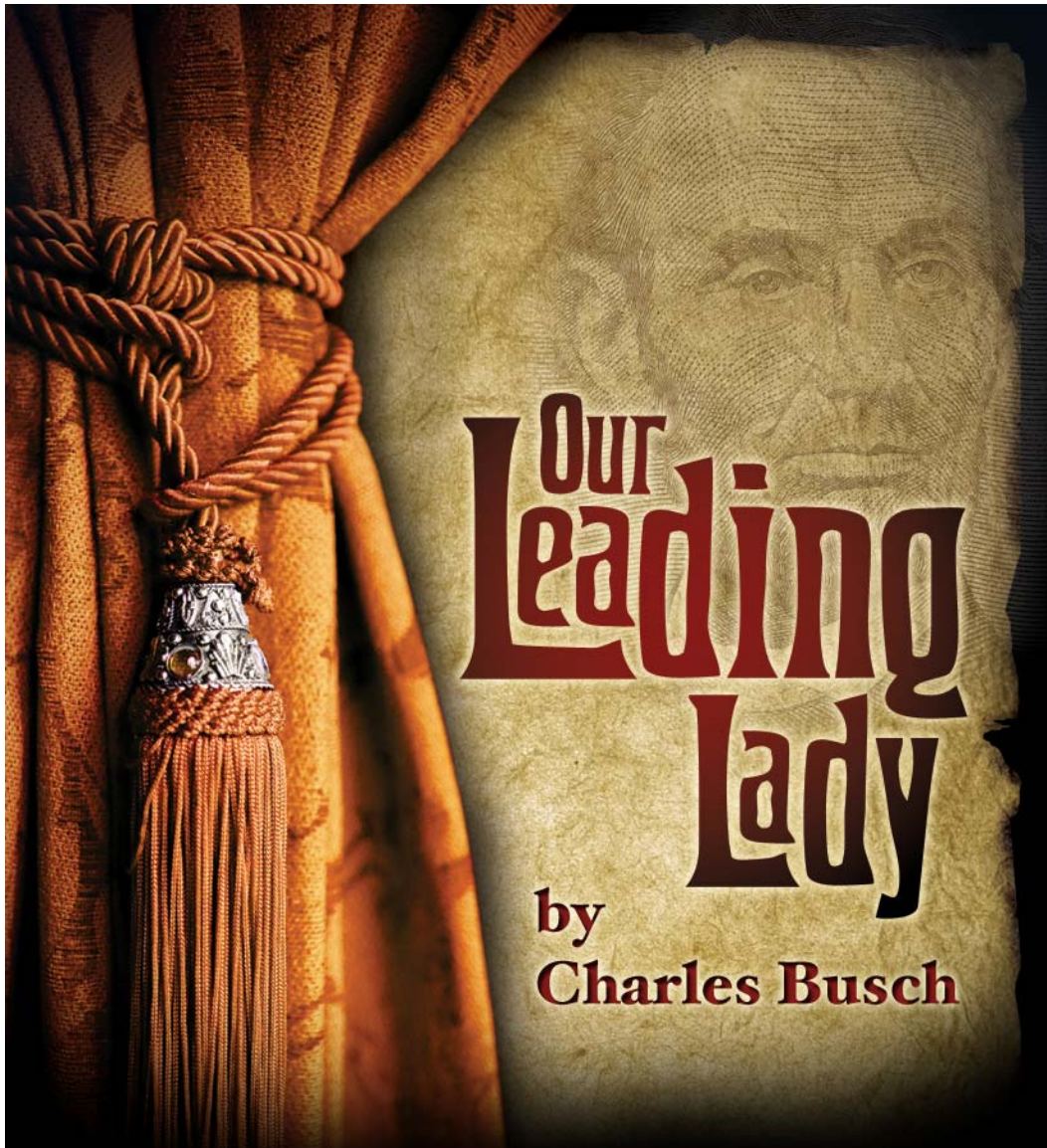


THEATRE JACKSONVILLE PRESENTS



STUDY GUIDE 2009-2010



Little Theatre. Big Voice.

