

II Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas de Panamá

Roberto Enrique King

Nuevamente la ciudad de Panamá fue sede de la fiesta del teatro y de la danza del mundo con la celebración de la segunda edición del Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas, realizado del 29 de marzo al 4 de abril de 2006, un evento bienal independiente que tuvo como escenario principal el Teatro Nacional, además de plazas y espacios alternativos del Casco Antiguo de la urbe. Una programación compuesta en su sección principal por seis espectáculos internacionales, calificada en general de entre buena y muy buena por público y conocedores, mantuvo un flujo fluctuante pero constante de espectadores circulando hacia nuestro principal espacio escénico, en donde día con día pudieron ponerse en contacto con las más recientes tendencias, recursos y temáticas que inquietan y ocupan a los artistas contemporáneos, especialmente de Iberoamérica.

Las puestas teatrales ofrecidas fueron *Dos hermanas*, del conocido Teatro Petra de Colombia, escrita y dirigida por Fabio Rubiano, un montaje divertido e inteligente alrededor de la traición filial y sexual, de un ritmo y de una precisión envidiables, llevado de la mano por muy logradas y sincronizadas actuaciones y *Sor María lo explica todo para usted*, una comedia negra de Christopher Durang, dirigida por Alejandro Trejo para el grupo Un Mundo Teatro, de Chile, un terrible alegato contra la intolerancia y crueldad de las enseñanzas religiosas en los colegios, que con su contundencia y buen hacer escénico creó en el público una mezcla de complicidad, satisfacción, incomodidad y rechazo, incluida la levantada y salida de algunos.

También se pudo ver una empática pieza argentina, cautivadora por sus actuaciones, agudeza verbal y canciones, *La amante de Baudelaire vestida de terciopelo* de Fernanda García Lao a partir de textos del poeta francés, actuada y dirigida por ella y Gabriela Luján, una tragicomedia musical envuelta en una atmósfera decadente y retro en la que la inestable cantante



Marcela Valencia y Marcela Gardeazábal en *Dos hermanas*

venida a menos y al borde del suicidio encuentra en una pragmática mujercita corriente a su salvadora y guía; y en un registro más épico, el clásico griego *Antígona* contemporaneizado por el autor peruano José Watanabe, en versión del Teatro del Mar de México dirigido por Miguel Angel Rivera, en donde el monólogo es repartido en cuatro personajes supervivientes de una guerra total, y reafirma la vigencia de su discurso en contra de la injusticia de los poderosos, envuelto efectivamente en impactantes recursos visuales y sustentado por un riguroso plantel actoral.

En danza ofrecieron sus propuestas las compañías Yoshua Cienfuegos de España con *Purgatorio*, un viaje hacia un sub o supramundo oscuro y surreal inspirado en la iconografía de *El jardín de las delicias* de El Bosco, que aunque estéticamente valioso y logrado se disfruta en el plano cerebral y visual, pero no logra conmovir; mientras que por el contrario, en un plano más visceral y de sensaciones funcionó *Impropio de 4 Pelos / Losdenmedium* de Costa Rica, dirigida por Jimmy Ortiz, en torno a una pareja de excluidos por diferentes, que luchan por ser aceptados como ellos mismos, mientras que los músicos y un enfebrecido y déspota narrador ininteligible los acosan. Un ejercicio de danza-teatro que resultó lo más innovador de la muestra.

El FAE incluyó entre sus nuevas ofertas para esta edición un espacio para espectáculos alternativos y experimentales gratuitos para el público, La Casona de las Brujas, que resultó la sede de las presentaciones panameñas, compuestas por el unipersonal *Mudo quiere ser diablo* del grupo Oveja Negra, actuado y dirigido por su fundadora, Ileana Solís, en el que la actriz demostró sus capacidades histriónicas encarnando diversos personajes propios de la fauna nativa, ante espectadores mayoritariamente jóvenes; y el performance *Madre tierra*, realizado por la bailarina y coreógrafa Vielka Chu con el grupo Yanza Danza y que incluyó bailarines, malabaristas, músicos, tirafuegos y danza aérea, una propuesta de búsqueda que llevó al público desde el interior del local a la calle para concluir en la contigua Plaza Herrera.

