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## Dispelling Rape Myths Through Prison Theatre

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Female inmates of a medium-security correctional facility perform a play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The play's theme of the oppression of women of color is used to encourage performers to confront social and cultural questions concerning the sexual and physical abuse of women. The inmate performers and the inmate audience bond in a common catharsis during two crucial scenes, resulting in the potentially liberating realization that society's prevailing "rape myths" are false. The psychodramatic theatre process is tested for providing avenues of new thoughts and perspectives for female inmates seeking new paradigms of society and themselves.

Keywords: Rape myths, sociodrama, drama therapy, prison theatre

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Lonsway & Fitzgerald (2006) define rape myths as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, serving to deny and justify male sexual aggression" (p. 133). Rape myths are almost always focused on victim blaming or excusing the perpetrator based on stereotypical perceptions and false beliefs about women desiring or encouraging sexual assaults. These beliefs and perceptions usually follow one or more of the following scenarios: women enjoy being raped; only "bad" girls are raped; rape is committed primarily by strangers and most commonly by sex maniacs; and women regularly engage in falsely accusing men of rape. Males also justify rape by asserting entitlement rationales based on a subtext of women's proactive participation, which invites sexual contact. This can include citing a woman's manner of dress, her consumption of alcohol, or her willingness to join a male in an intimate setting. Entitlement is also tied to expending money on a date: if a woman allows a man to spend money on dinner and drinks, then the male can argue that she "owed" him sex (Giacopassi & Dull, 1986).

Rape myths are "common yet pernicious in that they perpetuate sexual and racial stereotypes, increase the risk of violence, as well as demean the victim" (Giacopassi & Dull, 1986, p. 63). The media is rampant with cultural messages that socialize young males about what it means to be a man, drawing an equation between sexual aggression and masculinity. Much of the popular media is absent of narratives that clarify the meaning of consent or expose potential social, psychological, and legal consequences of unwanted sexual aggression.

Rape myths are sustained and perpetuated by popular media accounts of false accusations of rape. In March 2006 the national media focused on the false rape accusations made by an exotic dancer against members of Duke University's lacrosse team (Wilson & Barstow, 2007). In September 2009, a college student at Hofstra University in Long

Island accused a group of 5 males of gang-raping her in a men's bathroom after a night of partying. After the accused were apprehended, a source said that a surveillance video failed to back the original story. After the surveillance tape was released, the college student admitted that the sexual activity was consensual. She said she lied about the incident in order to conceal her promiscuousness from her boyfriend. The confession was a setback in the progress made over the last 30 years by victims of rape, feminists, and policy makers who have raised awareness, changed legal definitions of rape, and instituted laws and stiffer punishments.

There was no shortage of responses on local news blogs to the Hofstra incident. One reaction typifies most of the others: "Women cannot be trusted" (verbal, 2009). Another was more caustic: "I'm all for equal rights for women; arrest the bitch" (pastaboy12, 2009). When national or regional media attention focuses on false accusations of rape, there is often an attempt to link events together to establish a pattern of false accusations, and thereby justify the notion of rape myths.

Rape myths are depicted in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, by Ntosake Shange, which was recently performed at Bayview Correctional Facility, a women's prison in New York City. The play, or choreopoem, as it is called, is a collection of 20 vignettes in poetic verse. A treatise on the empowerment of women of color, the choreopoem developed out of oral tradition, mythology, women's use of language, poetic form, African dance, Senegalese music, and American jazz. Shange's characters reflect different types of women in various dramatic circumstances, breaking the long held silence marginalized women feel due to the social, political, and economic oppression of their gender, race, and class. Scenes focus on sisterhood, unrequited love, abandonment, female sexuality and victimization resulting from sexual and physical abuse.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at least 60% of women in prison report histories of childhood sexual or physical abuse and adult intimate violence (Beck & Harrison, 2007). By providing current research on the history of incarcerated women as victims of sexual crime, it may be possible to dispel myths widely embraced about women in prison as well as examine the treatment of rape myths in a play chosen for its potential resonance with this population. The play contains two scenes that focus on



Figure 1. The opening monolog speaks out against the silence endured by women of color.

acquaintance and partner rape and intimate violence, which will be analyzed using excerpts from the script. In 1975, Shange's work was among the earliest to reflect "the poetry and presence of women in a legendary male-poets' environment" (Shange, 1977, p. x). Women prisoners constitute a minority population in corrections, just 12.7% of the total prison population in the United States (Beck & Harrison, 2007). It is appropriate that the play was performed in a women's facility that is part of a system that is dominated by policies and programs for the generic male criminal.