THEATRE JACKSONVILLE
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ABOUT THEATRE JACKSONVILLE

Since its inception in 1919, the Little Theatre (which became Theatre Jacksonville in 1972) has thrived in good times as well as through some of the 20th Century's worst – the Depression, a Second World War, political assassinations, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and most recently, the threat of terrorist activities. Today, Theatre Jacksonville has the distinction of being one of America's oldest continually producing community theatres and one of Jacksonville's most cherished cultural treasures.

At this writing, Theatre Jacksonville is celebrating its 90th season. The theatre still resides at 2032 San Marco Boulevard, a building that was named to The National Register of Historic Places in 1991. Maintaining the vision of the Theatre Jacksonville pioneers, the theatre produces a season of high quality plays and musicals as well as offerings like the annual Shakespeare production, a performing arts Training Center for youth and adults, and an annual Creative Arts Summer Camp for children. The theatre is also dedicated to providing opportunities for the Jacksonville community to become involved in the artistic process – whether onstage, behind the scenes, in workshops, in the classroom or in the audience. Since 1919, Theatre Jacksonville's volunteers, patrons and staff have been the backbone of the theatre's success.

Because of this vital community involvement, the theatre has forged a remarkable legacy that continues to make a long-lasting impact on the First Coast.

— *Staci Cobb, Development Director*

A GUIDE TO THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Theatre, unlike movies or television, is a LIVE performance. This means that the action unfolds right in front of an audience. The performance, though well rehearsed, is constantly evolving. The actors respond to the audience: laughter, clapping, gasps and general reactions. Therefore the audience is a critical part of the theatre experience. In fact, without the audience, the actors would still be in rehearsal!

As an audience member, it is important to observe certain etiquette so that you may enjoy the best theatre experience possible.

When the performance is about to begin, the lights will dim. This is a signal for the actors and the audience to put aside concerns and conversation and settle into the world of the play.

The performers expect the audience's full attention and focus. This is the time for the audience to think inwardly, not a time to express your thoughts aloud. Talking to neighbors (even whispering) carries easily to others in the audience and to the actors onstage.

There is no food allowed in the theatre: soda, candy, and other snacks are noisy and therefore, distracting. (Not to mention messy!)

Walking through the aisles during the performance is disruptive. Actors occasionally use the aisles and stairways as entrances and exits. The actors will notice any movement in the performance space.

Please use the restroom and take care of all other concerns before the show, or at intermission.

Cell phones, pagers, watch alarms and other electronic devices must be turned off before the performance begins. When noisy objects of this type go off it is very distracting for the actors and audience. Absolutely no text messaging.

Again, attending a live performance is a time to sit back and look inward, question what is being presented to you and be curious about worlds that are different than yours. As theatre artists we approach our audiences with respect and expect the same in return. Live theatre offers the opportunity to experience new ideas and discover people and lives previously unknown to you. Your open mind, curiosity, and respect will allow a whole other world to unfold right before your eyes!

OUR LEADING LADY by Charles Busch

THE PLAY

Based on historical accounts, *Our Leading Lady* tells the story of Laura Keene, the British-born stage actress whose company was performing *Our American Cousin* at Washington, DC's Ford's Theatre in 1865 - the night Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed by John Wilkes Booth. In classic Charles Busch fashion, *Our Leading Lady* is a backstage comedy that takes a crucial twist, as Laura and her theatrical troupe collide with history the fateful night that would change their lives - and the history of the nation - forever

THE PLAYWRIGHT

CHARLES BUSCH is the author and star of such plays as *The Lady in Question*, *Red Scare on Sunset* and *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, which ran five years and is one of the longest running plays in Off-Broadway history. His play *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* ran for 777 performances on Broadway and won Mr. Busch the Outer Circle Critics John Gassner Award and received a Tony nomination for Best Play. He wrote and starred in the film versions of his plays, *Psycho Beach Party* and *Die Mommie Die*, the latter of which won him the Best Performance Award at the Sundance Film Festival. In 2003, Mr. Busch received a special Drama Desk Award for career achievement as both performer and playwright. Mr. Busch made his directorial debut with the film *A Very Serious Person*, which premiered at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival, where it won an honorable mention. He is also the subject of the documentary film *The Lady in Question is Charles Busch*. His latest play *The Third Story* was produced in 2009 by MCC at the Lortel Theatre.