Otra novedad fue la actividad dominical vespertina realizada en la Plaza Catedral, también en el Casco Antiguo, en la que, tras iniciar con un pasacalles, se presentaron los grupos Circleta de Argentina, Circofrénico de Brasil y Panamá, y Massa Divo de México, que animaron y divertieron a la gente del barrio y visitantes con teatro de calle, malabaristas, zanqueros, músicos y tirafuegos. El intercambio y lo pedagógico también tuvieron un lugar especial por medio de los conversatorios desarrollados con los grupos teatrales invitados y artistas del medio, al día siguiente de sus funciones, realizados en el Teatro La Quadra y la Casa Góngora; y los talleres, de Voz por la teatrística y especialista panameña Mariela Aragón, y de Actuación, a cargo de los actores y actrices del Teatro del Mar, de México, también en La Quadra, lo mismo que las clases maestras abiertas que ofrecieron las compañías de danza española y costarricense, respectivamente, en la Academia Steps. Todos los eventos formativos contaron con un buen número de interesados, especialmente los de danza.

Esta segunda edición del FAE lo comienza a consolidar como uno de los grandes eventos culturales con que cuenta Panamá, y tiene el potencial suficiente para llamar la atención progresiva de artistas, especialistas y turistas culturales a nivel continental, lo que podría repercutir en ganancias paulatinas para distintos sectores económicos del país, al tiempo que permite la creación de un público mayor y más exigente y con mayor criterio en cuanto al disfrute del arte escénico. Además, puede convertirse también en una efectiva herramienta para apuntalar el desarrollo y la puesta al día de las artes escénicas panameñas, ya que la danza y especialmente el teatro vienen a ser las disciplinas artísticas menos desarrolladas en el país en términos de calidad estética, contenidos y búsquedas, elementos que precisamente urge reforzar.

El II Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas – Panamá 2006 fue una producción de la Fundación pro Artes Escénicas y Audiovisuales (Fundación FAE), contando con los auspicios principales del Instituto de Cultura, la Oficina del Casco Antiguo, el GECU de la Universidad de Panamá y las Embajadas de España, México, Colombia y Chile, y la colaboración de la Asociación Teatral Tablas. El equipo de trabajo estuvo conformado por un grupo de artistas y amantes de las artes como Rosario Barrera, Caridad García, Martín Porto, César Robles, Natalie Medina, Xochitl Avalos, Jorge Conte, Abdiel Tapia, Milvia Martínez, Lelis Reyes, Elmir Fadul, Jaime Newball, Renán Fernández, Pilar Moreno, Carlos Murillo, Marisol Collazo, entre otros. La próxima edición del FAE está prevista para verano del 2008, pero en el camino seguirán realizando eventos de perfil nacional e internacional para mantenerse activos y presentes en la atención de la comunidad.

Panamá



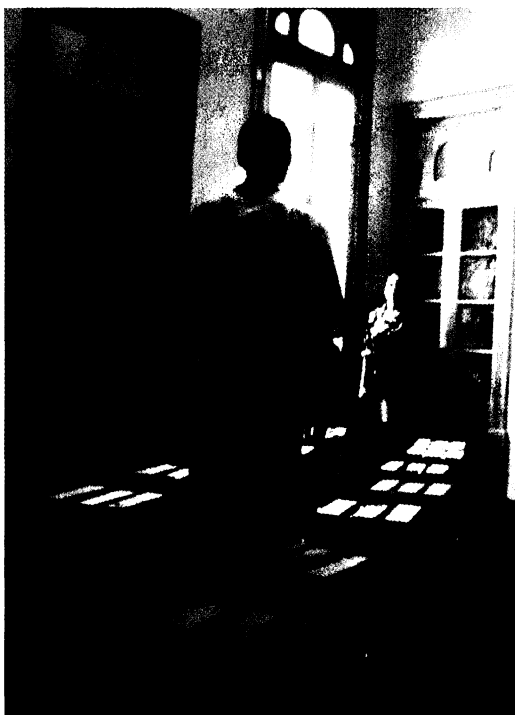
Circo y teatro de calle en la Plaza Catedral

Mexico City's Spring 2006 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Numerous theatre people asked while I was in Mexico if I felt, as they did, that this year's offerings were weaker than in the recent past. I reserved judgment until finishing my *recorrido*, but in the end I had to agree with the general sentiment. The closest things I saw to big-scale spectacular theatre this year were translations. Even those plays, however, were medium-scale at best, albeit with excellent performances. *Cupo limitado* seemed to characterize most of this season's most memorable theatrical offerings.

