

## Tradition and Experimentation: Mexico City Theatre, Summer 1989

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An opportunity to attend plays on a daily basis for a relatively short period of time last summer in Mexico City provided ample evidence that high-quality performances abound in the Mexican capital.<sup>1</sup> The variety of offerings included many playwrights from throughout the Spanish-speaking world and translations from virtually everywhere that ranged from Shakespeare's *Coriolano* to a satire reflecting a certain smallness of the theatrical or cinematographic world, *Abuelita de Batman*; from Lope de Vega to Luis Basurto; from Strindberg and Sartre to Leñero and Carballido; from Alarcón and Tirso de Molina to Alejandro Jodorowsky; from Maeterlinck to Marguerite Yourcenar as adapted and interpreted by director Jesusa Rodríguez. Long-established plays were given sometimes startlingly experimental direction and contemporary Mexican playwrights continue to find fresh realistic approaches to plays of social criticism. This study presents some overview observations on the state of the art, along with brief analyses of the plays I attended.

While one must always be careful about generalizing from a relatively limited number of experiences or samples, I think my virtual immersion in theatre activity provided me with reliable perceptions of the Mexico City theatre scene. Interviewing many actors as well as directors and playwrights proved to be most informative and contributed to a deeper understanding of the goals and practices of those involved in the production of plays.

Especially interesting to me were certain theatre characteristics that remained similar and others that had evolved since comparable theatregoing experiences in Mexico City had been recorded in *LATR* by Sharon Magnarelli (Fall 1983), Kirsten Nigro (Spring 1985), and by Ronald Burgess (Fall 1985).

Magnarelli was impressed by a theatrical self-consciousness in many of the plays she saw, concluding that "it would appear that theatre no longer strives to present itself as life but rather recognizes itself as art, literature, repetition, mask" (74). Based on the plays I saw, this tendency appears to have become more prevalent. Whereas a number of the plays she saw were in this self-consciously artistic category, almost all of the plays I describe below were

self-referential or overtly stylized in some fashion. Techniques included Pirandellian conventions, direct address to the audience, dance, music, mask, choreographed movements of choruses, and imaginative set designs and lighting. Also significant in this regard is that modern dance, and to a lesser extent performance art such as *Postales* discussed below,<sup>2</sup> seem to be flourishing and very popular. One aspect of Magnarelli's experience that I am pleased to say was different from mine is that most plays I saw were quite well attended, some with full houses, whereas in 1983 she lamented that the public seemed to be providing little support (74).

Although I made no attempt to systematically inquire about federal or municipal support for theatre, my general impression is that conditions for playwrights, directors and actors have improved from those described by Burgess in 1985. He cited Willebaldo López's "Para un teatro semiprofesional en D.F.," in which López decries the lack of facilities for small theatre groups and stresses the need for semiprofessional theatre (98). I cannot compare precisely between 1985 and 1989, but I attended what could be called backroom or upstairs theatres; neighborhood theatre endeavors and small festivals were plentiful. One widely publicized benefit concert filled approximately two thirds of the enormous Auditorio Nacional: "Obertura, Festival de Solidaridad Artística con el Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena." This was an extravaganza of many popular musicians, actors and writers raising money for the theatre group. Elena Poniatowska read a lengthy statement stressing the important accomplishments of LTCI in retaining indigenous culture; she and Emilio Carballido, Jesusa Rodríguez and Joseph Papp were included in a list of featured supporters.

It is somewhat ironic that this outpouring of support for theatre that deals with the conditions of rural life took place in an urban setting. The irony is intensified by the absence of Mexican theatre that addresses the conditions of urban life, which was pointed out by Guillermo Schmidhuber in 1985. The only exception that I saw to that absence was some of the satirical criticism in Jodorowsky's *El juego que todos jugamos* and, much more notable in terms of city life (including poverty, crime, drugs and housing), Tomás Urtusástegui's powerful *Cupo limitado*. Nigro was struck by the lack of this theme on stage while noting its more thorough attention in fiction (125). A relevant observation by Nigro as an urban theatregoer was the difficulty she experienced with transportation to theatres spread throughout the city, as compared to a theatre district in New York (126).<sup>3</sup>