THE CAST

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Laura Keene..... | MARYBETH ANTOINETTE |
| Harry Hawk..... | DAVID PAUL |
| Gavin De Chamblay..... | BRAD TROWBRIDGE |
| Verbena De Chamblay..... | NANCY MORGAN |
| Maude Bentley..... | SANDY SPURNEY |
| W.J. Ferguson..... | JOSH McTIERNAN |
| Madame We-Chan..... | TONI PHILIPS |
| Clementine Smith..... | STACY WILLIAMS |
| Major Hopwood..... | SCOTT PEELER |

THE SETTING

APRIL 1865 - In and around Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC

THE DIRECTOR

MICHAEL R. LIPP has directed or performed in nearly 60 productions on local stages since moving to Jacksonville from his home state of Connecticut 25 years ago. Michael has directed ten acclaimed productions for **Theatre Jacksonville**, including *Enchanted April*, *A Shayna Maidel*, *The Secret Garden*, and last season's *Into the Woods*, all of which won our Best Production of the Year Award. He has appeared a number of times on the Theatre Jax stage as well, including the title character in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, for which he won our Best Actor Award, and his Best Supporting Actor Award-winning roles in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Moon Over the Brewery*, along with nominated performances in *Seussical* and *The Little Foxes*. His most recent appearance on our stage was as Jack in this season's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Michael's directing and acting talents have also been seen at many other area theatres – Players by-the-Sea Theatre, Atlantic Beach Experimental Theatre, Limelight Theatre, Jacksonville University, and Jacksonville Actor's Theatre. Michael received his Master's Degree in Molecular Biology from Vanderbilt University and he currently teaches math at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts.

LAURA KEENE



Laura Keene (20 July 1826 – November 4, 1873) was an American actress and manager who will forever be remembered for the tragedy that befell her company during a performance of *Our American Cousin* on Good Friday, April 14, 1865 at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

She was born Mary Frances Moss in Westminster, England. At eighteen she married Henry Taylor, the godson of the Duke of Wellington and had two children. Her marriage ended abruptly after seven years, and even though she had no background in theatre, she decided she must try her luck on the stage.

Since she had no training, she paid to study with Emma Brougham where she learned the basics and prepared a number of ingenue roles. She debuted with the new name of Laura Keene and attracted the attention of Charles Matthews who offered her a role in *The Chain of Events*, at the Lyceum. Soon after, she left for America where she would debut in *The Merchant of Venice*. She took her children with her, but since divorce or separation was so widely frowned upon in America, she invented the story that her daughters were her nieces.

She joined the fledgling company of James W. Wallack, and played thirty-four roles on 250 nights. She then split off from his company to form her own in Baltimore. She took the Charles Street Theatre and made history as the first woman to manage a theatre in America on Christmas Eve 1853 by opening a season of plays with *Hearts Are Trump*. By March, she and her company had performed thirty-four plays on sixty nights.

Almost immediately, she set sail for San Francisco to take starring roles with a stock company there, which included a young Edwin Booth. She then traveled with her daughters to Australia where she would once again act with Edwin Booth. While in Sydney, she encountered her estranged husband who had managed to amass a small fortune and begged her to return to him, but she refused asking instead for a legal separation which he in turn refused. After only twelve productions in Australia, she (and Edwin Booth) returned to San Francisco and assembled a company at the American Theatre where she played *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest*, and *Henry VIII* which met with both success and critical acclaim. She then returned to New York to take up management there.

Once back in New York, she secured a lease for the Metropolitan Theatre, which she renamed Laura Keene's Varieties. Her most successful show was *Camille* which played for an astonishing run of three weeks in a season of forty-five plays running for 153 nights.

After she lost her lease, she decided to build her own theatre – The Laura Keene Theatre. While waiting for the building to be completed she decided to take her company, scenery and all, to Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia, which was unprecedented and led the way for the grand tours that would follow decades later.