The second tiniest *foro* I have ever seen (second only to the *forito* of Utopía Urbana) housed two of this season's most unique plays, *Asalto al agua transparente* and *Ensayo sobre la inmovilidad*. La Madriguera is not easy to find and is not well-marked. The box office consists of a portable stand placed on the sidewalk in front of the theatre's door about 45 minutes prior to a performance. The theatre has no lobby and does not even have a ground level floor – a long stairway takes spectators directly up to a small, misshapen, bare, second-story apartment which La Máquina del Teatro, a small theatre group headed by Alberto Villareal, maintains as an unlikely performance space. The subtitle for *Asalto al agua transparente*, a play written, directed and acted by Luisa Pardo and Gabino Rodríguez, was *Historia del agua y la ciudad de México*. The play chronicled the history of Mexico City through the lens of water, culminating in a focus on the present-day crisis of trying to provide it for more than 20 million people on a daily basis in a city far from any major rivers. And yet the performance did not feel like a history lesson, but a play focusing primarily on the developing relationship of a young couple in the city, and on their concern for the environment. On the way they took on the roles of historical figures such as Cortés, Moctezuma and Malinche. The set could not have cost more than



Asalto al agua transparente. Foto: Juan Leduc

few dollars, but was exceptionally effective. It consisted of 19 empty wooden crates, 16 of which were neatly arranged, upside-down and center stage in rows of eight at the beginning of the play. This arrangement left seating for 15 spectators. In addition, the set included several seats, several wash tubs, an altar, and half a dozen small, quirky items hanging from the ceiling, including three baggies filled with water. During the play the pair arranged the crates in at least ten different formations representing different things, such as an avenue, a bed, a river bed and a drainage causeway. In a particularly

powerful scene Rodríguez hurled empty food packaging at Pardo and into the “water,” representing the contamination of scarce resources over the years and continuing in the present. Several times water itself became a prop, most notably when Rodríguez punctured the baggies toward the end of the play, releasing water in tiny spray into tins. It created an effective auditory and visual effect and symbolized the depletion of water resources in Mexico City. This play was dramatically sound, extremely well acted and broached a subject of major social importance. Part of its charm and power was its “clandestine” setting, but it deserved a much bigger audience than the venue could accommodate.

The other play in La Madriguera was a strange yet fascinating play written and directed by the theatre’s director, Alberto Villarreal Díaz. *Ensayo sobre la inmovilidad* exploited the nooks and crannies of the quirky apartment/theatre, presenting an avalanche of symbols coming at spectators from numerous directions. In fact, the experience of the play was vastly different for each spectator depending on where each sat. The 28 spectators

sat arena-style in the center of the stage, with perhaps two feet between the facing sides. Action occurred in that middle passageway, around the entire perimeter of the room, in a pair of adjoining rooms linked by open, arched doorways, in rooms or closets linked by eight sets of doors and even in the stairway leading to the exit. The plot was as unusual as the setting, with numerous simultaneous actions occurring in different parts of the performance space at any one time. One main story line featured a young man who skipped work, was beaten, suffered, died, was thrown into the garbage and finally was buried. During occasional Brechtian interruptions actors complained that with all of Mexico's problems it seemed irresponsible to perform this particular play which had nothing to do with Mexico. The cast of characters included a cruel one-armed priest, a young woman who sang with a crazed, anguished smile on her face, and a pair of young women dressed in velvet, one of whom was cross-eyed, carried a Mexican flag and a bird, and saw things through a religious filter. The other who mocked and scolded her the whole play. Although the plot was convoluted at best, *Ensayo* was a visual and auditory tour de force. The lighting included myriad tonalities and textures. Often the only light was that which would tumble out of one or more of the eight sets of perimeter doors as they would open. Mirrors and flashlights further complicated and enriched the lighting. The costumes were quirky and many of the images powerful (and at times freakish), like the crucifixion of the main character as he lay in bed, the boarding up of a cemetery, lip-synching actors rolling through the stage on a table and cotton candy spewed into the audience from a fan. Music and sound effects emerged from all over the apartment. Spectators sat in the center of a whirlwind of action and sounds, never knowing what was coming or from where. Even the end was unique – the actors announced that as a symbol of hope they would serve coffee to each member of the audience, which they did. This was a bizarre, playful, unforgettable experience in a unique setting, which delighted spectators and caused considerable reflection.

