

THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD
BY CHARLES DICKENS
ILMINSTER ENTERTAINMENT SOCIETY
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DIRECTED AND ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY MALCOLM YOUNG

The Play

What an exciting challenge, Malcolm, bringing this epic story of David Copperfield to life! Charles Dickens described the novel as his “favourite child” and indeed his account of some of David’s experiences in the book were clearly autobiographical, as his own father had been incarcerated in a debtors’ prison. There is an innovative opening to the play, where the older David is narrating and looking back (as he does throughout the novel). The stage is described as being dimly lit to reveal only the shapes of characters whom we shall no doubt meet throughout the play. The youngest David stands behind two older versions of himself and is revealed as a small child only after they have both left the stage, thus beginning the action with his youthful mother Clara and of course his nurse and loyal friend Peggotty.

I am greatly looking forward to the fluidity of movement throughout the play, for example David 2 walking upstairs and passing David 1 coming down for his exit as the narration continues and am intrigued as to how you will stage and interpret the various scene changes. The script states that there are 34 in all! There are many different homes depicted throughout the play, and I wonder whether you will keep sets simple and use movement of props and effective lighting to aid these transitions. Of course many of these occur whilst the Narrator is looking back on his life and therefore the audience will stay focused throughout.

The script swiftly and successfully covers David’s life and we meet such a wonderful range of characters. Dickens’s observation of human nature was quite amazing and comes to the fore within the play; naivety, honesty, loyalty, kindness, patience, flamboyance, ruthlessness, cruelty, avarice, deviousness - they are all there, and it will be a treat to see your cast depict their particular character.

I felt that the script had strayed away from the novel a little with reference to Emily being present when Ham and Steerforth died, but it does bring Emily back quite nicely. I did become a little confused on page 44 of the script when Mr Micawber shouts for Traddles; there wasn’t an explanation as to why Traddles should have been there (in the novel he was in fact a lodger of Mr Micawber’s at this time) and again on page 57 when Traddles is also mentioned by Dora, although he hadn’t been in the room, and Dora said she was frightened of him. I can only think that all will be revealed when I see the play and I am sure you will have addressed this, Malcolm.

Presentation

It is always a pleasure to visit the Warehouse Theatre. There was a relaxed atmosphere whilst the audience were assembling and it was encouraging to see a wide range of ages ranging from children to older adults.

Initially the curtains were closed and when opened we met our Narrator, the older David, who sat front of stage left in a well-lit spot at a small table with glazed inkpot

and an authentic looking quill, an archway behind him being used for entrances and exits. A white gauze curtain was drawn across the stage and set approximately seven feet back which allowed action to take place at the front of the stage when the curtain was drawn across. The area behind the curtain was first in darkness and, led by the narration, atmospheric lighting and music are used extremely well until eventually the gauze curtain is drawn back and the stage is lit to reveal David at different ages, in turn to the narration, they had been placed so well on the stairs this was very enjoyable and a fabulous start to the play. I felt the choice of the blue and white wash as a background for the simple set was extremely well thought out as at times you could imagine the sky and at others the sea. Well done, Richard; a lot of painting required here as the legs were also painted to match and used for many of the entrances and exits. At first I was quite surprised to see your central, modern looking set, one central unit constructed of wood and painted white, consisting of a small flight of steps leading to an upper room with an L shaped bed, utilised to enable actors to sit next to those in the bed, the end of the bed facing the audience was effectively and amusingly used as Barkis's cart, a bench was also incorporated at the front of this unit. This structure was extremely well thought out; it was effectively used throughout the play and well constructed, the curved back softened the whole effect. Your set builders are to be congratulated!

Well done, Brian; lighting was effective throughout and always on cue. It was synchronised with what the narrator was saying and lifted gently to reveal changes in scenes. I was particularly impressed in that you successfully lit the front of the stage when action was taking place here but scene changes taking place behind the gauze, which at this point remained in darkness, were non-obtrusive which helped to make the production seamless. Nice subdued lighting at times as demanded by the script. The storm scene was well timed and very effective with the lanterns. Good work.