If one were to have any doubts about Mexico City as a showcase for world theatre, those doubts would be quickly dispelled by noting the wide variety of opportunities for international drama in any week's *Tiempo Libre*. The presentation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *El desperfecto* was successful commercial theatre (Teatro de los Insurgentes), enjoyed the draw of big-name actors like Ignacio López Tarso, and was hilarious. The humor, however, as one might assume with Dürrenmatt, became increasingly dark in this play

about retired jurists who entertain themselves with their private "trial" of some unsuspecting guest in a judge's home. The parlor game turns into a perverse peeling away of the defenses of the guest on trial and, by implication, of most people who have ever succeeded or advanced at another's expense. The two acts of this play are set before and after dinner with the characters drinking heavily throughout. The surface humor of the second act was heightened by the drunken stupor of most of the characters (accomplished, however, with understandable diction by the seasoned actors), but the vicious judging and condemnation accumulated until the darker absurd humor culminated in the "guest's" suicide.

Another somber European play, but without the satirical levity of *El desperfecto*, was Strindberg's *La danza de la muerte*, presented in one of several small theatres behind the Auditorio Nacional. Carlos Roces and Salvador Flores collaborated on this new translation which was directed by the latter, who told me that earlier Spanish translations seemed too stiff to him. Flores pointed out that this was the third Strindberg play to be performed in Mexico City in recent months. *La danza* explores the illusory tranquility of a marriage that in reality is a morbid dance of death rather than a celebration of life. To paraphrase the words of Strindberg, hatred plus boredom make up a union between two prostitutions that comprise a supposed virtue called matrimony. Director Flores encased three sides of a thrust stage in a curtain of gauze giving a striking dream-like effect to the action with the help of minimal lighting, an effect that became increasingly nightmarish as the couple reveal more and more of their nightmare of a marriage. The translucent gauze, while often rather eerie, also added a distancing effect that resulted in a heightened awareness of the fourth-wall sensation bordering on voyeurism: the audience's peering into the lives of the "people" on stage as they struggle with the truths of each other and the self that have been so destructive.

Two additional international texts that were both stylized and Mexicanized were *Los rubios*, based on a text attributed to Lope de Vega, and Shakespeare's *Coriolano*. *Coriolano*, presented at the Teatro Isabela Corona next to the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, depended nearly as much on choreography as it did on acting. The language and emotions of the plebes were intensified by frenetic body movement. On the mostly bare split-level stage, there was frequent motion by the people and guards before, during and after the important speeches. Collective arm waving heightened the moments of a mob reacting to speakers promoting radical political or social change. When the mob became too unruly, "dogs" (three naked male actors), straining furiously at their leashes, were brought out to bring them under control. Stylized rowing motions moved a whole group of men across stage in an imaginary boat. Messengers ran back and forth, appearing to traverse great distances between cities, and a large group of slaves mimed labor in a mine to the off-stage sounds of hammering. These kinds of physical images on stage produced strong metaphors of the oppression of dominated people.

The assistant director of *Coriolano*, Miguel Rivera, described the directorial work and adaptation as Shakespeare presented through a Mexican filter with a Brechtian emphasis on the social problems which he considered completely relevant to Mexico in 1989: the process of democratization, the evolving position of the PRI in government, and the dynamics between the governed and the governors of any society. He stressed that "Tú como pueblo eres co-responsable" was a central message of this production.

The most striking effect of Rivera's Mexican filter was the portrayal of Coriolano's death as an Aztec ritual. Once again with considerable stylized movement (or, as Rivera said, with "referencia plástica que incluye la cultura mesoamericana"), Coriolano is placed on a large sacrificial stone and his heart is ripped out of his chest by priests in ceremonial Aztec garments. Music on pre-Hispanic instruments and dramatic lighting changes intensifies the effect of the sacrifice. The quick yet smoothly accomplished transformation to a Catholic burial scene complete with Gregorian chant was a stunning finale that bridged centuries of Mexican ritualistic cultural expression; but the juxtaposition of the two religious rituals also mirrored the sudden (and not so smoothly accomplished) change in religion forced on the Indians by their European conquerors.

