

Lighting the Spark, Feeding the Flame

IMTAL 2018
GLOBAL CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 10-12, 2018

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY
LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

There is no home office for IMTAL. The officers of the organization are spread out in various locations around the country (at present Charlotte, Indianapolis, Brooklyn, St. Paul, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia) and this changes every couple of years or so as board members complete their terms.

Storage of artifacts (documents, programs, photos, badges, lanyards, etc.) has been challenging. There is a sort of archive: "The Box" (or rather, "The Boxes"). These boxes contain much of the paperwork related to the ongoing operations of the organization, most of the contents pre-dating the internet and the advent of cloud storage. The Boxes have traveled around the country, residing at the home institution (or just the home) of the current President. Or at least they did, until a few years ago when the ritual of passing the Box somehow was abandoned and the archive decided to live, untouched, for several years in Rhode Island.

The Boxes were delivered to us at the 2017 conference in Mystic, after

a few years of safe-keeping in the care of past President Jillian Finkle. From Mystic, I had them delivered to my institution, Discovery Place Science. Here in Charlotte, I'm very fortunate to have the help of some dedicated interns, and one in particular has been spending one shift each week scanning the documents, folders, photos, and newsletters for safe-keeping. The files (numbering in the hundreds now, with still another box yet to go) are being backed up to the cloud. Once the scanning process is complete, we'll begin the task of archiving them to our web site.

It has been a fascinating experience, seeing and reading the history of this organization in The Boxes, and now, in our cloud storage. We're excited to share it with you. It is a history rich with hard work, determination, passion, and an unwavering belief in the power of theatre to tell a museum's story. Thanks to the efforts of Zoey Epps, we'll all soon share that history once again.

- Douglas Coler
IMTAL President



Douglas Coler
IMTAL President

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Summertime is when we at *Insights* take a pause to bask in the light of great work done in the museum theatre profession.

In this issue we hear from the winners of both the Lipsky award for excellence in playwriting for a museum and the IMTY award for excellence in leadership, P.J. Griffith of the Old Sturbridge Village and Heather Nielsen of Denver Art Museum, respectively. They each have a thoughtful and innovative approach to their work, willing to reach into the boundaries of formality to break open what it means to help guests connect to

their institutions. I am certain you will find inspiration in hearing them speak about their process.

We are also drawing nearer to the Annual Conference taking place at my museum home, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles from September 10th-12th! Don't forget to register! Tell your colleagues! We look forward to seeing you in sunny California!

- Ilana Gustafson
Insights Editor



Want to write for Insights?

Short article, essay, opinion piece, announcement, photo... if it has to do with Museum Theatre, we're interested!

Visit our submission guidelines online at: <http://imtal-us.org/publications>.

Drop us a note! Board member email addresses are listed on the last page of the newsletter.

2018 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Lighting the Spark, Feeding the Flame: IMTAL 2018
September 10-12, 2018

The 2018 Annual Conference is upon us once again...

Book your spot today and join the nation's museum theatre practitioners in sunny Los Angeles!

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Brent Blair

Director of USC's Institute for Theatre and Social Change

Brent will also conduct a workshop for all participants!

SESSIONS Featuring topics such as collaborative theatre, using technology, facilitating difficult conversations, and more!

FIELD TRIPS

A visit with the team behind the innovative Noah's Ark program at Skirball Cultural Center and a special behind-the-scenes look at *Ice Age Encounters* at the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum.

REGISTER TODAY at www.imtal-us.org

- Member - \$275.00
- Non-Member - \$330.00 (includes IMTAL membership)
- Single Day - \$135.00
- Student - \$175.00

GETTING THERE

Hotel:

Radisson Hotel Midtown at USC
3540 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles

Airports:

Los Angeles, CA	LAX	(11 miles)
Burbank, CA	BUR	(19 miles)

Check the forums on the website if you'd like to arrange ride sharing to the hotel.

