

The Campesino's Early *Actos* as Templates for Today's Students

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Preface

In 1965, Luis Valdez and a group of striking farm workers formed the Teatro Campesino (Farm Workers' Theater) as the cultural and educational arm of the farm worker's union being organized by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Under Valdez's direction, this raggle-taggle troupe gave a face to those invisible workers, collectively creating and performing what Valdez termed *actos*: short, comic sketches that satirized enemies while calling for a union contract. Other than Valdez, these farm workers-cum actors had no theatrical training; few had a formal education. But they had a cause, and their performances of *huelga* (strike) songs and *actos* motivated farm workers to join the union. When they left the fields to take their message to other audiences, the group's performances moved people to donate money to the cause as well as to boycott grapes and other non-union produce in support of the union.¹

Though written for a particular historical moment, the turbulent 1960s and 70s, the *actos* are still relevant and necessary today. The influence of this theatrical activity led to a national coalition of Chicano theaters, called *teatros*, from the fields of California to Broadway and beyond. I teach the *actos* as living testaments to the hopes and dreams not only of the farm workers but also as enactments of the many issues that prevailed in the Mexican and Chicana/o communities across the land.

The ultimate objective of this article is to guide the professor and inspire the students to create their own *actos* in the spirit of theatre for social change—whatever that change may be in the students' eyes. Crucial to this task will be the demonstration of the *acto* as the embodiment of issues that people are passionate about and how to channel that passion into action. Although the

original *actos* were created collectively, anyone can **create** individual *actos* as long as they understand the conventions of the genre. As this essay will demonstrate, the *acto* form is a very effective tool for social change in the classroom and in public forums. I intend to give the reader a brief overview of the development of the *acto* in an effort to illustrate how the form can be applied to any issue. The following will position Chicanos as members of marginalized communities searching for their rightful place in the American imaginary through theatre for social change.

Laughter as a Weapon

As a colonized people living in what used to be Mexico, Chicanos have always found humor in their fractured, neo-colonial Southwestern existence. They've enjoyed making fun of themselves as well as ridiculing the invading Europeans' customs, manners, and ideas. The tensions created within and between these disparate communities have created anxieties that have fueled the comedy of Chicanos for generations—indeed, before they *were* Chicanos, which is to say, before the northern reaches of Mexico became the US Southwest in 1848.

When Chicanos began organizing in the late 1960s, having been neglected by traditional notions of Western Civilization and what was called “American history,” they looked for their roots in an ancient, mythical Mexico, rather than Mount Olympus and a Western European paradigm. They saw themselves as the descendants of Mexican revolutionaries such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, not George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. Studying pre-Columbian history, the Chicanos learned that the Aztec diaspora had taken them in the mid-14th century to what is now Mexico City, where they built a tremendous empire. They also learned that the Aztecs had migrated from the north, a mythical place they called Aztlán. Seeing themselves as descendants of the Aztecs, the Chicanos adopted the term Aztlán for the US Southwest.

Knowing that Chicanos' roots are firmly planted in Aztlán, we can understand when they say, “We did not come to the United States; the United States came to us.” Or perhaps more stridently, “We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us!” Despite the border, there is a constant flow of immigrants from Mexico into the US, which has also helped to keep the Spanish language and Mexican cultural identities alive in the US. This persistent exchange of cultural capital and labor has fueled the theatre of Chicanos as they express their ethnic identities and marginal positions in both the US and Mexico. Although Chicanos could, conceivably, go “home” to Mexico, I

have yet to see a Chicano play about returning to Mexico. They see Aztlán as home. Yet, despite calling the US Southwest Aztlán, it is not truly “home” for Chicanos, as they do not feel they belong there either. How could they when traditional history books elide their very existence and the media eradicates their presence or, worse, casts them as stereotypical victims or victimizers?

Like any other ethnic group, Chicanos have responded to their marginalization with laughter to build community, uniting in a common cause. I believe that they have employed humor in their theatre as a means of protection, as a weapon, and as an educational tool. Chicanos laugh at the weaknesses of their oppressors and in so doing feel superior to them. Indeed, nothing could be funnier to the oppressed than to make fun of the oppressor, to bring him down to size. As we all know, laughter is a very powerful expression, allowing the subaltern subject to find her voice in ridiculing the “master” and other adversaries, if only for a moment. Adding to their sense of otherness, Chicanos have often performed their comedies outside the mainstream, on the margins, effectively in private.