The other stylized and Mexicanized production was *Los rubios*, a popular dance performed at carnival time in Juxtaluaca in the Mixteca Baja in Oaxaca dating probably from the sixteenth century. The story, performed through dance and chant by actors wearing masks, deals with the abuse of the Indian cattle herders by "los rubios," who are the light skinned Spanish owners of the cattle. One dramatic incident that emphasized this abuse is a stylized sex scene in which a Spaniard coerces a woman into intercourse, during which the woman turns her masked face to the audience. The fixed expression of the mask, which cannot change to reveal her emotion, mirrors, in this instance, the passive faces the dominated learn to "wear" for their dominators. The varied folk dances and songs reflect the daily life and customs evolving around the cattle herding. *Los rubios*, a production at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, borrows plot content, including its basic conflict, from Lope de Vega's *La estrella de Sevilla*, in which a man ordered to kill a friend is torn between love and duty. The emphasis in this play is placed on the abuse of the powerless by the wealthy and powerful, a timeless Mexican theme. As director Rodolfo Valencia said in his program notes, "No se trata de ver una parte, una danza popular, y por otra un texto clásico, sino la integración de ambos: danzar el drama del poder y encontrar su validez, si la tiene, con referencia a nuestra realidad histórica y contemporánea."

Turning now to Mexican plays, Luis Basurto directed his *El candidato de Dios* at the Teatro Reforma and also attended most performances. Veteran actor Aaron Hernán brought appropriate levels of vulnerability, strength and commitment to the role of John Paul I who in the play is entangled in a web of political intrigue within the Vatican. The questions of radical reforms and

more democracy in church affairs comprised the surface-level antagonism between the Pope and his political adversaries while the underlying tension was created with the suspicion that plots were being made against the Pope's life. As playwright, Basurto succeeded in making the Pope a human character complete with doubts and dreams. As director, Basurto made frequent use of both contemporary and baroque music in addition to a loud, distorted cacophony for such moments as those when the Pope's life was in danger. In an interview after the play, Basurto said he was planning a New York production for this play.

*Doña Macabra* by Hugo Argüelles provided another opportunity to view successful commercial theatre with excellent acting. Carmen Montejo as Doña Macabra and María Teresa Rivas as Demetria, la soldadera, established a delightful rapport between their characters, two eccentrics who since the revolution have kept in their basement the remains of Doña Macabra's long-dead husband. Various visiting relatives and a kind of latter-day Frankenstein, who is a boarder in Doña Macabra's house, provide for ample Mexican black humor; but more importantly, they function as dramatic foils for the entertaining repartee by the two main characters, who were very entertaining thanks to the fine work of Montejo and Rivas at the Teatro Hidalgo.

Emilio Carballido and Vicente Leñero were the Mexican playwrights most in evidence during my stay in Mexico City. At this time, the former's *Rosa de dos aromas* was continuing a long run but with a cast different from the one that established the popularity of this play. Carballido uses farcical frame to slowly develop serious social commentary. The doubleness of the title reflects the dramatic situation--two women are married to the same man. They discover this fact after the man is jailed and then, since they are forced to solve various problems without a man's help, gradually become more independent, able to think for themselves and decide that they do not need a man to dominate their lives. Carballido's social criticism here is serious, but its seriousness is a subtext embedded within the clever humor of both the dramatic situation and the dialogue.

Carballido's *Nora* was presented together with Héctor Azar's *La appassionata* as a final project by acting students of the Escuela de Arte Teatral. *Nora* again deals with the liberation of women. In this plot a traditional husband cannot accept the fact that his wife has to work to help the family. The student actors effectively burlesqued the street behavior of young machos in this basically serious and realistic play. Gaudy costumes for La Calavera Catrina and El Ángel Nuncio complemented a camped-up directing approach to the plañideras enlistadas and the other characters in Azar's playful treatment of a popular Mexican tradition. Both plays were performed with notable energy and provided an evening of good and, certainly, varied theatre.

*El encanto*, an interesting play by Elena Garro, was burdened by sloppy management of the house, noise in the hall and mediocre acting in a neighborhood theatre, Teatro del Pueblo. The use of music and slides was

supposed to enhance the mythical aspects of this play, but it was unfortunately one of those nights in a theatre when one must strain to imagine the author's original text since the performance detracts from, rather than develops, the text's potential.