The Laura Keene Theatre was an artistic and social success which solidified the artistic reputation of Laura Keene. However, once she chose to produce the play *Our American Cousin* by Tom Taylor, her theatre became a financial success. *Our American Cousin* was the first long run show in modern theatre history.

In 1865, *Our American Cousin* played at Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C. on the night of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. By some accounts, Keene entered the presidential box at Ford's Theatre after the President was shot by John Wilkes Booth, and cradled the wounded President's head in her lap.

Keene was a successful melodramatic actress and an admirable manager. For most of the last 10 years of her career, she continued to direct her traveling company. Although Keene will forever be associated with *Our American Cousin* the night that President Lincoln was assassinated, she also played a significant role in the evolution of the actress as theatre manager in the history of American theatre.

Keene died of tuberculosis at the age of 47 at Montclair, New Jersey. She is buried in Brooklyn NY's Green-Wood Cemetery.

ASSASSINATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN



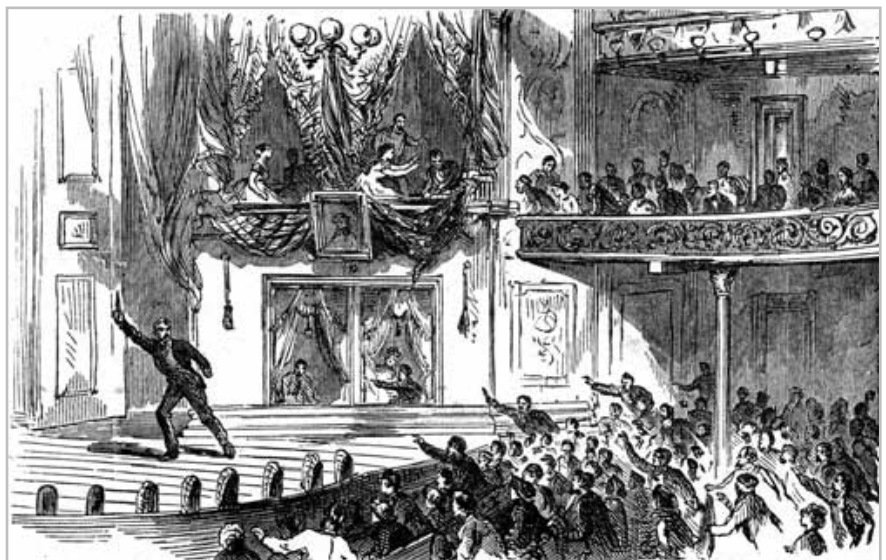
John Wilkes Booth, born May 10, 1838, was part of a renowned stage family who performed throughout the country. He was also a Southern sympathizer during the Civil War. He despised Abraham Lincoln who was though to be the representation of everything Booth stood against. Booth blamed Lincoln for all the South's troubles and wanted revenge.

Initially, Booth developed plans to kidnap President Lincoln, take him to Richmond and hold him in return for Confederate war prisoners. By January 1865, Booth had organized a group of co-conspirators that included Samuel Arnold, Michael O'Laughlen, John Surratt, Lewis Powell, George Atzerodt, and David Herold. On March 17, 1865, the group planned to capture Lincoln who was scheduled to attend a play in the outskirts of Washington. However, the president changed plans and remained in the capital foiling Booth's kidnapping plot.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. Booth's plans now turned in the direction of assassination.

On the morning of Friday, April 14, 1865, Booth dropped by Ford's Theatre where he frequently acted and was surprised to learn that the president and Mrs. Lincoln were planning to attend that evening's performance of *Our American Cousin*. Seizing upon this opportunity to fulfill his ambition, he held one final meeting with his co-conspirators. He decided to kill Lincoln at the theater. Atzerodt was to kill Vice-President Andrew Johnson at the Kirkwood House where Johnson lived, and Powell was assigned to kill Secretary of State William Seward. All attacks were to take place simultaneously at approximately 10:15 P.M. that night. Booth hoped the resulting chaos and weakness in the government would lead to a comeback for the South and a hero's welcome for himself.

