

The Washington Post

Wednesday, October 31, 2001

'After Dark': Love Is Funny That Way

BY DOLORES WHISKEYMAN
Special to *The Washington Post*

Love is in the details: the blue underpants, the cruise that wasn't taken, that "falling asleep/kissing thing," that embarrassing incident with the spaghetti.

That's the sweet homily at the heart of the raunchy but hilarious *After Dark*, presented by Actors' Theatre of Washington at the Playbill Café.

Steve Kluger's comedy concerns the coming together—and coming apart—of a gay couple. Act 1 can best be described as the prologue to love—that cat-and-mouse game we call courtship, as hunky Craig (Louis Cupp) fixes his eye on uptight Ryan (Jeffrey Johnson) late one night in a Los Angeles diner. Act 2 is its epilogue, as Craig and Ryan look back on a five-year love affair gone sour.

It's a predictable story line that Kluger pursues with relentless wit. As soon as we see these two—Ryan in his pressed blue shirt and tie, Craig in his T-shirt and tight jeans—we know exactly where this story is going to go. The fun is in watching it go there.

Ryan is a lawyer who regrets giving up his literary ambitions; Craig is a Ph.D. working as a Disneyland dwarf. One look at Ryan and he has one thing on his mind—and it doesn't involve much conversation. But Ryan, longing for a romance, resists Craig's advances—at first.

Johnson brings a precise comic timing to the mix. At one point, Cupp leans into him, rubbing his shoulders and arms from behind and purring, "Can't you feel the sexual tension?" There's a long pause as Ryan, clearly enjoying the sensation, considers the question. "No," he finally replies.

Kluger's script is stuffed with such moments, and director Charles Boyington takes full advantage of every opportunity to pump up the comedy. The funniest sequence involves Craig giving Ryan pointers on pickup techniques.

"Okay," he says, "show me your bar pose." Ryan poses, and Craig shakes his head.

"You look like a serial killer."



Craig (Louis Cupp, left) and Ryan (Jeffrey Johnson) don't always see eye to eye during the five-year affair that's at the heart of Steve Kluger's comedy.

And it goes from there, progressively sillier. Act 2 holds a few more surprises than Act 1—some unexpected changes occur in the lives of his characters, and Kluger finds moments of pathos amid the lunacy. But despite his efforts to sound the right political notes, *After Dark* is really just a good-natured celebration of human foibles, poking fun at the lusty and lovesick.

After Dark, by Steve Kluger. Directed by Charles Boyington. Set, Christie Kelly; lighting, Marianne Meadows; sound, Mark Anduss; costumes, Grant Kevin Lane. Approximately two hours. At the Playbill Café, 1409 14th St. N.W., through Dec. 22. Call (202) 319-1919.

November 2-8, 2001

T H E A T E R

Court and Spark



Opposition Party: Ryan and Craig revel in their conflicting emotions.

By Bob Mondello

After Dark

By Steve Kluger

Directed by Charlie Boyington

At 1409 Playbill Café to Dec. 22

Declarations of sexual orientation are rarely as crowd-pleasing as the one devised by Actors' Theatre of Washington for its unofficial coming-out party. The troupe acquired new management over the summer and is beginning its out-of-the-closet existence as the area's only "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender theatre company" with a corker of a romantic comedy.

The story of two 30-something guppies who meet cute and cruise cuter in a Los Angeles diner a few nights before Christmas, the play is undeniably funny from the moment Craig pops by with some tiramisù-flavored condoms in his pocket and bumps into Ryan.

The two seem worlds apart at first. Ryan (Jeffrey Johnson) is a buttoned-down lawyer who reveres Ethel Merman and mostly wants to be left alone. Craig (Louis Cupp) is more outgoing, a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of guy when he's out of his workday costume as a Disney dwarf—"I'm Bashful," he says; "Coulda fooled me," replies Ryan—and is a major sports nut.