Sound – thank you Peter; your sound effects added greatly to the atmosphere of the play, music was well chosen, especially the flute at the opening of the play, and the music accompanying the scene when Dora was dying. You incorporated the sound of the cart and the clapping of hooves when Mr Barkis drove his cart, street noises when David met Mr Micawber by chance, birds singing when he met Dora in the garden. I particularly liked the sounds of the sea when visiting Mr Peggotty's boat and of course the sound of the storm had us all enthralled. Well done.

There were some delightful props throughout with a chalked blackboard sign to warn us that David bites! A wonderful teacher's can, walking sticks, a broom, a paper kite for Mr Dick, a wooden birdcage and wicker luggage for Aunt Betsey, lanterns well lit and very effective in the storm scene, Mr David Copperfield's quill and inkpot on his table, a dark wooden occasional table and chairs with tea tray with silverware for tea at the sisters house and of course we mustn't forget Jip with his floppy ears! Nicely put together.

Wardrobe - Ruth, Nicola and Louise, you have done a marvellous job; so many different characters to portray and so well done. To commence the narrator looked wonderful and set the era in his smart black tail coat and bowtie. I felt a homely feel was given to the Blunderstone scene with young David in his green jacket, Clara in her simple lilac dress and Peggotty in blue skirt, practical white apron and cap. Our

older David had a very nice blue jacket and white trousers. The boat scene was also depicted well with Mr Peggotty in his neckerchief and neutral shirt and trousers. Mr Peggotty was very smart when he visited Mrs Steerforth in smart long jacket and cap. Emily in her smock and later as a young lady in red skirt and white blouse; her poor looking dress when she was eventually found depicted her change in circumstance well. Little Ham's simple attire both as a young lad and later in the play with his trousers tied up with string, a striking cap and neckerchief matched his role. I particularly liked Mrs Gummidge's black outfit which suited her lost, forlorn character. Miss Murdstone cut quite a forbidding figure, well done on her outfit, her long black skirt with black cape and bonnet with and black netted fingerless gloves, rather menacing, her brother cutting quite a dash in his long jacket and waistcoat. There was a lovely outfit for Mr Creakle in his gown and mortar and his wife simply dressed with shawl and cap, the boys looked well in their uniforms of black waistcoats with Steerforth singled out nicely in his blue coat. Mr Micawber looked wonderful in his flamboyant rust coloured jacket nicely clashing check waistcoat and check trousers and his wife in nice shawl and pink dress. We then meet Aunt Betsey in Dover, such a country feel with her check dress, shawl and lovely bonnet but nevertheless still looking very much a lady and in control with spectacles on the end of her nose. We were to see her later on too in a beautiful green satin dress with black edging, black shawl and lacy gloves. Of course we mustn't forget Mr Dick with his lovely multicoloured hat, matching waistcoat in gold, and jacket, and Janet too in her long brown dress, smock, long bloomers and cap, ready to face those donkeys! Bless David when he came in an overlarge tail coat. Of course we then move on to Canterbury; Mr Wickfield looked immaculate in his tails and waistcoat with pocket watch, Uriah menacing in his black suit, white shirt and those black fingerless gloves and little Agnes looked lovely in her blue velvet dress, white bloomers and mob cap and later on Agnes as a young lady in brown dress with red flowers and ribbons in her hair and later still in her burgundy dress. I thought Mrs Heep's outfit was well thought out in that she first appeared in a dark green skirt and black shawl and then a black velvet jacket replaced the shawl befitting her move to the Wickfield residence. When we did meet David as a young man he looked fabulous in his green jacket, matching waistcoat, white cravat and his white buttoned trousers, the older Steerforth too, very charming in his brown tail coat and red waistcoat again with a white cravat. I enjoyed the Waterbrook's party scene, all gentleman suitably attired and a glamorous lacy dress with diamante neckline for Mrs Waterbrook. Mrs Steerforth looked quite a lady in her lovely black skirt, white blouse and black shawl with lacy headdress. The aunts were well dressed, one in burgundy cloak and another in stripy dress and brown cloak, complete with caps, and their maid in green dress and white frilled apron and mob cap. Dora's dresses complimented her youth well. What a wonderful job you have done; I felt all costumes were appropriate to the Dickensian era and depicted characters and status well. Congratulations!

Hairstyles suited characterisation well, with some nice whiskers for the gentleman.