By all accounts, the presidential party arrived at Ford's a little after 8:30 P.M. Armed with a single shot derringer and a hunting knife, Booth arrived at Ford's at about 9:30 P.M. and went next door for a drink. An employee of the theatre, Joseph Burroughs, held his horse in the rear alley. Booth entered the front of Ford's Theatre around 10:07 P.M. and made his way toward the State Box where the Lincolns were sitting with Clara Harris and Major Henry Rathbone. A hole had been drilled in the back of



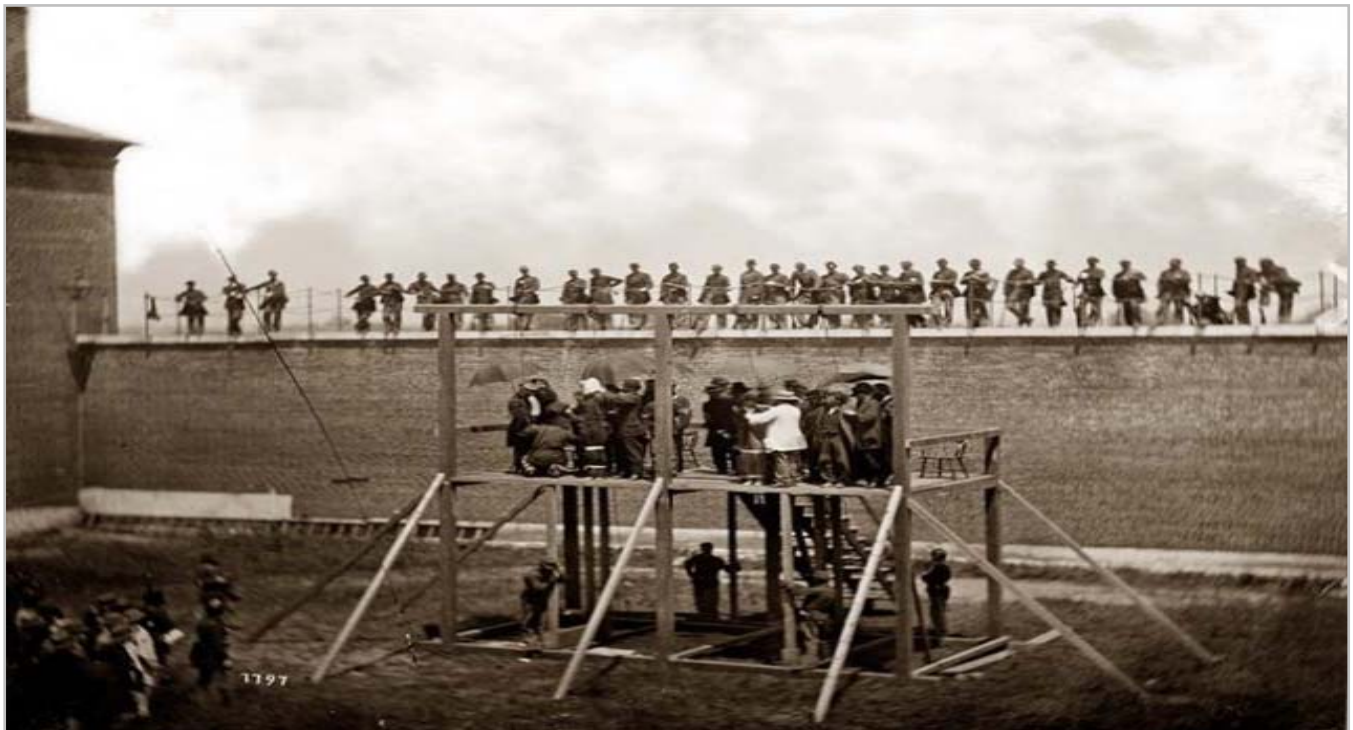
the box so that a guard could observe the occupants without disturbing them. At about 10:15 P.M. Booth found the guard had stepped away from his post, so he opened the door to the State Box, shot Lincoln in the back of the head at near point-blank range, and struggled with Rathbone. Booth escaped the box by jumping over 11 feet to the stage below. When he hit the floor he snapped the bone in his left leg just above the ankle. Many in the theater thought they heard him yell "Sic Semper Tyrannis" (Latin for "As Always to Tyrants") and he limped across the stage and out of the theatre to his awaiting horse. Everything happened so fast that no one had time to stop him. In the ensuing chaos, he was able to escape the city.