If you subscribe to the "opposites attract" theory of romance, they're clearly made for each other, but on first meeting, they're just opposites in opposition. Author Steve Kluger gives them one-liners of the "I got fired from Disneyland for blowing Dopey" variety and keeps things buoyant and upbeat for all of the first act and a goodly portion of the second. Questions of HIV status can't be finessed quite so blithely, however—but by the time Kluger brings them up, the audience has laughed enough to be willing to cut him a little slack.

That's partly because of the attractive acting by two quick-witted, well-matched performers who make the play's take on dating rituals funny enough to appeal to crowds of nearly any persuasion. As Ryan, Johnson suggests that bitchy reticence can be a point of style, snapping comebacks with a self-protective but somehow plaintive flair, and Cupp (who looks startlingly like singer Chris Isaak in profile) makes Craig his ideal foil, unself-consciously sexy and almost annoyingly relaxed even when matching Ryan quip for quip.

Director Charlie Boyington maintains a brisk pace throughout, giving the evening a professional enough gloss that you have to say the show has serious commercial potential if it can ever be pried out of its intimate theatre behind the popular 1409 Playbill Café, an actors' hangout that actively encourages patrons to take drinks back to their seats. Not that the laughter needs much lubrication.



October 26, 2001

ATW'S SEASON SETS OFF IN GOOD DIRECTION

Cupp and Johnson Deliver Emotional Performances 'After Dark'

In Steve Kluger's *After Dark*, two gay men meet at 3:00 a.m. in a lonely L.A. diner five days before Christmas. It is the early '90s. Ryan, a smug and unlikable attorney, is guzzling coffee and working on a motion. On his way home from the bars, cute and slutty Craig stops for coffee too. Shamelessly, Craig hits on the very resistant Ryan, instigating a verbal seduction that lasts throughout the first act. But why does Craig want this constipated professional? Maybe it's the challenge, or perhaps he needs a place to live? It's not immediately revealed.

Ryan's aversion to Craig isn't based on his sleeping around or that his last job was playing *Bashful* at Disneyland. Simply, Ryan is discouraged because Craig is not familiar with Ethel Merman, an obsession for Ryan. Through fast, funny and sometimes prickly, trivia-filled banter, Ryan begins to learn that Craig knows plenty about his other obsessions—athletes and the law—and he begins to get interested.

In Act II, Ryan and Craig are reunited at the same place five years later. The reunion shows two characters who both have changed and share a history that's not all good.

As Ryan, Jeffrey Johnson oozes a superficial hubris masking loneliness and a need to connect. He's terrific. Again and again, he

rattles off lines like "It's inconceivable that you've never heard of Ethel Merman" with feeling and conviction, and that can't be easy. He's wonderfully creepy as he prompts ex-tight end Craig to regale him with tales of Kent State locker room shenanigans.



Craig (Louis Cupp, left) and Ryan (Jeffrey Johnson) get closer 'After Dark'

As Craig, a searching sexual adventurer, Louis Cupp is equally captivating. Beneath Craig's slick Lothario shtick hides a sensitive soul, and Cupp nails it. With sincerity and utter unselfconsciousness, he demands certain rights because "for four years and two months, I kissed your perineum."

In a fantastically poignant moment, Craig pays tribute to all

of his gay heroes, the openly gay men of San Francisco, many of whom died of AIDS. It's here that Cupp taps a range of emotion that the script doesn't call for anywhere else. Both Johnson and Cupp have excellent timing and handle the play's wordy dialog with apparent ease.

Presented by the Actors Theatre of Washington, *After Dark* is performed in a small theatre adjacent to the Playbill Café. The space is cozy and functional. The occasional clanging of dishes from the café's kitchen enhances the production, as it is set in a diner. Christy Kelly's set feels real, especially since it's hard to distinguish where the Playbill Café ends and the set begins.

The very low stage holds a high table for two, a coffee bar, and a lot of authentically tacky Christmas decorations—plastic Santa faces of varied complexion and dozens of holiday greeting cards festoon the tiny diner's brick walls. Audibly, Elvis warbling his brand of carols completes the scene.

After Dark is more than just one thing. It's love in the time of protease inhibitors. It is a funny gay play chock full of gay quips. ("With a butt pirate in the White House, there'd be a new first lady every week.") Ultimately, it's about love and connecting. And it is definitely worth seeing.