Make-up - I thought that maybe Mr Peggotty, the older Ham and Mr Barkis needed a more rugged, weather-worn look, giving the impression of the outdoor life they led and would have liked to see Peggotty with a rosy glow in her cheeks, however with so many characters to consider, in the main make-up seemed appropriate and looked well under the lights, well done Vivienne.

Direction

It was obvious from the opening scene that you had taken great care in presenting your play, Malcolm. You and your backstage crew had devised a composite set that was extremely workable and aided the transition of all those scenes quickly, effectively and without the least interruption. The use of the gauze curtain added a little mystery to the scenes to come which was aided by very efficient lighting and effective sound. It was a shame that the curtain track was rather noisy and stilted and I wondered if, when the cord was pulled, was a hand-over-hand method used? This might have helped the curtain glide more and diminished the noise. Of course your charismatic narrator, Patrick, who guided us through David's story was engaging and therefore actors getting in place for scene changes behind the curtain when the stage was in darkness weren't noticeable. At other times actors just simply walked on from the wings as the story unfolded and your audience remained interested throughout. Some lovely scenarios were set from the beginning with the reveal of the three Davids, the sounds of the shore welcoming us on to Peggotty's boat, the upstairs room used for some emotional scenes for us to ponder and the comical scene of Barkis driving his horse and cart, to your wonderful tableau at the end, all actors appearing on stage as the narrator nostalgically remembered those characters who shaped his life, so well placed. The backdrop of a blue and white wash leaving us to think of sky or sea as our narrator took us through the scenes. Marvellous!

Your cast was chosen well and I think you need to be congratulated here in that you have chosen a play with community theatre in mind, a vast range of ages to be seen on your stage, it is so encouraging for the juniors in your cast to be able to work and learn from the older and more experienced actors in the play.

Your experience as a director shone through. You positioned and moved your actors so that we were never in any doubt as to the scenes they were portraying; fabulous work, I particularly liked the very humorous chaos when Aunt Betsey spotted and chased the donkeys together with Mr Dick and Janet, her broom always at the ready, the chaos increased nicely with each sighting, ending with a very funny entrance of the two Murderers (oops, I mean Murdstones!) Barkis and David on the cart was an innovative idea sat on the end of the bed upstairs, therefore really well seen, the reins were held convincingly but I felt this would have been even funnier if they were moving from side to side and maybe rising slightly when the cart went over a bump etc., I am sure Demetrius would have enjoyed this too! Good use of the bench at the front of your set, well utilised by Mrs Gummidge on the boat and also when David visited the Heep's house and was subjected to the stroking of Mrs Heep. I did feel there was a little masking during the scene when David and Dora were welcoming their relatives and Peggotty into their home and felt David could have taken Peggotty down stage right for their conversation and then needed to walk only a little SL in order for Dora to join him re the conversation about the meal, leaving the aunts Lavinia and Clarissa in full view. We were enthralled by the storm scene; this was greatly enhanced by the dark, the sound effects, the lanterns lighting the stage, the shouts and of course Zuleika's piercing scream. I did feel occasionally that voice projection needed to be worked on as it was difficult to hear some of your younger actors, but of course this will improve as more experience is gained. As mentioned above the emerging tableaux was wonderful, such good placement of all the characters of the play not to mention the children ascending the stairs to join the

waiting David and Agnes as their own children, with poor deceased Dora looking on; extremely effective and a wonderful end to an extremely well directed play. Excellent work Malcolm.

CAST

Narrator – Patrick Knox

A charismatic narration, Patrick; we so enjoyed listening to your lovely gentlemanly voice as you guided us through David's journey of life. We heard every word and your relaxed, conversational delivery to the audience was wonderful, always pausing to let us digest an amusing or poignant part of the dialogue or for actors to appear on stage, sometimes at the front close to where you sat or behind the white curtain but your narration was always well timed, allowing them to get into their place.

Sometimes you sat with legs crossed and hands resting nicely on your knees and at other times you turned slightly and indicated with your arms - I loved your handing over the quill! Excellent!

David as a child – Finley Lewis

Oh, Finley, we so enjoyed seeing you on stage in your lovely jacket and trousers, and what a treat to see you hidden behind the two older Davids, then sitting in bed asking Peggotty if she is married and offering your left hand to Mr Murdstone! You did well too coming downstairs to ask "why are you shouting". Well done, I hope you enjoyed playing David.