In like manner, the oppressors have also used laughter as a weapon. As Albert Memmi observes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, it is incumbent upon the colonizer to make the colonized feel inferior. Besides destroying anything that gives the subaltern a sense of culture, place, and agency, the colonizer must do all that he can to erase the colonial subject’s identity. However, Chicanos, like their indigenous ancestors, recognized this post-colonial project early on and turned the colonizer’s gaze back upon his own absurdities and failings: Enter Luis Valdez and the Teatro Campesino.

Early Influences: San Francisco Mime Troup and Commedia

Born into a farmworker family in the San Joaquin Valley, Luis Valdez was very familiar with the grave hardships of an agricultural existence. Unlike so many children of farmworkers, however, he graduated from San Jose State College in 1964, when few Mexican-Americans were even completing high school in California. He was an outspoken critic of the developing war in Vietnam and a favorite speaker at anti-war rallies on campus and in the community. His first play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, was produced at San Jose State College and gave the budding playwright the impetus to pursue his dream of writing theatre.² After college, Valdez spent one year with the emergent collective the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which proved vital to his political and theatrical training. This theatre troupe was founded by Ron Davis in 1959 with the purpose of exposing the ills of unbridled capitalism

through free performances in the parks of San Francisco and environs.³ One of the influences on the troupe's founding aesthetic was *commedia dell'arte*, the 16th-century theatrical form that evolved out of Italian street performances and circus acts. *Commedia* is a very physical type of theatre with scenarios created collectively around stock characters and easily recognizable stereotypes who are always ridiculous in their demeanor and purpose. An essential element of the form are masks, visual representations of seemingly frozen faces and an art form in themselves. As we discuss the conventions of the *acto* we will see how an understanding of the *commedia* is crucial to the creation of an effective *acto* performance for today's audiences.⁴

The Acto as a Genre

The Teatro Campesino's original comic *actos* were simple but not simplistic. I have described these *actos* as modern morality plays as they clearly show the distinctions between Good (the *campesino* and the Union) and Evil (the grower and his henchmen) and employ allegorical figures to demonstrate their point(s). Although the aesthetic legacy is sometimes difficult to separate from the political, in the realm of aesthetics, Teatro Campesino developed what has sometimes been referred to as a "*rasquachi* aesthetic." The Mexican term "*rasquachi*" is described by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as

brash and hybrid, sending shudders through the ranks of the elite, who seek solace in less exuberant, more muted and purer traditions. In an environment always on the verge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet), things are held together with spit, grit and movidas. Movidas are the coping strategies you use to gain time, to make options, to retain hope. (156)

Rasquachismo is a truly Mexican/Chicano term, a product of the working class understood by the people who have had to negotiate the uncertainties of life either in Mexico or *en el norte*, i.e. north of Mexico. Or, as Diana Taylor states in her landmark study, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, *rasquachismo* represents "the aesthetics of the underdog" (97). In keeping with the spirit of the form, it is important to keep these aspects of the *acto* in mind as one creates her/his own *acto*.

In an interview in 1967, Valdez described Teatro Campesino as "somewhere between [Bertolt] Brecht and Cantinflas" (Bagby 77). For some observers, Chicano theatre has its roots in Mexican tent shows called *carpas*, so named for the tents in which they were performed while touring all across Mexico and the Southwestern US. Aimed at the proletariat, they were vari-

ety shows, like vaudeville, in which working-class audiences were treated to songs, dances, and other acts as well as sketches that resonated with the Mexicans who found themselves in an alien environment. Popular figures such as the *pelado* and *pelada* made audiences laugh with their comic shtick and topical themes. The legendary Mexican comic actor Mario Moreno began his career in the *carpas*, where he created his famous *pelado*, Cantinflas, the little guy who comes through against all odds, villains, and obstacles. The reader might be more familiar with Charlie Chaplin, with whom Cantinflas was always favorably compared. Both Chaplin and Cantinflas perfected physical humor, which was initially non-verbal.