Photo credit: Denver Art Museum



Foxy Shmoxy at the Denver Art Museum with Jessica Robblee and Mitch Slevc

A Museum Director on the Power of Theatre to Connect Guests to Art

— By Ilana Gustafson, *Insights Editor* —

Every year, IMTAL celebrates the cherished leaders who support the work we do. This year's winner of the IMTY award is **Heather Nielsen**, Director of Learning and Community Engagement at the Denver Art Museum. Last year, her team, led by Lindsay Genshaft, won the Lipsky Award for Excellence in Museum Playwriting for their show *Art Emergency: Code Red*. Support for innovation often means giving a platform to do meaningful work, such as is demonstrated at DAM. I had the chance to interview Heather about her perspective on the value of museum theatre and their dreams for the future of the program. She offers an inspiring perspective and appreciation for theatre rooted in her background in Anthropology.

Thank you so much for speaking with me and congratulations on your award.

Of course. Thank you.

What did you think when you found out you were nominated and receiving this award?

Totally delighted and honored. And honestly, I credit Lindsay (Genshaft, Manager of Family and Community Programs). We're lucky to have a woman like that who really understands and sees the potential of what theatre techniques can do in a museum context. It's easy to support passion, in my opinion.

How has Lindsay been able to show you that theater can enhance the guest experience with your exhibits and collections?

I feel our collections are steeped with stories. Theatre has potential and power to unleash those stories that are embedded in these objects, while at the same time, stirring the imagination of our visitors. I think ultimately, that's what we want to do, right? We want to create deep connections with our visitors and with the stories that our objects hold. Theatre has been a powerful way to do that kind of work.

What are some ways you've noticed your guests' perception of an art museum shifting with the type of programming that you do?

I think that the experiences you can have in the art museum can be active, they can be creative, they can be participatory. So I think all

of a sudden that just opens up the potential for families to think very differently about the museum and very differently about the behaviors that are accepted in a museum.

I think one of the things Lindsay's worked really hard to do is ask how these experiences can create social connection and bonds between family members. It's been very interesting for me to watch how the theater pieces work at many levels. The kid is getting something out of it and the parent is getting something out of it and they can have this shared experience.

Right. And you've touched on the core of what theater is; it's storytelling, it's a social experience, you're connecting with other people. You seem to have a good appreciation and understanding for theater. I'm wondering what is your background in relationship to theater?

Not much! I'll be totally honest with you! I definitely feel that we've moved in this direction because we had a staff member who was very passionate, had deep experiences, had academic experience in this area. Personally, I'm an arts lover. I'm a lover of stories, but I have no background in theater whatsoever.

But you have an appreciation for it.

Yeah, I have a deep appreciation for it. My background is actually in Anthropology and so I've always had a love for the way in which culture uses art in its broadest sense. Whether that's performance, the visual arts, whether it's ritual, and how they use those things to explore what it means to be human. So I think my appreciation for theater is really grounded in that, appreciation for the kind of stories it can tell, the multiple perspectives, and the opportunity it gives us to empathize a bit.

I had a chance to see your show *Code Red* when I visited DAM. I really loved that you take this sort of static gallery experience and, with the story behind the images or within the images, give us a different connection.

Lindsay and I talk a lot about this, she's really pushed us to think about how this story is help-

Art Emergency: Code Red with Jose Zuniga and Mitch Slevc



Photo credit: Denver Art Museum

ing you see the artwork in a different way, helping you see the perspective of the artist, helping you see elements in the artwork.

It's so exciting for me to see programming like this in museums. Museums are often hesitant to take risks in ways of either exhibiting or highlighting the work. So, I'm just curious what your thoughts are on the perceived risks of doing something like theatre in a museum and some advice for leadership that might be hesitant to try something like this?

I want to unpack that question a little bit because when you say "risk," what are you thinking of?



Douglas Coler presents the IMTY Award to Heather Nielsen at the IMTAL Luncheon

AWARD WINNER INTERVIEWS

I mean to say quote-unquote “Risk.” So the perceived risk.

Yeah, great. “Risk.”

I know sometimes leadership is hesitant to do theater, for one, because of the logistics of using the space in that way and the perceived danger to the collections. Then also the risk of being less formal. Theatre will require you to be a little bit less formal.

Oh, interesting. Okay, being more playful.