The performance of *Me enseñaste a querer*, directed by author Adam Guevara, was also somewhat unsatisfying. At the Teatro Benito Juárez, this play was well performed, but the writer attempted far too many subplots and theatrical devices in this story of family dissension, political dissent, the generation gap and the 1968 civil unrest that culminated in the shooting of students by soldiers in Mexico City. I enjoyed the Pirandellian twists, but Guevara overloaded his play with frequent meta-references to plot and characters, and he placed too much importance on flashbacks to pop culture of the 60s and 70s, as if suddenly bringing "Rock Around the Clock" and "Hey, Jude" into his play would guarantee successful theatricality. Guevara's play became pretentious by trying too hard to be serious, intellectual theatre and by trying to incorporate too many stylized techniques at the same time.

Much lighter fare, but ultimately more successful as theatre and as social satire, was the Pirandellian farce by Juan José Arreola, *Tercera llamada . . . tercera o empezamos sin usted*. (The title refers to the Mexican theatre custom of announcing three calls, or warnings, to the audience that the play will begin soon; the final one is just before the curtain.) The play was performed in the "Foro Gandhi" of the Librería Gandhi, actually just a large room in the second level of this important bookstore. The five separate scenes of this play range from a skit of a cuckolded Adam in a Garden of Eden to skits of bullfighting and of inadequate medical care, all with frequent references to theatre, acting and the audience. Values and mores are questioned, culminating in a scene of two-liter plastic soft drink containers multiplying and overwhelming the characters, a ludicrous but effective visual metaphor for the idea that everything in modern society is disposable. After the performance, director Leopoldo Basurto (nephew of Luis) told me his goal was to try to bring particularly Mexican idiosyncracies to the tradition of the theatre of the absurd.

Alejandro Jodorowsky's long-running *El juego que todos jugamos* played to a full house and showed no sign of diminishing popularity. There are six actors in the cast with several different casts in rotation. The script scarcely leaves any social issue untouched, and the very recent political events portrayed indicated frequent up-dating of material. The messages became too preachy in the second act for some, but for me the high quality and energetic acting made for good theatre.

*iCrísmame la cabeza . . . vida!*, presented on the UNAM campus, appeared to be the result of some kind of experiment for drama students. The acting, direction and writing would have benefited from lessons from *Tercera llamada* and *El juego* in this largely forgettable attempt to say something about Mexican society in symbolic or absurd terms. The use of a simultaneous translation into Náhuatl was its only significant feature.

More successful experimental theatre, or performance art, was *Postales* at the Casa del Lago at Chapultepec Park. Created and acted by Vera Larrosa and Elena de Haro, this was a kind of danced readers' theatre of sixteen poems. For each poem a painted curtain was pulled across stage as a *postal* backdrop. A cellist, who was the third performer, played various folk instruments, including pots and pans.

Bruno Bert's expressionistic interpretation of *El cantar de los cantares* can also be described as performance art. The erotic songs of joy and fulfillment from the Bible were juxtaposed with songs reflecting the anguish and solitude of those who search for but do not find fulfillment. A chorus of "Los que son sin Ser" supported the four main characters (or symbols) of *Él que busca a Dios, Él que habla como Poe, Él que recuerda a Sade and La que perdió la razón*. As can be imagined by these names, the songs that are expressions of desperation dominated those of joy; excesses and unfulfilled desires prevailed in this presentation of humankind's failed quest for happiness.

My own quest for that rare occasion of theatre magic, which one hopes for frequently but seldom truly expects, was gratified twice--once in a brilliant format of grandiose spectacle and once in an equally brilliant reductionist form that conveyed the idea of the limitations of humanity. The first was an adaptation by the highly acclaimed director Jesusa Rodríguez of two works by Marguerite Yourcenar, *Quien no tiene su minotauro* and *Fuegos*. Rodríguez's title was *Yourcenar o cada quien su Marguerite: Divertimiento sagrado*. The set and lighting were by Carlos Trejo, in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz at UNAM, the dimensions of which were important to the production: a stage of approximately twenty square yards with a four-story tall vertical space and an L-shaped audience space mainly on the ground floor with additional seating in a narrow L-shaped balcony. Three musicians were on a third-level balcony: double bass, trombone, and bassoon, each identified with, respectively, the main characters for Teseo, Ariadna and Fedra. A pool of water approximately two by four yards and six inches deep was located center right. Scattered around the pool and stage, but piled up mainly along the back wall and in the corner opposite the L-shaped seating area were eighty tons of rocks. They were placed so that actors could climb them to reach the second-level balcony area.