Valdez's mentioning of Brecht refers to the political influences of the great German playwright, director, and theorist who was just being introduced to English-speaking readers (and audiences) when Valdez was in college. During the 1960s and 70s, Brecht's plays and Marxist theories influenced theatre artists around the globe and were of particular interest in Latin America, where the long arm of US imperialism was running rampant in the name of anti-communism. Further, Valdez had been a member of the first Venceremos (We Will Overcome) Brigade to Fidel Castro's revolutionary island, moving Valdez to proclaim "that we support Fidel Castro as the real voice of Latin America, declaring that social justice must be given to Latin America" (Steiner and Valdes 218).

As an aesthetic, the earliest Teatro Campesino *actos* were truly *rasquachi*. Because the group had no money, they had to be prepared to perform the *actos* anywhere, usually outdoors, with the result that design elements came together by chance. The *actos* were inventive by necessity. Presentational theatre was the norm, with the actors or characters breaking the fourth wall to get the audience's attention because they were either performing at the edges of the agricultural fields or at a park or community center with the attendant noises and distractions. Even if the production was indoors, children would always be present, some supervised, others not. Signs around the necks of the actors marked the characters clearly and masks further delineated the villains from the heroes. Costumes were found and the exaggerated props were put together in somebody's kitchen. The *rasquachi* aesthetic cannot be "designed"; it just happens.

The Teatro Campesino inspired a national network of Chicano theatre groups on university campuses and in working-class Mexican and Chicano communities. These theatre groups, too, were usually composed of political activists who were untrained in theatre, and the *acto* served them well as a

training tool for future aesthetic and sociopolitical growth and development. There was no time for social realism or any kind of theatrical realism in that turbulent period of street theatre and improvisation. For most of the young *teatro* activists, the message was more urgent than the medium. The performers in the early *teatros* were more like social workers than cultural workers, eager to speak truth to their communities as they educated and motivated their audiences to take action against any number of injustices. Further, *actos* were meant to address current issues in large brushstrokes, as they were often performed at political rallies, usually outdoors. There was no room for “kitchen-sink dramas” under those conditions; it was about having nothing more than the proverbial two boards and a passion.

The First *Actos*

In 1971 the Teatro Campesino published a selection of *actos* the group had collectively created and performed between 1965 and 1971.⁵ Edited by Luis Valdez, the *actos* serve as a historical and thematic progression that begins with the initial farm worker *actos*, *Las dos caras del Patroncito* (*The Two Faces of the Boss*) and *La quinta temporada* (*The Fifth Season*), to be discussed later. When the group left the union in 1967, its *actos* began to reflect issues outside of the fields: the sell-outs who reject their Mexican heritage in *Los vendidos* (*The Sellouts*); the Conquest of Mexico and a call for Chicano unity in the puppet play *La conquista de México* (*The Conquest of Mexico*); a critique of the schools in *No saco nada de la escuela* (*I Don't Get Anything Out of School*); a critique of the Chicano movement in *The Militants*; and opposition to the Vietnam War in *Vietnam Campesino* and *Soldado Razo* (*Buck Private*). I call these *actos* classics because they have stood the test of time, lasting beyond the period in which they were created. With simple adjustments (or none at all), each of the *actos* can be adapted for today's audiences. Although several of the titles are in Spanish, the *actos* are mainly bilingual, English and Spanish. If the actors were bilingual they could adapt the language to suit their audience: more English if the audience were not (apparently) bilingual or Spanish-speaking and vice-versa. Versatility is key in the performance proper; the actors had to be able to adjust to any number of given circumstances.