Yes, being more playful. So, I’m curious what you would say to leaders who kind of come from that perspective?

What’s interesting is those ideas of using space in unusual ways, being a little less formal, and allowing for a range of interpretations, those are things that I think we’ve had a

long history of wanting to disrupt. Theater for us was a natural outgrowth of the tactics we were already using to engage with families.

So, I guess I would say that if one is a bit fearful of this, it would be very interesting to see where are they actually doing similar kind of work. Because a school tour in many ways can often use a space in unusual ways.

Find a seed that’s already been planted and extrapolate from there.

Let me just add one other kind of fear: what are the other people in the gallery who may want a more quieter experience going to think? And that actually did happen where during one of these performances in the gallery. Some visitors were like, wait a minute, I didn’t come here for this kind of noise. We had to figure out how we can be a little bit more proactive in letting visitors know what was happening in this gallery space. I often see those kinds of moments of tension as a place to say, okay, how could we actually support all of our visitors for success around this experience?

So what are some ways that you do approach that or prepare your guests for these experiences?

We’re very transparent when these things are happening. These happen during family moments and weekends when people are expecting the museum to be a little bit

more playful and unusual.

Do you make an announcement to warn people that are in the gallery or do you just show up?

No. Yeah, we just show up and go for it! I think that’s where this stuff contributes to the overall perception shift for visitors to museums.

I would say, predominantly we’ve used theater in our family program, but we’ve also had theater groups perform in the galleries, perform in the freight elevator, perform throughout the building, create site-specific small vignettes. So I think our visitors, both young and old, are already accustomed to this in our museum.

It’s almost as though you trained your guests to expect things like this to happen.

Kind of, yeah. I think by using more innovative techniques, whether you yourself are doing them or you’re inviting partners, you’re committing to your museum being open to kind of shared authority, shared creation of experiences. Once you establish that you’re all onboard with that, it makes it a lot easier to then do the work.

You’re not imposing this on them, you’re sharing it.

Right, it’s a two-way experience.

That’s great. I’m always so excited to hear someone, especially someone who doesn’t have a theatre background, be so supportive of theatre in a non-typical context.

It’s been really great to hear

Art Emergency: Code Red with Jose Zuniga and Mitch Slevc



your thoughts. My final question is how do you see this program evolving and do you have anything in the works right now?

Well, we're actually currently going through a renovation project which is essentially a complete renovation of our original building. When we open, it'll include a new Learning and Engagement Center.

We'll have something that we're calling a Creative Hub. In that Creative Hub is a performance area. I think that that opens up a whole new set of possibilities for more co-created programming with theatre partners. We also have a rich creative in-residence program and it could be really exciting to think about working more with actors in that program. So, for us, it's about deepening the

work that we're doing in our family programs, but also thinking about how this work helps us connect more deeply with our creative community.

And you're creating space that's conducive to these things which is really exciting. Well, I look forward to seeing that develop and will have to come back and visit.

Yeah, right. You all have to come back!

Maybe have another IMTAL conference out there!

Yeah, there you go! ❖

MEET THE IMTY WINNER:

Heather Nielsen is Director of Learning and Community Engagement at the Denver Art Museum. At the DAM Heather oversees all program areas including Family and Community, Adult and College, Teacher and School Outreach, and the Museum's Artist and Studio Programs. Most recently, Heather has been the project lead on multiple IMLS funded investigations into fostering creativity among visitors and the museum as a platform for community creativity. During her time at the Museum she has grown family and community initiatives to include programs for families with young children. In addition, she has overseen the development and launch of programs aimed to facilitate engagement with Denver's Latino communities. Prior to joining the Denver Art Museum, Heather worked as a Museum Educator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Heather has broad Museum experience, ranging from developing and conducting in gallery interpretation for culture based exhibitions, to writing and developing curriculums and study guides around anthropology and art topics. She has conducted teacher trainings, taught graduate courses in Museum Education, and has served as a consultant on national and international museum projects. She holds Bachelors in Anthropology from Vassar College and a Masters in the Anthropology of Art, from University College London.



