered 'acceptable', queerness. *And Then Came Tango* is a play for young audiences by Emily Freeman based on the true story of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins, who formed a same-sex pair bond and raised an abandoned egg together in New York City's Central Park Zoo in 1999.

And Then Came Tango has had two scheduled school tours to local elementary schools cancelled. The school boards and parents who championed these cancellations raised concerns because of the play's 'gay themes'. In Texas, 10 scheduled performances of *And Then Came Tango* were cancelled at Austin elementary schools, 'with some officials questioning the age-appropriateness of the subject matter' (*Huffington Post*, 2012). Jonathan Saenz, the President of conservative group Texas Values praised the school board's decision to cancel the tour claiming that Texas 'define[s] marriage very clearly...so if you have a play that tries to push and promote a different marriage definition, which is clearly illegal, it leads students to ask questions about it, and it leads to the discussion of sex' (*Huffington Post*, 2012). Importantly, Saenz made these remarks on the cancellation before the United States Supreme Court ruled in 2015 to federally legalise same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). This ruling marked a global shift, beginning to lift stigma of lesbian and gay familial structures through legal recognition and legitimisation. As of April 2016, there are now 23 countries which have legalised same-sex marriage, including the United States (2015), England (2013), and Scotland (2014). Perhaps now, opinions have shifted and *Tango* may not have been cancelled post-2015. Nonetheless, Saenz's conflation of showing depictions of queerness to children with necessitating a discussion of gay sex reveals itself as a consistent fear voiced by those who protest against these cultural texts. This particular cancellation received media coverage from both the online pop culture blog Gawker, and The Huffington Post.

The second cancellation erupted in Fresno, California in February 2015, just months before the Supreme Court ruling, where a hearing took place before the Sierra Charter Foothill School Board because they were scheduled to host a performance of *Tango*. When the Fresno State Theatre Troupe sent the play's synopsis to the school:

...the administration wretched [sic] over what they perceived as a 'gay theme.' They immediately made attendance voluntary and sent out 'warnings' to all their parents. This effort was not enough for many in the community who demanded that the ability to opt out was not enough. They insisted that the school needed to cancel the production all together or they would boycott it for the day (Watson, 2015).

Rob Watson, a gay father whose son attends the school, wrote a public letter to the Sierra Charter Foothill School Community criticising the play's censorship, citing his love for his sons, his husband, and standing up for all the families *Tango* represents. He writes:

That is our story, and it is reflected in the factual story of the penguins in the play. The penguin real life story occurred in 1999 at the Central Park Zoo, and they met with the same intolerant attitude that your community is exhibiting. Homophobic people rose up and demanded that the penguin family be broken apart. They felt what had happened naturally was somehow 'sending the wrong message.' The *Tango* story is about love. My family's story is about love... theatre arts are meant to illustrate, illuminate and shake their audience from pre-conceived notions and feelings. This play was brought to you not so you can judge and censor it, or the families like mine that it represents, but so you can watch and grow from finding out about us (Watson, 2015).

Because *Tango* depicts overt queerness that falls outside the acceptable queerness otherwise aimed at young audiences, as exemplified in Stockton's reading of *Willy Wonka*, it has faced these instances of controversy in its touring productions.

Those productions of *Tango* that have not toured to local

elementary schools have not received the same critical treatment as its school tours. I directed a production of *Tango* as a part of the New York International Fringe Festival in the summer of 2014 that met no controversy. These productions did not meet resistance perhaps because they are not usurping what Foucault defines as heterotopic relational spaces, where ‘we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another’ (1986, p.3). According to Foucault, a space is defined by the relations of those who occupy it. Because heterosexuality pervades culture as the assumed norm, particularly considering a room of adults and children where adults’ perception of children is that of the innocent, these spaces are heterotopic. When considering a heterotopic theatrical space, one must also consider the consumerist element of choice when an adult brings their child to the theatre and pays for their ticket. It can be argued that an adult who brings a child to a play like *Tango* and is fully aware of its queer content, acknowledges the queerness of the theatrical space they are entering, thereby acquiescing and contributing to that space’s relational queerness, breaking down the heterotopia. Instead of the play ‘invading’ a normative space, such as in a school, with queerness, this theatrical, not educational, space where *Tango* might be performed is already established as queer from the adult’s prior knowledge of the subject matter and the queer child is invited to come and inhabit that queered space. But the necessity of the adult’s prior knowledge of and acceptance of the play’s content precludes the ticket buying process and therefore the child’s ability to attend the play and participate in a queered space. When an adult learns of queer content and rejects that content as inappropriate for young people, the adult exercises their imbalance of power which Reason articulates, as the young person cannot be exposed to content they are unaware of and are not introduced to by an adult. These young people who do not have the individual agency to enter queer theatrical spaces may be more easily and directly accessed through school tours and

performances because the consumerist ticket-buying element no longer puts the parent in charge of the young person's exposure to cultural content. So how do we inject the child's queerness into their cultural content and actually ensure that young people will see these queer stories without worrying about administrators and parents cancelling productions and censoring material?

Looking forward

We must reengage with Stockton and Reason's theories to adequately answer this question. The field of theatre for young audiences and its gatekeepers perhaps need to embrace the idea of the queer child and eradicate the pervasive idea that the 'innocent child' needs to be protected. This shift in ideology around young people could lead to more progressive work, like *White*, and more productions and exposure to complex and necessary themes, like those in *Tango*. Momentum is slowly building behind the advocacy for queer narratives and characters for young people, riding the coattails of the gay rights movement's recent successes and shifting perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and issues in popular culture.

Artists are beginning to create and develop queer content for young people across multiple mediums. In the field of live performance, Glasgow-based live artist Eilidh MacAskill has been commissioned by Imagineate¹, to develop her 2015 project, *Gendersaurus Rex*, 'a new research project looking into gender, feminism, sexuality, queerness and difference, and how these areas intersect with the field of live performance for children' (MacAskill, 2015, n.p.). The project is still in its research phase, but it will likely culminate in a performance for young audiences that engages these topics. The YouTube Channel, *Olly n' Pop*, created and produced by performer Olly Pike, creates easily

accessible videos for young people discussing LGBTQ+ topics. And Rebecca Sugar's show *Steven Universe* on Cartoon Network breaks boundaries in its queer content, depicting one of its main characters in an overt lesbian relationship.

Content like this is laying the important groundwork to expose young people to queer topics. Queer artistic content and progressive storytelling can have immense cultural impact with a potential to break apart pervading stigmas about LGBTQ+ people, particularly when considering children. When queer stories begin to be told and treated with the same level of normalcy with which heterosexual stories are treated, then queerness itself will then be perceived as the everyday, mundane way of life that it truly is, rather than as the inflammatory, inappropriate calamity it is still treated as today. This new queer normalcy might even force another reclamation of the word 'queer'. This new queerness may shift our theorising from the binary of queer versus normative, to a wider understanding of queerness as a spectrum of difference, where there is no normative and we are all understood to be a little bit queer, or a little bit strange, like the queer child, simply because we are all different from one another. Within this new queer normalcy, young people can grow into adulthood within the perception of a queer totality, move to ultimately eradicate hetero-assumptive behaviour, and build a global queer relational space.

Notes

1. Emerging from the Scottish International Children's Festival in 2000, Imagine is now the national art-form development agency for children and young people's theatre in Scotland. It organises the annual Imagine Festival of performing arts for children and young people in Edinburgh, and provides professional advocacy, creative

development and commissioning, as well as creative learning programmes in schools.

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