David as a boy – Demetrius Driver

This was quite a large part for you Demetrius and you handled the many varied scenes well, a nice ride with Mr Barkis on the cart, handing him a cake, and I enjoyed your scene with Little Emily at the front of the stage. We did see you biting Mr Murdstone's hand! You cried out well at Mr Creakle's thrashing. The meetings with Mr Micawber, Miss Trotwood and Mr Dick were quite amusing, especially when you asked, with great hesitancy, if Mr Dick was "out of his mind?" Then of course you were fawned over by Mr Heep and his mother, poor you! Your entrance and exits were all well timed, so important, and you delivered your lines well. I am sure you will want to do more acting in the future, never be afraid to show that your character is upset or happy on stage, for example crying a little more after the beating and when talking to Peggotty about going away to school or smiling and showing more pleasure or even bewilderment at Aunt Betsey chasing the donkeys and Mr Dick's super ideas but very good work for such a young actor, Demetrius.

David as a young man – Xavier Driver

You cut a dashing figure when you appeared on the stage in your lovely green jacket and matching waistcoat and white trousers. This was not an easy role to play for a young actor Xavier as David has many different emotional encounters along the way. You played him as a mild-mannered but astute young gentleman concerned when Agnes is talking about her father and Uriah's hold over him. Initially pleased to see Steerforth but easily guessing it was he who had run off with Emily, I think you may have shown more emotion here as your friends had been duped. You delivered "I should have known you anywhere, Miss Murdstone" well when meeting her at Mr Spenlow's. You fell in love with Dora and gallantly took her hand. You portrayed a quiet loyalty to your friends and we found it amusing when you were continually meeting Mr Micawber in different circumstances until finally he is working for Uriah at

Mr Wickfields! You had an emotional scene to handle, holding Dora until the end. At times your lines were a little rushed and your voice was sometimes too quiet but as you are given more characters to play, your confidence will grow. Please don't forget to think about the various emotions your character is feeling, firstly on the inside, and then let it out for the audience to see. Well done, Xavier, and I hope to see you on the stage again.

Clara Copperfield and Sarah, the maid – Ruth Moran

Poor Clara, you did look a slight little figure and we could well believe that you would soon come under the influence of the two Murdstones. This was evident when David returns from Yarmouth and your anxiety had markedly increased, so much so that you apologised for wanting to comfort Davy. Nice portrayal. As the maid Sarah an amusing entrance with a shaking of the tray; I fully expected you to say "two soups!" Well done.

Peggotty – Lucy Driver

A lovely homely outfit, Lucy, which suited your character well, though I thought some very rosy cheeks would have finished it off! You were a champion of both Clara and of David. Some lovely scenes, firstly sitting by Davy's bed and reading about crocodills and then later comforting him on the stairs after his beating; you had some emotional moments which you handled well. You loved your family in Yarmouth and later cared for Mr Barkis. Your portrayal was soft, caring and practical, taking Dora off to sort the dinner but at times you weren't afraid to speak your mind. A pleasant performance.

Edward Murdstone – Neil Morgan

What a rogue! We could easily see why Clara in her naivety would instantly be attracted to you; you were a handsome man and did try and appear to be charming until of course we saw your true colours and you stopped Clara comforting poor Davy and then you went upstairs to deliver the beating. This was done extremely well, but I felt that more sternness and raising of voice would really have enhanced this scene. Your meeting with Aunt Betsey was superb. Well done.

Jane Murdstone – Belinda Morgan

A good strong portrayal here, Belinda. Your malicious nature was immediately evident when, with brilliant facial expression, you looked down your nose at poor David because generally speaking, you don't like boys! You kept in character throughout using your hands in those black lacy fingerless gloves to menacing effect, always delighting in David's discomfort and overjoyed at sending him to London. We all had a good chuckle when Aunt Betsey had marked your card! Very good work.

Barkis – Ken Steed

A humorous performance on your cart with young David, expertly handling the reins and enquiring about Peggotty after tasting one of her cakes. I loved your line "Didn't she though", so well delivered with a well timed pause. A touching scene on your sick bed and after convincingly coughing you told us "Barkis is willing". Nicely done Ken.