Heather Nielsen
2018 IMTY Award Winner

AWARD WINNER INTERVIEWS



The Potter, the Peddler, the Farmer's Daughter, the Blacksmith, the Printer's Daughter, and the Hunter bring Old Sturbridge Village to life in *Midwinter Mischief*.

An Immersive Journey with the Characters of Old Sturbridge Village

— By Ilana Gustafson, Insights Editor —

The winner of this year's Lipsky Award for Excellence in Playwriting is P.J. Griffith for his epic immersive show, *Midwinter Mischief*. This script, created for the Old Sturbridge Village, is written entirely in Anapestic Tetrameter. It's a playful and interactive show where the guests follow a scheming peddler on a mile-long journey through a 19th century village where they meet a cast of colorful, historically-based characters. It's an ambitious undertaking that is accomplished with thoughtful skill and reverence to historical accuracy. I had a chance to email with P.J. to find out more about the process for creating his masterful story.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? How did your life path lead you to your current role as a script writer for Old Sturbridge Village?

I am an actor with a passion for working in immersive, site-specific theater. Beyond being in *American Idiot* on Broadway, I was in the immersive theatrical project *Sleep No More* at The McKittrick Hotel, helped create the *For the Record* series in Los Angeles as well as *Shaken Not Stirred* in NYC.

I have been going to OSV since

I was a kid, having grown up in central Connecticut, and was cast as "Brom Bones" in the immersive *Sleepy Hollow Experience* that utilized OSV at night in fall 2016. During the day, I spent a lot of time walking the museum, soaking in as much information/interesting stories about the time period as possible. *Midwinter Mischief* took shape after hours of conversations with the historical interpreters who inhabit the village on a daily basis. It was the product of my curiosity and fascination with the strange,

unknown specifics of daily life in early America.

What was the script development process for *Midwinter Mischief* from inception to performance? Was it a collaborative process with the performers or did they get a fully developed script before going into rehearsals?

I was tasked with distilling the winter experience at OSV into a two-hour adventure where guests could emotionally connect to the content and collections of the museum. It

was an exciting and well-supported task as I was given pretty much free reign of the village's resources—from its costumes to its historical buildings to its arms collection to its culinary staff to its animals.

I wrote a full script over the course of a few months and sent it out to the heads of each department, who willingly picked it apart like 5 dramaturgs, punching holes in any plot-lines or language that were not true to 1830's rural New England. After a few more drafts, it was handed out to the 30+ historical interpreters who would be playing the roles in it. Some were nervous because they weren't used to memorizing text or speaking in verse, others jumped in with unbridled excitement. Everyone had their input and we developed each scene over a few weeks of rehearsals so it fit well in each of the 13 spaces and made sense coming out of the mouths of each character.

What is the thought behind the choice to write the script entirely in verse?

Midwinter Mischieff is a fable written in Anapestic Tetrameter—a style made popular by Edgar Allan Poe, Clement Clarke Moore and Lord

What is the Lipsky Award?

In 2014, IMTAL established an annual award dedicated to the memory of playwright Jon Lipsky. Jon was Professor of Acting and Playwriting at Boston University's School of Theater, and he created many wonderful short plays on science themes for Boston's Museum of Science. The winner of the Lipsky award will have written the play that most exemplifies standards of excellence in Museum Theatre.

Byron in the first half of the 19th century. I thought it would be an interesting way to tell stories in a poetic form that would grab the audience's attention immediately and pull them out of their day-to-day reality, spending of their disbelief into a different world.

How has it been received by the guests of OSV?

They have really loved it—from young kids through the older members of the museum. I tried to appeal to all of their senses on a cold winter's afternoon. It was a piece that was driven by curiosity of what might be lurking around the next turn and tries to overwhelm their senses, not just listening to stories seeing scenes play out, but asking the audience to touch, taste, smell and feel winter in 1830s New England.

The audience was always one step behind a wily peddler who is bartering and scheming his way through the village to pay off his tab to the tavern keeper. I think everyone in that part of the world could relate to an underdog hustling to pay the bills. The experience also ended with a huge party in the tavern after finally catching up with the

peddler, complete with period food, booze and live music.