—Patrick Folliard



● Potomac Stages Pick of the Week ●



After Dark

After Dark

November 8–December 22, 2002

Running time 2 hours 5 minutes

By Brad Hathaway

Gay theater, like any theater, must be judged not on how gay it is but on how good it is—as theater. Here's a play that works because its two characters are well defined, interesting people about whom the audience comes to care, who face important choices and struggle with them in very human ways. It's about being gay, but it's more about being human. It is couched in explicit language but not much explicit action and no nudity—the skin that is exposed is all above the waist.

Storyline: Two gay men meet in a coffee shop at 3:20 a.m., five days before Christmas. They flirt, connect and a relationship is born. Five years later—at 3:20 a.m., five days before Christmas and in the same coffee shop—they reconnect, after having spent most of the intervening years together. Though they have separated, each would like to re-ignite that special relationship.

Steve Kluger's script is completely devoid of artifice, which is a fabulous attribute when creating a light romance with a high heart-tugging quotient. Yes, there is an abundance of lightly humorous banter, especially early in the development of the relationship. But there is also a deepening emotional involvement illustrated by the details these characters share with each other (or—when things are strained—throw at each other.) There are as many lines which draw knowing nods and approving murmurs from the audience as those that draw a laugh. Comedy? Yes. But it is a positive, affirmative comedy. Not a put-down in the bunch.

The two-man cast is terrific. Peter Wylie has compiled quite a resume recently in the Potomac Region. He was Oscar Wilde's last paramour at Rep Stage, Molière's Clitandre at Catalyst and a number of different characters at Virginia's Clark Street and Maryland's Olney Theatre. Here he is charming and touching as the attorney with something missing in his life. Michael Francis O'Connor, who is a newer member of our theater community, is earthier and more audacious in his come-on but reveals more vulnerability as the man on the make who initiates their byplay.

The back room of the 1409 Playbill Café isn't an easy space to stage a play, but the design team under director Charles Boyington pulls it off handsomely here. The entire space becomes a small coffee shop decorated with plastic Santas and soap-on-mirror holiday greetings. The gay-ness of the space is established through the mixing of male-oriented pictures among the Christmas cards and religious art.

"After Dark", by Steve Kluger. Directed by Charles Boyington. Design: Grant Kevin Lane (costumes) Marianne Meadows (lights), Mark Anduss (sound). Cast: Peter Wylie, Michael Francis O'Connor. At the Playbill Café, 1409 14th St. N.W., through Dec. 22.



After Dark Redux

The Actor's Theatre of Washington

<http://www.atwdc.org/>

Review by Rich See

The Actor's Theatre of Washington kicks off its 2002-2003 season with a remount of last year's wildly popular romantic comedy by Steve Kluger, *After Dark*. Set in the wee hours of the morning at an L.A. diner five days before Christmas, this boy-meets-boy love story is a sweet holiday treat, especially in its performance space at the 1409 Playbill Café. The small black box, filled with Christmas decorations, offers a theatrical intimacy that few venues can beat.

As the story opens, angst-filled lawyer Ryan comes into the diner for a cup of coffee and to mull over an impending motion. Effervescent and seemingly wild boy Craig soon enters for a cup of java as well. As soon as he notices Ryan, Craig begins enticing the attorney into a date--or at the very least a one-night stand. What commences is a dialogue-filled comedy of witty repartee that slowly reveals each man's fears, hopes, and inner longings.

Act Two is set five years later, to the day. After that first Christmas encounter, the two became inseparable and began a four-and-a-half year romance, until Ryan--angst filled to the last--screwed up and cheated on Craig. And Craig, hurt and angry, left their home before an apology or explanation could be given. Now each has returned to the diner in the hopes of running into the other on this, the anniversary of their first meeting.

Director Charles Boyington has remounted *After Dark* with a great deal of attention to recreating its previous incarnation. He's added just a few little changes as far as staging and music go, while keeping everything else--from the stage to the look of the actors--the same. The result makes for an experience that is kind of like visiting old friends and watching the interplay between them. While a greater amount of change might have been nice, the familiarity of this production simply adds to its overall charm.