Daniel Peggotty – George Montague

Peggotty's brother, Dan, everyone's loyal friend, you played him sincerely and with great understanding, George, and a nice accent. He seemed genuinely pleased to meet young David and proud to introduce him to precious little Emily and Ham and he was always patient with Mrs Gummidge. An honest fisherman who welcomes Steerforth onto his boat only to find he entices Emily to run away with him. A good strong exit when you leave to find Emily and an especially moving but also down-to-earth performance when appealing to Mrs Steerforth. Admirable.

Mrs Gummidge – Maggie Griffiths

A delightful character and you had us all laughing; lovely mannerisms when you were feeling lost and forlorn and had the creeps, and endearingly overawed but happy, clapping your hands when Mr Steerforth enquires about your health. Lovely.

Young Ham – Jasper LeFeuvre

Well done, Jasper, it was nice to see you on the stage.

Ham – Michael Wills

This was a good performance Michael, you looked every inch the working Norfolk man in trousers tied with string, suitably pleased to welcome David and his friend Steerforth onto the boat and I was impressed with your accent. An emotional scene when telling Mas'r Davy and Dan that Emily had run away; this was well done and the wringing of your cap and agitated manner added to your distress. Good work.

Little Emily – Edie Hawkrige

I loved your smock and you did so well, Edie. You delivered your lines flawlessly on the beach from the front of the stage which takes a lot of courage, well done.

Emily – Zuleika Driver

I enjoyed this performance. You looked very attractive in your red skirt and white blouse with your lovely natural hair and were suitably shy of attention when your marriage to Ham was announced and you met Mr Steerforth. After being lost and found, we see you transformed in a drab dress, looking forlorn. I felt you dealt with Emily's feelings of unworthiness and shame very well and you handled the storm scene well, professing her love for Ham, kneeling beside him at the waters-edge and ending with a fabulous piercing scream on seeing Steerforth. Extremely well done, Zuleika!

Mr Creakle and first creditor – Rob Lewis

Rob, you epitomised the tyrannical headmaster, fully enjoying his emotional and physical power over the boys, hanging that terrible placard around David's neck and thrashing him with his cane; this was well done and then chasing off Traddles to deliver another thrashing! A good strong performance. You were also quite menacing dress in black when you crossed the stage in your role as creditor.

Mrs Creakle –Sonya Shaw

A nice mild mannered performance here Sonya, obviously subservient to Mr Creakle and trying hard to find the right words with which to tell David his mother had passed away. Good.

Young Steerforth – Daniel Baker

A confident performance with a nice strong voice and good delivery of lines, amusing too; sticking up for David then skilfully conning him out of his shillings! “That’s a pity” was spot on. Well done Daniel.

Tommy Traddles – Jack Lewis

Just great, Jack, you stuck up for David and later running in late to class was amusing but unfortunately you had to run off again for a thrashing! You did do well though.

Schoolboys – Jasper Lefevre, Hector Montague and Archie Davis

Good taunting of David, you rotten lot! You were all very amusing in class when you pushed David off the bench. Good team work.

Wilkins Micawber – Laurence Meering

You captured this character extremely well Laurence. You were flamboyant in mannerisms, holding onto the edge of your magnificent jacket at times with very amusing facial expressions throughout, especially when passing one of the babies back to Mrs M. I particularly liked your amusing explanation re “annual income twenty pounds” etc; the giving of the salt shaker to David to pawn and that simple walk around the stage before meeting David and his Aunt at the Wickfield’s was delightful. Your continually popping up in penury and trying to convince David that something WILL turn up was really very funny; and the bringing down of Mr Heep with your deposition was delightful; we loved it. Wonderful.

Mrs Micawber – Catherine Meering

Poor Mrs Micawber, never knowing where the next penny was coming from to feed your family, you were genuinely nervous and screaming amongst all those shouts and demands from the creditors; giving up your Mama’s silver salt shaker to keep them at bay! Very amusing too when suggesting Mr Micawber’s next venture and emphatic in the fact that you would “never desert Mr Micawber”. Nicely done.

The Orfling and young Agnes – Sydney Loveless

A good entrance as the Orfling, Sydney, carrying one of the twins; your screaming convincingly added to this scene. You did look the part in your smock and mob cap. You also had another entrance appearing as Agnes. Well done.