You ask some lucky guests to play characters in the performance. I'm curious how guests respond?

Guests were given very specific characters when they arrive at Bullard Tavern. These "mischievous" characters all could have been drinking at the tavern in the 1830s, from John C. Colt (a notorious rake and brother to industrialist Samuel Colt, whom Edgar Allan Poe wrote a short story about) to Prudence Crandall (a Connecticut abolitionist who opened a controversial school for African-American girls).

Throughout the 2-hour adventure, guests were called by name and asked to take on tasks in different scenes, from throwing clay to dipping candles to stuffing a sausage to helping work a two-handed saw. Most loved it and dove in head-first. If they were too intimidated to get their hands dirty, they quickly convinced someone else in their party to cover them.

I love how the interpretation of the village and 19th century life is carried by the story. What do you believe to be the value for guests experiencing history in this way?

I think it gives guests a good feeling of where a lot of principals of our



The Schoolkeeper at Old Sturbridge Village

AWARD WINNER INTERVIEWS

modern life began—a lot of luxuries and technology we take for granted in 2018 evolved from desire to solve problems in the early 19th century. Refrigeration, sanitation, medication, heating, the industrial process, the modern educational process and nationalism all have roots in that era.

What have been some of the challenges and triumphs of the show?

The weather became a challenging element. Volatile New England January and February could sometimes be too cold or too warm for an experience that was both in and out doors.

In one scene we utilized adorable baby oxen as a major plot point, but they could be REALLY fussy, especially when they sensed it was lunchtime. We had no real idea what this show would feel like over a stage that spanned over a mile until we put an audience into it. We

adapted and evolved as we learned. The whole piece was like a giant clock with each gear dependent on the one it was connected to working. We played with the timing of each piece and the movement of the audience to make sure it went as smoothly as possible throughout the day. We staged the experience again in early 2018, learning from audience feedback of what they liked and what felt like it was a little too much. We had to cut the baby oxen and replaced them with a musket-firing scene.

In general, what are your thoughts on how theatre can help people connect to history?

I think theatre is a great opportunity to give people an emotional connection to history. History is just an interconnected web of people's individual stories that are far more interesting than just memorized dates, locations and outcomes. By taking away the “imposed reverence”

of “Historical Figures” out and looking at them as real human beings making difficult choices, there always seem to be parallels with what we read in the news and what any given person is dealing with on any given day. It is evident, now more than ever, that history has a tendency to repeat itself.

What other projects do you have on the horizon?

I'm currently in rehearsals for the world premiere of a new musical about “The Five Points” in NYC during the “draft riots” of the 1860s called *Paradise Square* that will be making its world premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theater later this year. I'm also in talks for a new projects with Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and the Cheney Homestead in Connecticut. I am always looking for interesting new spaces to tell interesting new stories in... ❖

MEET THE LIPSKY WINNER:

P.J. Griffith is a writer/director/performer from New York City with an extensive background in theater and television, working on both sides of the proverbial camera. He specializes in creating site-specific, immersive theatrical experiences. As an actor, P.J. first gained experience in “immersive theater” playing principal roles in some of the country's most critically-acclaimed and financially-successful immersive productions, including *Sleep No More* and *Bond: Shaken Not Stirred* in New York City, *For the Record: Baz Luhrmann* in Los Angeles, *Descent* in Sarasota and *The Sleepy Hollow Experience* in Massachusetts. P.J.'s other recent theater credits include “St. Jimmy” in *American Idiot* on Broadway, “Leon Czolgoszcz” in *Assassins* at Yale Repertory Theater and “Jett Rink” in The Public Theater's premiere of *Giant*. P.J. received the 2010 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Featured Performance for *Set-Up & Punch* at The Blank Theater and the 2017 New York Musical Theater Festival Award for Outstanding Lead Performance for *Georama*. He can be seen on television in guest starring in roles in episodes of *Blue Bloods*, *Gotham*, *Jessica Jones*, *The Good Wife*, *The Mysteries of Laura* and *Without a Trace*, as well as in the feature films *Easter Mysteries* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. He has worked on the production staff *Comedy Central Presents*, *Phenomenon*, *MADtv* and *VH1 Storytellers*.