### **Incarcerated Women: The Reality**

Bayview is a medium security prison for women who are serving out the final years of their sentence. The women in the theatre project are representative of most incarcerated women in America today in terms of race and level of offense. African-American women, in particular, are disproportionately represented in prison (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). They are nearly eight times more likely than white women to be incarcerated. Of the nine women who participated in the *For Colored Girls Project* (as it became known at Bayview), five are of African American descent; three are Latina; and one is white.

Common stereotypes concerning female criminal offenders suggest that women are categorized as generic offenders. But several factors, such as the level of risk, the crimes they commit, and their role as mothers distinguish them from their male counterparts. According to Polly Radosh (2002): women commit half the number of violent crimes as men; women are incarcerated predominately for non-violent offenses such as low-level property crimes, drug offenses and public order crimes such as prostitution; and approximately 80% are the primary caretakers of their children prior to their incarceration. Of the nine Bayview women who participated in the project, four were serving time for drug sentences; three for theft-related offenses; and one for murder; all but two are mothers.

Women convicted of crimes are often victims of crime themselves. The histories of incarcerated women are rife with emotionally damaging or violent experiences with men who are either incarcerated, or felons, abusers, victims of substance abuse, or who have abandoned the women and their children (Radosh, 2002). Various studies conclude that the majority of incarcerated women have histories of exposure to different types of trauma, most commonly interpersonal violence incorporating sexual and physical abuse (Spjeldnes & Goodkind 2009; Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Green et al., 2005 citing Battle et al., 2003, Browne et al., 1997).

According to Green et al. (2005), 98% of incarcerated women in a study had been exposed to at least one type of trauma in childhood or adulthood, including life-threatening accidents, witnessing someone injured or killed, personally being threatened with a weapon, or experiencing either physical or sexual interpersonal abuse (p. 142). Forty-eight percent of incarcerated women had been sexually molested as children and 26% had been physically abused at some point in their childhood. In adulthood, 58 % report being raped, 57% physically abused or attacked, and 71% report experiencing some form of domestic abuse. Incarcerated women anticipate continued abuse when

returning to their community and are vulnerable to outside abuse even behind bars, and, as one woman explains:

He refuses to bring my kids to see me and tells them all kinds of things about me. He has threatened to hurt my mom if I say anything in court about him... Even these guards can't protect me. Do you know he had the nerve to push me against the wall and twist my arm way behind my back during a visit? It hurt so much. That was the arm he broke last year... My kids have told me that he is messing with them [sexually abusing them] while I am gone. It made me sick, but at first I was afraid to tell because he said he'd really take them if I report him. (Richie, 2001, p. 736)

Once incarcerated, female prisoners are vulnerable to abuse within the correctional system in the form of verbal degradation, sexual assault, unwarranted visual supervision, denial of privileges, or the threat of force (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003).

### **Theatre Project: *For Colored Girls...***

There are many obstacles to directing a theatre production within a prison, many of which I experienced while directing plays at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. While the atmosphere and environment at Bayview is less tense due to the absence of violence, the rules for producing an event are stricter, perhaps because of the newness of many of the programs there. There are many constraints in directing a production in any prison. Like most facilities in New York, the prisoners are on a regimented schedule, working at jobs during the day while attending rehabilitation or educational



Figure 2. Cast members physicalize various forms of oppression.

programs at night. Security officers constantly monitor them within the facility by video camera. They are restricted in their movement around the facility and must continually report to a designation to be counted to ensure they have not escaped.

Except for the rehearsal time, which occurred one evening per week over an 8-week period, there was no contact between the director (myself) and the women. Rehearsals were restricted to a small room called the chapel. The women were required to meet for 3-hour rehearsals and were not permitted to take a break, except to go to the restroom.