Students of the CasAzul theatre school performed a splendid version of Hugo Salcedo's *El viaje de los cantores* in its small second-story *teatro de cámara*. This version, directed by Claudia Ríos, incorporated texts from several Juan Rulfo stories and from Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Hotel Juárez*. Thus, the play combined the hot-button issue of immigration to the US with the equally hot issue of the disappearance of women in Ciudad Juárez, all within a context of the inhospitable nature of Mexico and life as seen in Rulfo's stories. The play was performed on a long and narrow platform

between spectators, who were seated arena-style. The narrow stage adapted beautifully to various locales, culminating in the wagons of a train. The changes of locale depended primarily on spectator imagination, with minor props such as chairs. The performance space was so narrow that actors many times brushed up against spectators as they went past. Thus, this representation of *El viaje de los cantores* did more than just portray the struggles of immigrants; it immersed audience members into the cramped circumstances so many immigrants experience, forcing them to share a bit of their discomforts. Several scenes were brilliant, but none more so than the initial sequence, in which all the actors silently portrayed the repetitive menial labor in a stylized way, in four moving rows, each row dedicated to a different labor, all rows working in a rhythm dictated by live percussion. The actors effectively communicated the intensity and emotions of sending loved ones away and crossing into a new country, culminating in the tragic deaths of a train car full of immigrants. Performing this play during the spring of 2006 was particularly poignant since immigration issues had come to the forefront of national consciousness in both the US and Mexico, and because of recent deaths reminiscent of those portrayed in the play. The award this play received as the best at the XXXX Festival Nacional de Teatro Universitario seemed very well deserved. This play later enjoyed a run at UNAM's Santa Catarina theatre during the summer 2006 season.

Another award-winning play gave spectators a similar immersion experience in the Foro del Taller de Teatro de la Biblioteca de México "José Vasconcelos." *Mocasin*, a play by Reynol Pérez Vázquez, who hails from Monterrey, and directed by Sandra Félix, was based on a Bulgarian short story by Stanislav Stratiev. The plot focused on the housing struggles of a family of four shoehorned into a tiny apartment. The tiny puppy they accepted as a gift from their powerful uncle (powerful enough to get them a bigger residence so they better keep the gift), turned into an enormous shaggy dog which further exacerbated their housing woes. And so the family faced the dilemma of whether to keep the loveable muppet-like dog that complicated their lives in a big way. The set, designed by Juan Carlos Roldán, was genius – an entire studio apartment in a tiny quadrant of the stage, including a bookcase which pulled down into a bed, a miniscule kitchen table and a sofa which practically blocked the entrance to the apartment. It seemed almost like a dollhouse. Audience members could practically feel the pain as characters scooted uncomfortably around furniture, and audience members could relate to the physical proximity of the actors as they also were pressed close to



Mocasin. Photo: Armando Ortega

each other on a series of uncomfortable risers. Space was at a premium both on stage and in the audience, where spectators crammed even into the stairway. The fact that the entire set and most of the costumes were stark black and white further emphasized the austerity of the family's situation. The actors, all of whom maintained a hilarious Slavic accent, were superb, with particular kudos due to Víctor Román as the air-headed academic husband, Carol Sánchez as the cranky, end-of-her-rope wife and whoever was inside the delightful dog costume, exuding a joy *de vive* which contrasted beautifully with his surroundings. Soviet music, imaginative use of props, some of which were literally imaginary, and creative use of lighting rounded out this excellent play. Happily, Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes has selected it for its school project, so it will extend its run at least six months with performances for elementary and middle-school students starting in 2007. Incidentally, this play was the fruit of a theatre workshop, aimed at giving young people a taste of the world of theatre, which Sandra Félix has been conducting since 1988.

Two other excellent plays were performed in a better known and somewhat larger foro, the Centro Cultural Helénico's La Gruta, a black box theatre which year after year houses some of Mexico City's best theatre.