In order to clarify the intent behind the *actos*, Valdez wrote the following, which he titled “The Five Goals of the *Acto*”: “Inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling” (12). As

any student of political theatre knows, these five goals can be applied to many events or works of art including, but not limited to, a play, performance, song, dance, mural, or any number of social media. The most difficult of the five goals is to show or hint at a solution. In the farmworker *actos*, the message was clear to the actual farmworkers in the audience: “If you want a better life, join the union.” This was not an easy solution. It meant losing daily wages, however meager, marching in a picket line and even risking one’s life when the growers hired their henchmen to stand guard at the edges of the fields, rifles cocked. But there was a clear objective for the farmworkers. For non-*campesino* audiences, as stated earlier, the “solution” was to support the union through boycotts and donations. As the *acto* was adapted to other issues such as domestic violence, drug abuse, and homophobia, the solution became more complex. Of the five goals listed by Valdez, each is essential to successfully getting a message across. However, in order to create an *acto*, the student needs to keep these five goals in mind as s/he studies the conventions of the form, never forgetting that it will be performed.

The Conventions of the *Acto*

Conventions define and describe the genre and can be seen as rules to follow. For example, a close-up is a cinematic/photographic convention; you can’t have a close-up, per se, in a stage play. Of course, with all of the advances in technology today we are seeing a great deal of video, live-streaming, and film in theatrical expressions, but high technology was not a convention of the *acto* when the form was first explored. When the Teatro Campesino performed outdoors at night, the only “technology” was provided by headlights. Indeed, the group was lucky if it had microphones. What the Teatro Campesino and other troupes had was *passion*, a message that was important to them and to their audience of (mostly) initiates—people who wanted to see and hear what these activists had to say, because it mattered to them as well. Many of the following conventions, taken from a commedia playbook, were enhanced by the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s commitment to social change. The mime troupe’s overriding goal was to educate and entertain, to somehow make didactic messages palatable through humor.

There are several types of comedy in the theatre (and life), and I see farce as the most universal form of comedy. First of all, farce is non-verbal. The first example of farce I always list in a lecture on comedy is the word “fart” because I know it will elicit laughter. You cannot pass gas in public without eliciting laughter. Scatological humor guarantees laughter from an observer,

but one must always keep in mind the intended audience and the venue. There are audiences that will roar with laughter and others that will suppress a laugh because of who just farted. Bodily functions are universal, and exposing our digestive systems in public reveals our common humanity. Coupled with the fart is the pratfall, another physical act that usually elicits laughter.

Physical humor where nobody really gets hurt, as in cartoons and puppet shows, can usually create laughter in an audience. In *commedia*, a slapstick was a common convention, a paddle-like prop that made a strong slapping sound when a character struck another character. Punch and Judy puppet plays are rife with, well, punches, delighting audiences. Sound effects are another universal aspect of physical comedy and are essential conventions in an *acto*. Drums or found objects such as tin cans filled with pebbles are portable sound machines that can be used to make a point, exaggerate a blow, or put an exclamation point on an action. Exaggerated props are also a part of physical humor. An enormous cigar, for example, can give the obnoxious character who is “smoking” it a ridiculous appearance, enhancing the comedy.

Coupled with physical humor are masks, theatrical conventions that are universal forms of giving a face to a character. We think of the Greek masks of tragedy and comedy—the one frowning, the other laughing—as symbols of Western European traditions, but there are many cultures that use masks to capture ideas and characters. The *commedia* masks were made of leather with exaggerated features such as large noses and other comical attributes that identified the characters’ personalities. Although I stated earlier that the masks were “frozen faces,” this does not mean that the mask should stay frozen. If used creatively through movement of the head, which takes practice, the mask can change expressions. Most importantly, the masks did not cover the actors’ entire faces but left their mouths uncovered so the actors could be heard when they spoke. This takes us to the verbal humor inherent in the *acto*. Recall goal number three, “satirize the opposition.”

Satire is distinct from farce, although the two conventions work very well together. Farce on its own does not attempt to change anything; only when a farcical act involves someone in power does it become satirical. Political satire criticizes an individual who represents an institution, such as the president of the United States. *Saturday Night Live* has for several decades made fun of political figures of all stripes and persuasions. What is essential if one is going to “satirize the opposition” is a very deep understanding of that enemy. This means having suffered at the hands of an enemy in power or doing your research about that enemy or enemies. Only then can you truly satirize the

opposition. In preparation for a realistic play, the actor researches his character's mind and his backstory (or creates one). In the *acto*, that character is based on someone real, not a fictional person. Once you know your enemy, you begin to construct an outline or template for how to "express what people are feeling" and, more specifically, how to "show or hint at a solution."