The rest of the assassination attempts were not as successful. Atzerodt made no attempt to kill Vice-President Johnson, and Powell stabbed Secretary of State Seward but failed to kill him. Booth met up with one of the other conspirators, David Herold, in Maryland and stopped briefly around midnight at Mary Surratt's leased tavern in Surrattsville. Early in the morning, the two men met at Dr. Mudd's home where Booth's broken leg was set and splinted by Dr. Mudd.

Back in Washington Lincoln never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead at 7:22 A.M. on the morning of April 15, 1865, at the Petersen House (across the street from the theater).

Booth and Herold left Dr. Mudd's during the following afternoon and traveled south. Federal authorities were finally able to catch up with them at the Garrett's farm near Port Royal, Virginia early in the morning of April 26. Hiding in a barn, Herold gave up, but Booth refused, so the barn was set on fire. Booth still didn't come out and was shot to death by Sergeant Boston Corbett. Booth's body was searched, and a diary was among the things found. Booth's remains were returned to Washington for positive identification.

Within days the rest of the conspirators with the exception of John Surratt were found and arrested. They were tried by military tribunal and found guilty. Mrs. Surratt, Powell, Atzerodt, and Herold were all hanged. Dr. Mudd, O'Laughlen, and Arnold were given life terms in prison and a Ford's Theatre stagehand received a sentence of six years in prison.



TERMS AND CULTURAL REFERENCES

Bonnie King Charles | (1600-1649) Charles I of England

Coquette | Woman who endeavors without sincere affection to gain the attention and admiration of men

Fontana di Trevi | The Trevi Fountain in Rome



Neil Gwynn | (1650-1687) one of the earliest English actresses to receive prominent recognition



Mathilda Heron | (1830-1877) American actress who founded the “emotional school” of acting

Ingénue | Stock character in theatre and literature who is typically beautiful, gentle, sweet, and often naïve

Mezzanine | The first balcony

Nosegay | Small bouquet of flowers given as a gift

Proscenium Arch | In theatrical design, the arch that frames a stage, separating it from the auditorium

Richmond, VA | Capital of the Confederacy

Saint Christopher’s Medal | Medal denoting the patron saint of travel

Soft Soap | Term referring to a soap made from oils. Also a contemporary term meaning to soothe or persuade with flattery or blarney

Soufflé | Light, fluffy, baked cake made with egg yolks and beaten egg whites that has a tendency to collapse rather quickly

Tom Taylor | Author of *Our American Cousin*

Whist | Classic English card game that was played widely during the 18th and 19th centuries

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Laura Keene was a real historical figure. What details about her actual personal and professional life are revealed in the script? Have any been changed? Are there any other interesting facts about her life that are not mentioned?
2. Research some of the details about the life of other characters in the play who are based on actual historical figures.
3. What things do Wu-Chan and Laura have in common that bind them so closely together? How is each of them a "soldier"?
4. Why is the character of Wu-Chan significant? Why does she feel the need to hide behind an alter ego? Why don't the other characters who interact with her recognize or acknowledge her true identity? What does her character reveal about the historical time period of the play?
5. Describe the plot and characters of *Our American Cousin* by Tom Taylor (the play being performed in the show). What is significant about the scene and lines in *Our American Cousin* when Lincoln's assassination took place?
6. Describe Laura Keene's role as an "actor-manager" in a repertory company of the time.

SUGGESTED READING

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Laura Keene A British Actress on The American Stage, 1826-1873..... | Vernanne Bryan |
| The Life of Laura Keene..... | John Creahan |
| Chasing Lincoln’s Killer: The Search for John Wilkes Booth..... | James L. Swanson |
| Lincoln: A Photobiography | Russell Freedman |
| Photo by Brady: A Picture of the Civil War | Jennifer Armstrong |
| The Long Road to Gettysburg | Jim Murphy |

STUDYGUIDE SOURCES

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