The first was a spectacle unlike any performance I have ever experienced: *Vencer al Sensei*, written, directed and acted by Richard Viqueira. Before entering, audience members were warned to stay away from the front row if they were susceptible to strong emotions. Once seated, spectators on the front row were emphatically warned not to cross a line at their feet, not to lean forward and to keep their arms down. These warnings were indeed warranted, as actors engaged in round after round of Japanese martial arts, including Samurai sword play during which spectators' heads were within inches of speeding, whirling metal. The plot and dialogue were minimal and almost irrelevant; as the stern master, Viqueira never even uttered a word of Spanish. By contrast, the choreography and actor performances were stunning. Viqueira and Mauricio E. Galaz jousted in a variety of breathtaking, physically demanding and exacting ways. They engaged in flips, falls, leaps and acrobatics. Galaz's facial expressions contrasted with Viqueira's stone face and matched the pair's corporal expression in intensity and range of emotions. The pacing of the play was crucial, as a variety of vigorous, exacting combats alternated with humorous snippets, such as the interventions of a Geisha who looked air-headed and provided props, but turned out to be a nonchalant martial arts warrior in her own right. Although it may have been a theatrical trick, toward the beginning of the play Viqueira appeared to have cut his hand on one of the swords. Given spectator proximity to the actors, I was convinced it was his own blood. He used it dramatically and effectively throughout the play, dabbing it on his disciple's head at a key moment, for example. By the end of the performance small spots of blood had stained the pair's costumes numerous times. Viqueira and Galaz reportedly trained for this play for several years, and it paid off, as packed houses have prompted La Gruta's management to extend its run.

Although it occurred in the same theatre, *El anticristo* was a more traditional play, abandoning *Sensei*'s arena-style seating in favor of a more traditional setup with spectators on one side of the stage. Written by Mario Cantú Toscano and directed by Gabriela Lozano, *El anticristo* portrayed the neurosis and eventual demise of Damián while his supposed friends stood by and did nothing. The trick of the play was that it started at the end, with Damián's friends shocked at news of his suicide, and then jumped in time and space to see what brought him to that point. It ended up a searing rebuke of modern society's selfishness and lack of human compassion, but on the way served up a lot of fun. The play's title derived from Damián's fear that he was the Beast referred to in the Bible, having found a small mark on the

back of his head which, with the help of a mirror, he concluded was a 666. His friends thought it was hilarious and fed his neurosis instead of helping him as a human being. One of the play's most attractive features was the way it seamlessly and instantly handled jumps in time and space. A hospital waiting room one moment became an apartment the next. The coffee machine in the waiting room somehow transformed into a refrigerator. Actors took a set of attached chairs from the audience and carted them around the stage to create a variety of spaces. In a brilliant scene, as Ariadna described to Damián the quirks of living with Marcos in one space, Marcos deadpanned the outrageous behavior in another, with Ariadna flowing between spaces. Sometimes characters would appear to observe their fellow characters, invisible to them, yet able to influence the scenes in subtle ways. Certain scenes were repeated word for word, gesture for gesture, but the second time through was more significant given the greater context. And occasionally characters would simply turn to the audience and explain themselves. Although the thematics and acting and set and plot and even the program (with a note dated 6/06/06) were outstanding, *El anticristo*'s finest trait was its sleight-of-hand use of space, which drew spectators into the game and magically transported them through time and space.

The Galeón theatre hosted a festival created by the Teatro Línea de Sombra group. The festival lasted nearly a month and was called "Inventario: escena alternativa." It included representations of 13 different plays which were each performed three or four times. Several of the plays premiered in this venue, while others had been performed earlier. An example of the plays from the festival was *XV*, directed by Espartaco Martínez and written as a *creación colectiva*, which featured a series of compelling visual images. The quintet of actors was most impressive in its corporal work, which was not quite modern dance but shared many similarities. The lighting included strobe lights and light mixed with smoke, and the set remained bare – the actors were the focus. The text was poetic and elliptical; a plot unidentifiable. This was highly creative theatre performed with great enthusiasm, but with an amateur feel that went beyond the glaring technical mix ups.