One of the most important aspects of the *acto* is the process of collective creation through improvisation. Before this process can begin, however, the members of the group must all be able to agree on the theme. If the theme is pro-life, for example, only people who are pro-life should participate in the collective, otherwise there will only be friction and confusion. I use the theme of pro-life as an example specifically because it is a conservative viewpoint; an *acto* can explore *any* issue or issues as long as the creators believe in and are passionate about that issue. However, these *actos* cannot be built on passion alone. You have to know your audience and know what the other side is thinking in order to ridicule his or her viewpoint, hence the need for thorough research.

Like the commedia sketches, the *acto* is not fully scripted but leaves room for the actors to improvise and interact with the audience. Because the actors are fully aware of audience responses as there is no fourth wall, they can react to audience interruptions either physically or verbally. The actors can "play with" the interlocutors as they discover what "works" and what does not. What definitely works in the *actos* is the use of stock characters, such as the *patrón*, the grower, who can be further identified by a pig-face mask or a sign around his neck. These visualizations of the grower as a pig always elicit laughter, especially from an audience of *campesinos* who delight in bringing the villain down to size as a pig. In like manner, a monkey mask could be used to characterize the boss's henchmen, who should also imitate primate movements and grunts. These were stock characters in the *actos*, similar to commedia stock characters, which were exaggerated examples of stereotypes the audience could readily identify. The villains were clearly contrasted with the humble farmworker, sometimes a Mexican recently arrived, looking for a job.

Another convention of the *acto* is the use of allegorical figures, which are, quite simply, ideas in costume. The serious student of theatre history will recall the medieval morality play *Everyman*, in which the central figure represents every man who is confronted by his own mortality. When he is told that he is going to die, he seeks help from allegorical characters such as Good Deeds and Beauty—ideas in costume—desperate for their help. The tale does

not end well for Everyman, but the costume designer has a great time with those allegories. Of course, the early *teatros* did not have designers of any kind, as I've discussed. The best example of the use of allegorical characters is found in one of the earliest Teatro Campesino *actos*, *La quinta temporada*, which should serve to illustrate and support all that I have discussed here.

A Quintessential Acto: *La quinta temporada*

I consider *La quinta temporada* (*The Fifth Season*) the quintessential *acto*. As is usual in the typical *acto*, it begins with a character running on stage to grab the audience's attention (presentational theatre). He is wearing a sign around his neck that reads "Campesino" and speaks directly to the audience:

Oh, hello—*quihubole!* My name is José. What else? And I'm looking for a job. . . You see, I just got in from Texas this morning and I need to send money back to my *familia*. (Valdez 29)

In this opening action, we find out who the character is, where he is from, and that he needs a job in order to send money to his family, ostensibly in Mexico. José is a Mexican Everyman, the humble *campesino* who is willing to do back-breaking labor, regardless of the pay. Into this scene walks the farm labor contractor, called a "Coyote" by farm workers because he is a trickster and a cheat who finds cheap laborers for the grower. With a sign around his neck identifying who he is, the Coyote introduces himself and offers José a job. The Coyote is followed by the grower, El Patrón, wearing a pig-face mask. The grower shouts, "Summer, get in here," and on walks an actor with a sign hanging on his chest that reads "Summer." "I am Summer," the character says, and when he turns to cross the stage we see that the back of his shirt is covered with fake money. Everybody laughs at this visualization of what the lush summer season means to the farm worker; the crops are translated visually into money.

As Summer passes, the farmworker grabs as many bills as he can off of his back, stuffing them into his back pockets. Following closely behind him, the Coyote takes the bills out of the farmworker's pockets and stuffs *his* back pockets. Right behind the Coyote is the Grower, taking the bills out of the Coyote's pockets. When Summer has passed, the farmworker is left with no money, the Coyote is counting his take, and the Grower is counting his large wad of bills.