We were allowed one debriefing session following the end of the performance in addition to the restricted rehearsals.

There was no guarantee that an audience would be allowed to view the play. At Sing Sing, there is an established theatre program and an enthusiastic inmate audience for productions. For the last theatre project at Bayview the administration allowed the cast two inmate guests each, for a total audience of 40 inmates and some invited guests. There is no stage or equipment at Bayview. Due to space constrictions, the play is performed in the gym. As the set and lighting equipment would intrude upon daily activity, the set is constructed and struck the day of the performance. Because items brought in from the outside are considered contraband, all props, scenic components, and costumes are detailed on gate clearance lists and subject to scrutiny by security. Colors worn by correction officers (COs) such as blue and grey are prohibited. Props that can be used as weapons are eliminated. In the last production, a rope was eliminated because of its potential use as an instrument of suicide. The inmates were told if they failed to properly return items, they would be strip-searched. Participation in the production sometimes conflicted with other prison programs, parole hearings, family issues, health concerns, and pressures to satisfactorily perform their daily work schedule.

A new challenge for this *For Colored Girls* production was the administration's last minute decision to open participation in the theatre program to include women in the general population, where there is a diverse level of literacy, as opposed to women who were taking college-level courses at the prison. The cast had an education level ranging from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to a college degree. Although most of the women in the project had earned a general education degree (GED) while serving their time, the majority of women had little or no experience with poetry, verse, or live theatre.

### The Praxis of the Rape Myth

Because incarcerated women have such high incidences of victimization, analyzing the play's treatment of rape myth is meaningful. The first rape scene is called *latent rapists*; it is a conversation between four women—a scene about the experience of acquaintance rape. At the time of the first reading, the women responded as if the script constituted the first public airing of a dark communal secret. They seem surprised to find this deeply personal topic scripted for public consumption. Although a lack of formal education might account for this lack of knowledge about acquaintance rape, ignorance about the subject is rampant



Figure 3. The women enlighten the audience about "friends" who rape.

even among college students on many American campuses (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). Like many victims of sexual abuse who suffer from a state of terminal isolation—the perception that they are the only ones who experience this trauma—the inmates exhibit timidity about making a public indictment of men. This timidity is enhanced, possibly, since most of the corrections officers are male.

In the first half of the scene, the often-sarcastic dialog describes common misconceptions about the rapist as being a pervert and stranger. (Each of the characters' names represents a color of the rainbow.)

*Lady in red/* a rapist is always to be a stranger/ to be legitimate/  
someone you never saw/ a man wit obvious problems/  
*Lady in blue/* ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket/  
*Lady in purple/* a lil dick/  
*Lady in red/* or a strong mother/  
*Lady in blue/* or just a brutal virgin. (Shange, 1977, p. 18)

The dialog describes how “normal”, even cultivated, these men appear to be, setting up a sharp contrast between the men’s supposed gentility and their unwanted sexual aggression, creating ambiguity in the mind of the victim:

*Lady in red/* these men friends of ours/ who smile nice/ stay  
employed/ and take us out to dinner/  
*Lady in purple/* lock the door behind you/  
*Lady in blue/* wit fist in face/ to fuck/  
*Lady in red/* who make elaborate mediterranean dinners/ & let the  
art ensemble carry all ethical burdens/  
while they invite a coupla friends over  
to have you. (Shange, 1977, p. 19)

Adding to the victim’s self- doubt is the fact that the rapist travels in the same social circles as the woman, bringing her credibility into question if she challenges his integrity. Therefore the victim remains silent:

“*Lady in purple/* we see them at the coffeehouse/ *Lady in blue/* wit someone else we know/ *Lady in red/* We’d even have em over for dinner/ & get raped in our own houses/ by invitation/ a friend” (Shange, 1977, p. 21).