Carlos Corona directed a disturbing play by Luis Enrique Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio, *Edi y Rudy*. Jorge Zárate created an abominable character in Edi, a lazy, heartless, relatively young man who fancied himself sophisticated and sharp as he tried to pull off scam after scam, even stooping so low as to try to exploit a group of Down's syndrome children. Carlos Cobos created Rudy, a loveable but stupid character who was always getting

railroaded by Edi. Despite the excellent acting of Zárata and Cobos, I failed to enjoy this play. I believe the aberrant thinking, cruelty, humiliation and abuse it portrayed condemned it. May Mexico have no real life citizens anything like Edi and Rudy.

The remaining plays in this report were among the best of theatre performances with texts written by non-Mexicans. Unfortunately, none was transformed to Mexican culture, but each had components worthy of praise. Students from UNAM's Centro Universitario del teatro performed Philippe



¿Adónde vas, Jeremías?

Photo: CUT/José Jorge Carreón.

Minyana's *¿A dónde vas, Jeremías?* in its new black box theatre. Alberto Lomnitz directed the dozen actors in a remarkable parade of quirky, alienated, suffering characters, 37 in all, lamenting life and its difficulties. Several elements of this play were particularly noteworthy, starting with live music produced by the actors as they sang or played a variety of percussion instruments. The set offered a number of delicious effects. First, as the audience entered, an enormous, luxurious tapestry hung center stage. It dropped suddenly, which was a surprise in and of itself, but the surprise deepened upon seeing the surprised spectators on the other side of the

tapestry. Second, the stage floor consisted of sand, which was exploited for many effects, both visual and auditory, and transported the audience to the desert, the setting of a number of scenes. Third, a pair of enormous doors with inlaid glass allowed for lighting effects from behind and were beautiful backdrops. Finally, actors exploited the unique performing space, entering and exiting in unexpected ways, and appearing at three different levels, including in a plane in the theatre's rafters. This was yet another play heavy



Operación amen. Photo: CUT/ José Jorge Carreón

on visual images with a dense to impenetrable text. This play routinely sold out and turned away many spectators on any given night. The same can be said for *Operación Amén*, which played next door in the Foro del CUT. José Ramón Enríquez based the text on a play by Dario Fo, and Jesús Ochoa directed this raucous, picaresque piece. Much of the humor was juvenile at best, but the portrayal of a pair of incompetent police officers was brilliant.

Carlos Corona directed a delightful version of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* at UNAM's Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as part of a series of events honoring Ibsen at the centennial of his death. The cast was superb, with Rodrigo Vásquez in the title role and Laura Almela as Peer's mother. The set, designed by Auda Caraza and Atenea Chávez, was as magical as the play, with an enormous ramp that turned upward and curved all the way into the rafters, reminiscent of massive trees in a forest. The "ground floor" of the ramp included several trap doors, the head board and foot board for a bed, and the end of the ramp folded upward to create the edge of a ship during a storm. The "second floor" of the ramp featured doors and at the "third floor" windows, all of which seemed like part of an enchanted forest. Of *Peer Gynt*'s many merits, its greatest may well have been its costumes, simple in the case of Peer and his mother, and fantastically involved and

magical in the cases of many of the characters in the enchanted woods. Getting a ticket to this play was not easy, but it was well worth the effort.

Finally, Raúl Quintanilla directed *La casa suspendida* by Canadian Michel Tremblay. Philippe Amand's set was simple compared to so many involved sets he had designed, but true to the title he made the house front appear to float. The beauty of this play was the manner in which it brought three generations together at a time on the stage. The main character bought a family home, and as he wrote about the past, several generations of his forebears came to life in the space, but no one could see anyone else from any other time period. The choreography was beautifully done to keep characters from running into each other's ghosts. The stories of the various parts of the family seemed a bit melodramatic at times, but the evocation of a place and the way it houses generations of a family history was beautifully accomplished. I am certain this play could have been adapted beautifully to a Mexican milieu.

This season may have been weaker than past seasons, but Mexican theatre remains very strong. The May 4-10 edition of *Tiempo Libre* listed 21 plays for children and 111 plays for adults, over half of which were written by Mexicans. Although many of the season's best plays came to life in smallish venues, spring with gusto to life they did, treating spectators to exceptionally creative theatre of the highest quality.

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