P.J. Griffith
2018 Jon Lipsky Award Winner

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IMTAL Luncheon @ the AAM Conference

Phoenix, Arizona - May 7th, 2018

— By Douglas Coler, *IMTAL President* —

Arizona weather can be lovely at certain times of the year—and early May is usually one of those times. Attendees at the Annual AAM Conference and Expo were greeted with daily temperatures that hovered around 106 degrees F (roughly 41 degrees C for those of you in the rest of the world). Those temperatures are not unheard of at

the height of summer in Phoenix, and although one should always expect the unexpected in any desert, the oppressive Spring heat doesn't explain the comparatively low turnout for the conference, or for our annual award luncheon. After all, most of us had to make reservations some months in advance, and I'd wager, few of us consulted the Farmer's Almanac prior to making travel plans.

Chalk it up to climate change, perhaps. Those who chose not to come were spared the the unrelenting heat, but they also missed an opportunity to share a meal and some memories with us.

On Monday, May 7, in a quiet dining space at the Sheraton Grand Phoenix, a dozen members of The International Museum Theatre Alliance met for lunch, and to honor our IMTY and Lipsky Award recipients, Heather Nielsen and P.J. Griffith (much more about them elsewhere in this issue). We spent the first roughly ninety seconds on round-robin introductions, then moved on to an impromptu "state of the organization" report (see inset) and also announced the location and dates for our 2018 conference, hosted by the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles, this September 10-12.

As of May 2018, the International Museum Theatre Alliance has **127 members** (61 of which are institutional memberships) across 12 countries, 19 US states, and the District of Columbia.

Attendance at our previous two regional conferences was:
2016: Denver/Littleton, CO - 63 **2017:** Mystic, CT - 33
(The discrepancy can be traced to Denver having many one-day attendees from the 4 institutions that hosted us.)

That means that roughly 25% of our members attended our last conference, an extraordinary figure for an organization our size!

I introduced Heather and presented her with the IMTY Award, and Vice President Todd Norris introduced playwright/actor P.J. Griffith and presented him with the Lipsky Award. Both Heather and P.J. were lovely speakers, and we were delighted that they chose to be with us in person. We all enjoyed ourselves, so much that the scheduled 75 minute event stretched to more than 90 minutes, and we were all still deep in conversation when the hotel staff arrived to gently shoo us away. We hadn't thought to assign an official photographer, however, so the luncheon, the presentations, the speeches, and the laughs are consigned only to the memories of those in attendance.

It was definitely worth the possibility of heat stroke. Next year's luncheon is at the AAM Conference in New Orleans, where it will not only be damnably hot, but uncomfortably humid as well. I hope that you'll join us. ❖

Here's Your Chance to Change the World!

Want to get involved with IMTAL but aren't sure how?

I scream, you scream, we all scream for IMTAL!

Just a taste...

- Help with next year's conference planning
- Submit articles, news, photos and ideas for *Insights*
- Share IMTAL with friends and colleagues
- Send a photo to post on the IMTAL website
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The full scoop!

- Become an At-Large IMTAL Board Member
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For more information, visit: <http://imtal-us.org/lipsky-award>
- Nominate your leader for the IMTY Award
For more information, visit: <http://imtal-us.org/IMTY-award>



Photo credit: Museum of Ice Cream

Dive right in, the water is... sprinkles!

Want to be in the next issue of *Insights*?

Send your article, photo, or news to publications@imtal-us.org by **October 10, 2018** for the Fall 2018 issue!

KEEP UP

...with IMTAL online and on social media!

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for posts and pictures about IMTAL news and events!

Tag us when sharing your own museum theatre-related posts and tweets so we can help spread the word.

...and don't forget to check out our [online archive](#) for past issues of *Insights*!

The International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) is a nonprofit, professional membership organization and an affiliate of the American Alliance of Museums. IMTAL's mission is to inspire and support the use of theatre and theatrical technique to cultivate emotional connections, provoke action, and add public value to the museum experience.

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