The Rodríguez adaptation was the story of Fedra and Ariadna, of Teseo and the Minotauro; but more primarily the history of love, loneliness, passion, friendship and jealousy. Despite the fascinating set and the spectacular actions that occurred there, the physical phenomena remained, appropriately, secondary to the human emotional drama. The former certainly were of vital importance to the success of the latter, but the show's first priority was the human drama even though it was splendidly and very theatrically enhanced by ingenious stage properties and special effects. The primary human emotions were set in the primordial physical elements of earth (rocks), water, fire and air (emphasized by the use of the four stories of space). The first sound heard

in the play, during a blackout, was by an actor hanging from a rope some thirty feet in the air. Torches were used on occasion and, at one moment when the dialogue focussed on the element of fire, a flammable mixture was poured down sheet metal creating a moving wall of fire.

The stones became a vital part of the action. In a love scene between Teseo and Fedra on a bed of smaller rocks, before the moment of climax, the actors separated and Teseo moved one small rock to create an opening into which he inserted his entire arm until both actors reached orgasm even though no longer touching one another. When Teseo was preparing to seek out the Minotauro in the labyrinth, he disappeared into--not behind--the pile of boulders in the corner. His "exit" from the labyrinth, coming forth as a changed person because of new experiences, is a birth scene, his head emerging first between the legs of Fedra as she reclined against the stones and then the rest of his body slowly writhing its way out of the rocks.

A key element that kept the play focussed on the human drama, despite the force of the stunning physical images, was the role that director Rodríguez gave herself, that of "una viajera" who functioned as a kind of Brechtian commentator on the action. The viajera's costume was a woman's business suit in contrast to the main characters who were minimally draped in lengths of cloth and a chorus of "víctimas" who were in rags. The distancing effect of the viajera included understatement and disarming irony in observations such as "Le cuesta mucho no creer en la amistad de los puercos" and "Lo que sigue es quizás menos importante de lo que creen." After judging the motivation of certain actions she just witnessed, she bent down, looked at the audience from between her legs and calmly declared, "Pero ustedes lo verán distinto."

The differences between *Yourcenar* and the second of the two best plays serve as reminders of the varieties of potential for set design and the use of space on stage. Although the theatre was fairly small for *Yourcenar*, the vision of the world of human beings was immense, aided by the set, the music and the use of the four-story column of space. By comparison, *Cupo limitado*, by Tomás Urtusástegui, lives up to its title while also presenting broad fundamental truths about contemporary Mexico and Mexicans. The title is a play on words; it is an expression commonly used in theatre listings or ads to announce that seating is limited. The entire play, with its eight member cast, takes place in a crowded elevator stuck between floors. Since the characters can barely move, there is no action in the physical sense of the word. Whereas the *topos* is a common one in drama, that of people thrown together unexpectedly and having to put up with one another, the image became progressively more metaphorical: all humans are stuck on a crowded, polluted world where life is endangered. The set consisted of just an elevator cage, and the theatre itself happened to be very small--indeed, "cupo limitado." The size of the theatre was an important part of the theatrical experience; the seating area was oblong, about eighteen feet by eighty, with the elevator in the center, and therefore audience on two sides. This play could be and merits being



performed for larger audiences, but one result of the small performance space was a forceful and complementary sense of claustrophobia. In a conversation after the play, the actors insisted that the small theatre was obligatory for the desired effect.

Urtusástegui, a physician who has turned to playwriting, created eight fully believable but basically motionless characters with his talent for writing dialogue. The characters are Abuela, Niña (her granddaughter), Sirvienta, a Pareja Joven, Beata, Secretaria and Viejo, who has a respiratory illness. The conflicts that arise are personal, national and universal as the characters annoy each other, complain about housing and national policies, and lament various particular or general aspects of the human condition. The language is always lively and as diverse as the characters. In the first half of the play, there is considerable humor; the smart aleck Joven's language amuses his girlfriend, offends everyone else and proves Urtusástegui's finely tuned ear for dialogue (one suspects that the playwright has eavesdropped on street conversations and/or has teen-age sons). As might be expected, a certain grotesque absurdity results from such confined circumstances: the granddaughter has to urinate, a woman becomes ill and vomits, and the old man is continually coughing. However, woven into the above problems--and they increase in importance as time passes in the elevator--are different moral approaches to the characters' lifestyles and values.