Peter Wylie as Ryan and Michael Francis O'Connor as Craig heat up the stage as the men who fall in love. They seem to be enjoying playing the parts as much as the audience is enjoying watching them perform. For gay audiences, the play offers some wonderful campy dialogue and Ethel Merman references, while straight audience members get to see gay characters who are not tragic, stereotyped, or otherwise one-dimensional.

This year instead of watching a holiday movie, again, go see *After Dark*—again! You'll be captivated by its simple and understated elegance.

For information about The Actor's Theatre of Washington and their season, visit the web site at <http://www.atwdc.org/>

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Editors Review Corner

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On Stage -

AFTER DARK



Our Mini Review:

Milan:



Michael:

A fun romantic comedy that captures the life of two guys from their first encounter to 5 years later at a late night Diner. The friendship and love between the conservative Ryan and the wild Craig is brought to life by humorous and detailed conversations. Craig & Ryan did a great job to make us realize that its worth taking a "chance" and to fall in love. This hilarious two-character play gets a thumbs up for playwright, direction, and acting!!

The stage setting lacked the detailed touches, but don't let that stop you from checking out this fun production.

Nov 17th



AFTER DARK

by Steve Kluger



Photos By: Rusty Hernandez
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Media:

AFTER DARK , by Steve Kluger

Kluger's comedy concerns that cat-and-mouse game called courtship, as hunky Craig fixes his eye on uptight Ryan late one night in a Los Angeles diner. Love is in the details: the blue underpants, the cruise that wasn't taken, that "falling asleep kissing thing," that embarrassing incident with the spaghetti. That's the sweet homily at the heart of the raunchy but hilarious After Dark, presented last season by Actors' Theatre of Washington. .

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More Arts**“After Dark”
Axis
Through November 30**

Reality Theatre is back on the boards again, recently breaking in its new home, Axis nightclub, with Steve Kluger’s hilarious comedy *After Dark*. This two-hour, two-act, two-character play implements a circular, symmetrical structure to explore the ins and outs of Ryan (Christopher Palazzolo) and Craig (Jeremy Meir), a gay couple who discover that love at first night can indeed be a transformative experience.



[D.A. Pennebaker visits the Wexner Center](#)

[Complete D.A. Pennebaker interview](#)

Act One opens to the strains of “Winter Wonderland” and finds the guys in an otherwise abandoned L.A. diner at 3 a.m., “shortly before Christmas.” Craig, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, introduces himself with a gang-banging joke about the military being in, then attempts to engage the suit-wearing Ryan, who feigns disinterest.

Always prying and aggressive, Craig (who ironically plays Bashful at Disneyland) works hard to wring out the inner risk-taker from uptight lawyer Ryan. The tight and fast verbal tennis match that ensues uses clever volleys served with several references to the fields and courts of law and sports. Much of this dialogue is rife with joke set-ups and punchlines (many quite funny) and recalls a racy and gay Neil Simon, or a graduate-degreed, R-rated *Will and Grace*.

Act Two, which happens in Act One’s identical place and hour, but five years later, proves that *After Dark* isn’t just light romantic fluff. It begins with the same old Yuletide song, but now the actors dance through more pointedly political issues concerning AIDS and gay rights. They

also have a chance to somewhat literally step into each other's shoes.

Throughout, Palazzolo and Meir do a fine job delivering zingers and rendering their characters' development arcs in a credible-enough fashion. Meir's head takes and ocular swirls seem especially ready for primetime sitcom cameras. Credit director Bill Salmons for his guidance in keeping the wordplay snappy and pulling in the reigns on the potentially sappy aspects of the second act.

Call 265-7337 for ticket info. —R.M. Avalos

November 14, 2002

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'After Dark': Have a gay old time with romantic comedy

By Chad Jones, STAFF WRITER

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STEVE KLUGER is a writer with a penchant for cheap sentiment and a wicked ear for comedy.

His epistolary 2004 novel "Almost Like Being in Love" is charming, romantic, hilarious and only slightly related to reality.