The line “...cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed” (Shange, 1977, p. 20) challenges old conceptions of rape as perpetrated by strangers. The irony of the use of the word “friend” underscores the crime’s complexity. When men see women’s objections as ambiguous or see the exchange of light intimacy as a green light for sex, the act is reduced to



Figure 4. Rape victim argues that punishment should equal the crime.

miscommunication. Using the connotation of friendship as a veil for coercion or abuse makes the act more heinous, signifying that acquaintance rape be redefined to include a punishment that equals the crime.

*Lady in purple/ especially if he has been considered a friend/ Lady in blue/ & is not less worthy/ of being beat within an inch of his life/ bein publicly ridiculed/ having two fists shoved up his ass/ Lady in red/ than the stranger/ we always thot it wd be. (Shange, 1977, p. 20).*

The scene vilifies this type of sexual assault without blaming the victim or excusing the rapist. The verse also suggests how difficult it is to break the silence and how easily the perpetrator blends back into society unpunished.

The next occurrence of rape in the play is combined with physical abuse, dramatized in Shange's final scene about an abused mother named Crystal. The scene begins with a lengthy monolog told by Crystal using third person, although as the story progresses the audience understands Crystal is telling her own story.

Crystal begins with a description of Beau Willy, the father of her two children. He is a lowlife drug user, emasculated by the urban ghetto and demoralized by the Vietnam War. The audience learns that her association with Beau begins at the age of 13 when he rapes her in a stairwell. Pregnant at 14, she begs him to marry her. Beau refuses, calling her a whore and spreading rumors that the child isn't his. After returning from the war, Beau again rapes Crystal, who becomes pregnant with their second child. Beau's response to the news is to beat her. Crystal, showing a misguided faith in the system, obtains an order of protection against Beau. But Beau ignores the order. He forces his way into the apartment, manipulating her into a defenseless position. He wins over the children with

sweet talk and hugs. Then, he grabs them, hoists them up onto the windowsill, and dangles them out over the street. In spite of her emotional plea, he drops them to their death.



Figure 5. The women listen intently as the story of Crystal's abuse unfolds.

“I stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reaching for me/ & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fith story/ but i cd only whisper/ & he dropped em” (Shange, 1977, p. 60).

In the moments following the story of her children's death, Crystal describes the long, winding process of transcending her grief, ending the monologue on a moment of hope.

That chill at daybreak/ The sun wrapped me up  
swigin rose light everywhere/ The sky laid  
over me like million men/ I waz cold/I waz  
burnin up/a child/ & endlessly weaving



garments/ for the moon wit my tears/ I found god in myself/ & I loved her/I loved her fiercely. (Shange, 1977, p. 63)

During the first rehearsal of the scene, it was apparent that the tragic elements of the story resonated with the cast. They reacted to the narrative as if it were a real story, punctuating the monolog with uncensored verbal and nonverbal responses. It was as if the actress who played Crystal was breaking the silence that had perpetuated the victimization and exploitation of each woman present. As a director, I hoped to incorporate these uncensored responses in the play. As a human being, I struggled with the ethics of bypassing the moment to focus on the production. I struggled with how I might structure this session with compassion, without crossing over into “therapy”.



Figure 6. The women support Crystal through the horrific loss of her children.

Following a short break, I remembered a group cohesion exercise used in sociodrama, where participants support personal statements made by members of the group. Standing in a circle, one person steps forward and expresses a belief. When someone else shares the belief, they silently step into this inner circle to support the first person’s statement. After a moment of affirmation, people in the inner circle step back to their original position until someone else expresses a belief and enters the center of the circle. During the exercise, the cast shared the trivial and the profound: (Nicky), “Everyday I thank my maker for my blessings.” (Samantha), “It’s the kids that keep you going.” (Raysa), “It helps me a lot to see there were others like me.” (Theresa), “You’re scared to leave because you know he’ll find you.” As a theatre educator, I am torn about priorities, keeping to the collective issue, aware so much more needs to be done. The exercise becomes an opportunity for disclosure and for the women to bond.

After the exercise, we stage the Crystal piece so the women surround her. The monolog is alive with their responses. After a moving rehearsal, the women share warm farewells, “Get Home Safe.”