The following review, or endorsement, by Vicente Leñero was printed in the program:

Eficaz, cruel en sus historias, definitivamente áspero y definitivamente irónico, Tomás Urtusástegui vuelve a sorprendernos con esta nueva pieza que extrema características estridentes de un teatro que no está hecho para complacer al espectador sino para agitarlo . . . Intrincada situación-límite, despiadado desarrollo de una historia que está en peligro de suceder siempre que nos subimos a un elevador, el relato que esta puesta en escena nos plantea, agrega al efervescente teatro mexicano de nuestros días una buena dosis de ironía negra, una refrescante cucharadita de estupor.

*Yourcenar* and *Cupo limitado* will remain with me as exemplary theatre experiences and as standards for excellence. *Yourcenar* used classical tradition and theme for basic dramatic conflict and as a point of departure toward experimental set design which, as one proof of its success, could be both expressionistic, as a result of the director's interpretation, and realistic, as called for by the action of any given moment. *Cupo limitado* contained traditional social criticism, but delivered it with superior dialogic exchange with absurdist situational and verbal humor, mainly in the first act. The realistic dialogue and problems discussed by the characters made their crises both within the elevator and outside of it very real while the central metaphor grew

progressively more stylized and intense. Several features of these two excellent productions were indicative of much of what I saw throughout the city: interesting experimentation with theatrical structure that was often based on classical or traditional dramatic content.

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## Notes

1. I wish to express my gratitude to two sources that made this study possible: the Southern Arkansas University Research Committee and the NEH Summer Institute, "The Encounter of Cultures: Sixteenth-Century Mexico," organized by the University of Maryland Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

2. One performance of dance theatre that I saw in Oaxaca was an interpretation of a Zapotec legend, *Los Vinnigulasa*, that included masks, music and a traditional castillo of fireworks. Nine musicians provided a variety of primordial sounds as the dancers enacted humankind's evolution from the roots of trees, the development of animals, a cataclysm foretelling the arrival of men of iron who would destroy the Indians' lives, and their transformation into fish to escape the destruction. Elaborate masks were worn by the dancers to portray the animals and fish.

3. Since I experienced relatively few problems in this regard, some practical suggestions for theatregoers without a car are in order. First, *Tiempo Libre* is a must, which has a separate theatre section with all the data necessary for any performance; it is available at the many newspaper stands. Transportation certainly requires some careful planning, but with a city map, ample time and the subway (plus taxi as necessary), one can manage the sprawling metropolis. To solve the ambiguity of travel time (and to verify the data in *Tiempo Libre*, for I did encounter some errors), I would recommend calling in advance to confirm the performance, curtain time, availability of tickets, and to reserve a seat, if possible. Although most theatres did not accept telephone reservations, they sometimes sold tickets up to a week in advance at the ticket office. From Friday to Sunday I sometimes saw two plays in one evening because there are often early and late performances on weekends. A habit that proved very useful was to leave early enough to have dinner *after* locating the theatre and buying a ticket; on more than one occasion, that prevented my missing a first act when there were delays due to transportation problems or ignorance of the city. An early departure from downtown would also, perhaps, avoid the rush-hour conditions in the Metro, and the easy to use albeit often crowded subway can make the difference between a 20-minute trip and an hour or two trip in traffic. (A tall gringo theatrically wedged into a packed subway car provided many opportunities for delightful conversations ranging from theatre and literature to oranges and transportation with the ever-friendly Mexicans eager to converse with a Spanish-speaking visitor.) Finally, and most importantly, I recommend seeking out opportunities to chat with actors and directors. After noticing how interested they usually were in a discussion with a North American professor interested in Mexican theatre, I routinely made some inquiry about directing or actors' experience etc., and that proved more often than not to open doors to fascinating conversations and contacts for the future.

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