This simple technique is repeated with Fall, again leaving the farmworker without money, when in walks deadly Winter, demanding money for groceries, heating bills, etc. Since there are no crops to pick in the winter, the Grower

and the Coyote leave for sunny vacations while Winter batters the hapless and helpless farmworker. But Spring arrives and convinces the farmworker to go on strike until the Grower signs a union contract. In a nod to the Christian morality plays, Spring serves as a symbol of renewed life, resurrection, and hope. Inspired by Spring, the farmworker refuses to pick the crops, and as Summer and Fall pass, with no workers to pick the crops, they leave with their backs covered with money. When Winter returns and begins to batter the Campesino, in walk three actors with signs that read “The Union,” “The Churches,” and “La Raza” (The People). The three stand together, protecting the farmworker against Winter’s onslaughts. In an intentional gesture, the woman who plays Spring returns as a nun, or another religious figure, embodying the support for the union from leaders of all faiths.

After taking a beating from Winter, the Grower has to give in and sign a union contract, against the pleas of the Coyote, who shouts: “They’re communists!” (39). When Winter begins to beat the Coyote by proclaiming him to be the “fifth season,” the latter reveals another sign under “Winter” that reads “Social Justice.” The Coyote is booted off-stage and the *acto* ends in victory for the farmworker and the union. A symbolic victory, to be sure, but an excellent example of how an *acto* can educate and entertain. To enhance the performance and get the audiences’ attention, the Teatro Campesino members always began and ended with *huelga* (strike) songs, building energy in the crowd. These songs were either original *corridos* (Mexican folk ballads) or new lyrics transposed onto a traditional melody, reflecting in song the unfolding action.

As can be seen from this example, the *acto* is most effective when it satirizes the opposition, bringing him down to size. Recalling Sigmund Freud’s oft-quoted treatise on jokes, the good doctor believed that “[b]y making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, [. . .] bears witness by his laughter” (103). This symbolic deflation may be just that, symbolic, a metaphor, but it clearly illustrates to the “third person,” the audience, that there is power in numbers. If all of the workers go on strike, the boss will have to sign a union contract. The use of allegorical figures is pure fun; audiences always delight in the seasons covered with money. Farmworkers remain among the lowest-paid workers in the US, a thoroughly marginalized and neglected segment of society. Through these early *actos*, farmworkers were, and still are, strengthened in their resolve, united in the generative release of communal laughter.

Conclusion: Why Create an *Acto* in Today's World?

As I hope this discussion has demonstrated, the *acto* can be a very effective tool for change—any change. The five goals remain foundational guides to achieving a successful *acto*. The conventions reflect the rawness and vibrancy of the period in which they were first created: two boards and a passion were all that the early *teatros* had at their disposal. Most importantly, the early *teatros* were part of a national Chicano movement in which students and other activists were fighting for their lives, demanding social justice on the streets, in the courts, the schools, the prisons, the workplace, their homes, etc. There is no Chicano movement today; there is social media for people who want to feel a part of a cause.⁶ The challenge to today's activists is to learn from the basics of the *acto* and to adapt to today's technologies. Ask any theatre artist why they do theatre, and I believe that their answer would be “because it is live, in front of an audience.” Ask anyone who wants to perform an *acto* why they want to do so and I would hope that the answer would be “because it is *necessary theatre*.” Go for it.

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Notes

¹ For more on the development of the Teatro Campesino, see Jorge A. Huerta, *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms*, Bilingual Press, 1982.

² Luis Valdez's *Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* is published in Jorge A. Huerta, *Necessary Theater: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience*, 1987, pp. 142-207.

³ For more on the San Francisco Mime Troupe, see R.G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years*, Ramparts Press, 1975, and *By Popular Demand: Plays and Other Works by the San Francisco Mime Troupe*, San Francisco Mime Troupe, 1980.

⁴ For more on commedia, see John Rudlin and Olly Crick, *Commedia dell'Arte: A Handbook for Troupers*, Routledge, 2001.

⁵ Luis Valdez, *Luis Valdez: Early Works: Actos*, Bernabe and Pensamiento Serpentino, Arte Público Press, 1990, pp. 6-120.

⁶ There is a very vibrant movement of Latina/o theaters called the Latino Theatre Commons, which is a national network of regional alliances and national events. See LatinoTheatreCommons.com.

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