### **“Get Home Safe”**

These three words are part of the ritualistic farewell from the women after a productive night. It is ironic that they express their care the civilians in terms of the perils of the outside world. The outside world is a dangerous place for incarcerated women, according to Green et al. (2005). “Given their poverty and chronic exposure to violence, it is not

surprising that life outside would be extremely stressful and that, at least for some, jail might feel like a safe haven” (Green et al., 2005, p. 148).

Women in prison are more often than not victims of poverty. They often reside in low-income communities where they have faced the challenges of urban poverty including burnt-out communities, poor schools, and lack of resources and resultant feelings of hopelessness. Typically, incarcerated women are unskilled workers at low paying jobs, with 30-40% (depending on the study) working at jobs that are legitimate, and nearly half unemployed at the time of their arrest. Because of financial hardships, many have experienced repeated homelessness or live with families that are already plagued with financial burdens or severe dysfunction (Green et al., 2005; Richie, 2001). To supplement scant incomes, many economically desperate women have taken on minor roles in the drug trade.

Many women, particularly those with histories of victimization, often replace the relational dysfunction in their lives with addiction (Covington, 1998). Unlike incarcerated men, the higher rates of sex abuse, unemployment, and sole responsibilities for a dependent child are the catalysts for women’s chemical dependency (Pelissier, Motivans, & Rounds-Bryant, 2005). Women who are in a subservient relationship with men where they suffer from financial abuse also have a higher rate of substance abuse and prostitution. According to Knight, Logan, & Simpson (as cited in Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009), a significant number of women who have custody of children avoid getting help because they are concerned about losing their children to the system. Existing social and economic assistance programs for released inmates focus largely on the needs of males rather than females, in part because of the much higher numbers of male offenders in probation or parole programs (Bloom & Covington, 2003; Green et al., 2005; Radosh, 2002; Richie, 2001; Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009; van Olphen et al., 2009).

Because the majority of women behind bars are mothers, even a brief period of time away from home can cause disruption in the life of the family with adverse costs to both mother and children, resulting in estrangement, anxiety, and economic sanctions such as the discontinuation of public housing, food stamps, or welfare. Many women return to the challenge of maternal caretaking after incarceration without childcare support, vocational skills, adequate housing, or financial assistance. For example, according to Solomon et al. (as cited in Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009), social welfare policies prohibit offenders from obtaining access to public housing, cash assistance or food stamps, and many job options because of the stigmatization that accompanies incarceration. The multi-leveled challenges of these women who are released from a correctional system compounded by the untreated histories of trauma and drug addiction give these women few options but to return to crime and eventually to prison where once again they are stuck in a system ill equipped to address their needs (van Olphen et al., 2009).

### **Performance and Post production activities**

The rehearsals of *For Colored Girls* culminated in a performance for 90 female prisoners and 75 outside guests. The response of the female prisoners to the scene when Beau drops the children to their deaths was visible and profound. One woman in the sixth row of the

audience was intensely involved in the scene. When Beau dropped the children 5 floors to the street below, the female inmate fell to her knees sobbing. No one rebuked her for this display of emotion. In a moment that transcended the art of theatre, the entire audience became one community, united in an attitude of compassion for Crystal's loss and this prisoner's grief.

As the monolog draws to a close, the cast, in an act of support and compassion, physically lifts Crystal from her knees, as if raising her from her despair. At that moment, Crystal has an epiphany, finding a vestige of hope "...i found God in myself and i loved her fiercely" (Shange, 1977, p. 63).

Hope is contagious and the cast echoes the line, first to one another, and then to the audience.



Figure 7. In spite of the shackles of gender, race and class, the play ends on a note of hope.

Samantha, a cast member, walked straight to the sixth row of the audience and helped the sobbing prisoner to her feet, delivering the message of hope directly to her, exclaiming, "I found God in myself and I loved her." This moment was the crowning moment of achievement for the project. That the cast received a standing ovation was secondary.

After the production, we met for a final debriefing session. The women watched a slide

show of photographs taken during the performance cut to music and completed interview questions, which were later analyzed qualitatively for emerging themes.

Theatre is ephemeral. On a simple level, the slide show confirmed that the performance was real. It also validated the hard work of the rehearsal process.