You could say much the same about his play "After Dark" now running at San Francisco's New Conservatory Theatre Center. Like Kluger's novel, his play involves gay men finding, losing and possibly reclaiming the great love of their lives. It also mixes in generous helpings of show tunes, campy humor, sports and state politics.

The play opens in 1996 as the jukebox in the corner of a dingy, deserted Los Angeles diner (nicely detailed set by Bruce Walters) plays a scratchy version of "Winter Wonderland."

It's the wee small hours of the morning a few weeks before Christmas, and workaholic lawyer Ryan (Markham Miller) has been up all night drinking coffee and poring over a brief.

His night gets a whole lot more interesting when Craig (Carlos Barrera) waltzes into the diner, pours himself a cup of coffee and starts a game of major flirtation with a reluctant Ryan.

We learn some key things about these guys very quickly. Ryan is a major show queen (with a real thing for Ethel Merman) who also happens to be a sports nut. He earns a big dose of audience affection when he says that he knew he was gay as a child when he had a crush on Elroy Jetson.

Even though he's a lawyer, he's a heavy-duty romantic. When he fell in love with a dentist, rather than tell the guy, he faked toothaches and even had a root canal he didn't need.

Craig comes on with all the force of a hustler on the make, but as he says, he's not as dumb as he looks. He may work in a dwarf costume in Disneyland and not have a clue who Ethel Merman is, but he's got a master's degree from Kent State in political science.

Clearly the men are meant to be together in that fated, opposites-attract kind of way, and by the end of Act 1, the men realize this as well. In fact, in one of Kluger's few nods to stomach-turning sweetness, they're calling each other Craigy and Ry-Ry.

By Act 2, we've advanced five years. It's the same December night, and a much less

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uptight Ryan is lip-synching to a Steve and Eydie song on the jukebox. When Craig arrives in a three-piece suit, we realize things have changed. One of them is now a successful off-Broadway playwright while the other is making inroads in politics. One of them is also dealing with HIV.

After that first night in the diner, the men embarked on a relationship that lasted for four years and two months. But then one of them cheated, and they've been apart for 10 months when they meet again in the spot where it all began.

The second act is essentially a celebration of couple-ness as Craig and Ryan fondly recall details of their life together — vacations, quirks, escapades, anniversaries and fights. There's no question where the story is going, but Kluger is such an entertaining writer that the conventions of romantic comedy feel, if not exactly fresh, then definitely not stale. And Kluger mixes genuine sentiment with the laughs, and that's really the whole point of doing a play like this.

Director John Dixon and his two appealing actors don't fight too hard for laughs and let the charm in Kluger's writing carry the nearly two-hour play. And who can resist a play that underscores its happy ending with Ethel Merman warbling "Together Wherever We Go" and gets away with it?

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Take a Chance on Romance with After Dark

By Tom W. Kelly

Published: December 8, 2005

Where does a single man meet other eligible bachelors? Well, a run-down Diner in Los Angeles is just as good as anywhere else. In New Conservatory Theatre's mounting of *After Dark* by novelist and playwright Steve Kluger, said Diner provides a fertile locale for the vagaries of romance and love. It's 3am at an all-night Diner, and charismatic Craig (played by sexy Carlos Barrera) tries to pick up a reticent Ryan (stuffyly portrayed by Markham Miller). The stop-and-go flirtation leaps about from sports to Ethel Merman to outright sexual propositions. Ryan protests way too much that he's not interested, and eventually the two are ready to bed down. These two really prove that opposites attract. Act Two takes place five years later, and Ryan's words from Act One ironically return to haunt him. Craig has dumped Ryan due to a one-time-only indiscretion. (Now that's tough love.) And yet, the repercussions of the break-up are consistently counterpointed by the onslaught of witty one-liners. By the final moments, it appears that love (and/or pity) just might triumph after all.

Actor Barrera gets all the fun lines as he tries to flirt, entice, and get down with a potential bedmate. But why is he so desperate for sex with an emotionally uptight lawyer when he's so darned cute? Barrera's comic timing is excellent, though occasionally his accent makes him difficult to understand. Oh, did I mention he looks great in tight jeans and t-shirt? Actor Miller well shoulders the onus of being the frigid stick-in-the-mud who eventually thaws. His nicely nuanced performance balances a stand-off attitude with a lonely, love-starved soul as well as a sharp mind with a fixation for the immortal Merman.