James Steerforth - Benjamin Overd

A confident performance, Benjamin, which we did enjoy. With a lovely upper class accent you carried off a privileged and charming young gentleman well but always with an underlying disparagement looking down on Ham, although you were obviously attracted to Emily. Your parting line “I wish we all so good” was spot on. Good characterisation.

Mrs Steerforth – Jo Neagle

I enjoyed this short scene. You were every inch the lady, Jo, and with a good speaking voice. You left Mr Peggotty in no doubt that it would be impossible for James to marry Emily, and you were emphatic but calm and collected. Good work.

Betsey Trotwood – Irene Glynn

We loved Aunt Betsey; what a wonderful lady, pragmatic, direct, loyal and above all very amusing, Irene, from the minute you fell over at the sight of David. The scenes with the donkeys were delightful and actually became more frenetic at each sighting, well done. Your repeated reliance on Mr Dick's advice was wonderful, as was your no-nonsense dealing of the Murdstones, which we all enjoyed! You certainly brought this wonderful character to life, thank you.

Mr Dick – Mick Glynn

What an endearing and comical character, always a little hesitant before you made a grand suggestion and also delightfully childlike. You never lost his loveable, bumbling character Mick and you were everyone's friend, even Jip's. Marvellous.

Janet – Charlotte Wild

You did very well in this role Janet, forever at the ready to chase those donkeys, which you very effectively, a good entrance too when negotiating all that luggage and a bird cage! Well done.

Mr Wickfield – John Tyler

A very appropriate business- like manner was evident when we first met Mr Wickfield, however, you successfully showed hesitancy later on when you had succumbed to the influence of Uriah. Good portrayal.

Agnes – Bethan Moran

You were very much a young lady and lovely in your dresses, I thought you were calm and serene in your performance. You were involved in some emotional scenes, worried about your father and also supporting Dora and David when Dora was losing her life; this is difficult for so young an actress and I think as you gain more experience on the stage your performances will be lifted by thinking these through and trying to express more of the feeling behind the words. Well done, Bethan.

Uriah Heep – Richard Tingley

What a fabulous and challenging role which you fully did justice to, Richard. Your hand wringing in your fingerless gloves and continual body writhing, likened to an eel by Aunt Betsey, were brilliant as was your bent stature in your "umbleness". You established a sly, self-serving character throughout. Wonderful performance.

Mrs Heep – Maddie Lowe

I so enjoyed this performance Maddie; you did make us laugh when welcoming young David into your "umblome" and stroking his jacket effusively, what fun. Your voice so suited your character too. When your son was being taken to task your hand wringing mirrored that of Uriah's in your black lacy fingerless gloves, this was extremely well done as was you throwing yourself onto your knees and begging them not to take your 'Ury' away. Fabulous.

Mr Waterbrook – Ken Cooper

Another very professional gentleman, fully in character, thank you Ken.

Mrs Waterbrook – Stella Davies

You looked stunning Stella in that lovely dress with diamante neckline; a definite lady when announcing that dinner was served. Thank you.

Mr Spenlow and Second Creditor – Philip Hunt

Every inch a gentleman as Mr Spenlow and a demanding voice as the second Creditor – Well done, Philip.

Dora Spenlow – Miranda Carins

You looked extremely attractive in your beautiful dresses, Miranda, and you flirted quite nicely with David when you met. I think a little more naivety and girlishness might have enhanced your character. The scene in your home when Jip had run off with the mutton was quite amusing and you handled your dying scene with dignity, thinking of David to the last. Well done, Miranda.

Lavinia Spenlow – Gill Walker

An amusing little scene at tea with your sister and David, I felt you were definitely the diplomat of the two and of course experienced in affairs of the heart! Nicely done.

Clarissa Spenlow- Ann Cook

It was quite amusing when you were determined to let David hear that there was “no room for them” at Dora’s Mama’s table, only to be curtailed by Lavinia. You did well in this role.

Congratulations to everyone involved; you should be so proud of all your hard work which led to a wonderful production. I am sure you all heard us cheering at the end!

Special thanks to your front of house team too, especially to Val, Olwyn and a nice young man at the ticket desk (I apologise, I don’t know his name) for giving us such a warm welcome. We really enjoyed our evening and meeting you all.

Thank you for inviting me.

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