The ritual of public performance is one of the most important characteristics of therapeutic theatre (Emunah & Johnson, 1983; Mitchell, 1994). Viewing the performance enabled the women to perceive the response of the audience as a public affirmation of their life experiences. Studies show that vulnerable populations experience a profound need for respect, from their own community and from staff (Snow, DiAmico, & Tanguay, 2003). In the days following the performance, the women heard accolades from fellow prisoners, staff, and administration. Immediately after the Bayview performance, one corrections officer confided that he "was amazed that the women could remember so many lines." One woman stated, "I feel more confidence and people show[ed] more respect toward me." The cast shared other responses including the details of the story of

the prisoner who feel to her knees in tears. “They [the audience] were so into the play. They didn’t miss a thing.” One newcomer to theatre production disclosed how the play “helped overcome her fear of being in front of people” and that the experience of performing “would help at the parole board.”

Literature on the psychology of women has long since promoted connection as the guiding principle of growth for women (Covington 1998; Gilligan 1982; Miller 1976). “Such connections are so crucial for women that women’s psychological problems can be traced to disconnections or violations within relationships—whether in families, with personal acquaintances, or in society at large” (Covington, 1998, p. 5).

When asked about positive changes in attitudes toward self or others, one player responded, “Everything I feel was positive, like how we supported and worked with one another.” Another stated, “The positive impact . . . was the dedication and team work that the women exuded amongst each other.” A woman who confessed at the outset to having issues with many of the women in the facility stated that since the production, she is more “easily accepting of each of my peers.” Given the diversity of the participants, one hopes that working on this project may have dispelled some social stereotypes by promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity. That “we had a bond like no others” diminished the sense of isolation between the women suggesting that the project succeeded in spite of cultural differences.

Barbara MacKay (1996) writes about therapeutic theatre and relationships: “It is impossible always to know what long-term effect experiences like these have on participants. I have long felt that we cannot speak of cures, but rather of experiences of healthy functioning and healthy relationships which may become benchmarks in further development” (p. 166).

Ramon Gordon (1981) of Cell Block Theatre believes that performance training functions as a re-socialization process that contributes to the development of realistic social attitudes: “Theatre training begins to remove the unrealistic attitude of instant everything and builds a concept of future. Rehearsal means repetition, practice over and over again . . . the offender gradually learns that the work process is, in itself, both necessary and rewarding.” The theme of learning patience was consistent throughout. A lengthy and demanding rehearsal period combined with the memorization of the script and staging created challenges for some of the cast. One stated, “It taught me patience,” adding, “Good things comes to those who work hard.”



## Conclusions

The highly limited post-performance contact enforced by the prison administration between the performers and myself minimized the opportunity for detailed and exhaustive explorations of what effects, if any, performing the play had on inmates' perceptions and beliefs about rape and the rape myth. Performance can sometimes act as a cathartic agent for transforming long-held ideas and preconceptions. Women inmates are possibly the most highly sexually abused population of women in the United States. Their experience, to them, may be commonplace and may be perceived as their "due" for unknown but accepted wrongs they committed with males who treated them as the sexual objects they accept themselves to be.

The power of myth over cultural and social norms is extremely difficult to dismantle, and performing in a single play will not suffice to the task. Drama therapy work with psychiatric patients confirms that the achievement of performing is compounded when the audience shares the same reality as the performers. As stated by Renee Emunah and David Johnson (1983), "The applause by the women in the facility was not just for the *actors* but also for the *women as fellow humans* who have overcome untold obstacles in life and who achieved something positive, something extraordinary" (p. 236).

It is possible that the performance at Bayview allowed performers and audience to bond in a common understanding that rape myths are a product of male domination rather than the truth. Facilitators of other prison theatre programs describe performance as a healing process. It is an emotional reenactment in which audience response is the formal recognition of a means of communication that might be closer to "a psychodramatic/therapeutic process" than a simple performance (Gladstone & McLewin, 1998, p. 72-73). Just as Crystal becomes the spokesperson to the other women on stage, the members of the cast become the spokespersons for an important message to the prison population

about the falsity of the rape myth. Performance allows actors and audience to forge a new myth that may expose rape as an instrument of male domination.

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