Writer Kluger's script delivers lots of laughs. His skill with comedy is superlative as he generously sets 'em up and pays 'em off. Oddly, though, he brings up the very serious topic of sero-differentiated relationships, only to have it quickly become a non-issue. In these days of safe sex, is it really the moral highroad for negatives to eschew the company of positives? What is that, a grass-roots quarantine? When the topic reappears as a convenient Act Two complication, it's a brief plot device that ultimately goes unresolved. Also, for a couple that claims not to kowtow to heterosexist "morals," why did the boys break up after one infidelity? How deep was their love, when one runs out so quickly?

John Dixon directs the comedy-drama with great skill. He fights the play's sit-com tendencies and steers it all into psychological and emotional honesty. His blocking of the actors is nicely balanced, and always feels true to the moments. Bruce Walters has designed a thoroughly complete Diner setting that excellently



Carlos Barreros (in blue shirt) and on the left, Markham Miller in *After Dark* at the New Conservatory Theatre.

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suggests just the right mood, time, and place. And lighting by John Kelly admirably complements both the script and set.

An overall light evening of romantic fare, After Dark is a pleasant diversion from the upcoming holiday insanity. When the course of true love does not run smoothly, good humor more than compensates.

After Dark continues until Dec. 31 at the New Conservatory Theatre, 25 Van Ness Ave. (lower lobby), SF. Tix (\$30-\$38) call 861-8972 or go to www.nctcsf.org

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"Buzzin' Lee Hartgrave 02.DEC.05

AFTER DARK is an autobiographical play written by playwright Steve Kluger. One of his heroes was Ethel Merman and he manages to weave her in and out of the scenes in his charming play about meeting someone in an old fashioned diner in Los Angeles. This boy meets boy comedy/drama has moments that are funny and enchanting due mostly to the

talented Carlos Barrera (Craig) It is his Columbian accent. It would charm the feathers off of Chicken Little, let alone any man or women within two feet of him. The man he meets in the diner is Markham Miller (Ryan) who plays an attorney who is not especially looking for love, but that doesn't stop Craig from pursuing him.

The joy of seeing this play is the sweetness and delight of the courtship that is filled with sharply observed mischief. The back and forth banter between Craig and Ryan is about one-upmanship. Each man is trying to best the other. Getting to what they are really trying to say or do is the fun part of this laugh riot.

We first meet Craig as he enters the diner wearing a white t-shirt, a leather jacket, a motorcycle helmet and tight blue jeans. He tries everything to get the attention of Ryan, the attorney who is at a booth going through some legal papers. Craig stretches, drops a packet of condoms on the floor so that he can bend over to pick them up with his butt facing Ryan. He even tells Ryan that he once took his sister's Ken dolls and put them down together in

Highlights

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Book Review Thursday



The Hummingbird's Daughter
by Luis Urrea

CitySessions
Live music showcase



a 69 position. Ryan asks him "Ever sleep with a girl?" Craig answers, "No, I'm a thoroughbred."

They eventually quit the cat-and-mouse game and live together for four and a half years. Not in the diner of course.

Act II is about the breakup, politics, new values, good news and some bad news. Craig is thinking of running for public office. He has become a political activist. He proclaims to Ryan, "The reason straights are against same-sex marriage is because it prevents inbreeding."

At another time in the play Craig says: "They say that gays are 22% of the population. I think it's more. Do you?" Ryan tosses back "I don't know. Nominate Carol Channing for President and see if she wins."

After Dark is an enormously enjoyable play. The second act could be trimmed a little. By doing so, I think the impact would be greater. But I would not want to steer you away from this deftly directed play by John Dixon. The swell costumes by Kristi Johnson are period perfect and the sound by Ted Crimy is right on spot. This one is a "Don't Miss". At The New Conservatory Theatre Center, 25 Van Ness Ave in San Francisco.



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