

Opening Playwriting Workshops to Other Forms and Frameworks of Creative Logic: Challenges and Paradoxes in a Belgian Case

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Abstract

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The emergence of the director at the turn of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century has deeply reinvented theatre making in the West. Since then, the playwright has no longer been the only creating figure; rather, a second new artist assumed responsibility for the global staging of the play. As a result, theatre making has split into two main phases: playwriting and staging (corresponding, respectively, to the responsibilities of the playwright and those of the director).

In 1989, the French theatre theorist Henri Gouhier explored in depth this artistic and temporal schism (*Le Théâtre et les arts à deux temps*), viewing it as the essence of theatre, rather than a specific model which resulted from the director's position of pre-eminence. According to Gouhier, playwriting corresponds to the first step in a creative process, while staging as the second step *re-creates* the play on stage (17). Thus, each step produces a distinct work of art: the text of the play is the first artistic product and the staging of the play is the second.

This mode of theatre-making has contributed to the perception of the playwright as an entity disconnected from the realities of the stage; the statements of Edward Gordon Craig (*On the Art of the Theatre*), Adolphe Appia (*L'Œuvre d'art vivant*) and Jacques Copeau ("Dialogue avec le metteur en scène") have attested to this view. Arguably to legitimize their role, these three prominent directors of the early twentieth century all pointed out the playwright's (alleged) problematic nature, arguing that the dramaturge was henceforth a literary artist, a word master incapable of understanding the logic of the stage.

Through the influence of collective creations, playwriting practices diversified in the second half of the twentieth century. As Sarah Sigal has shown for the U.K. with her guidebook *Writing in Collaborative Theatre-Making*, or as I have demonstrated more broadly in my PhD thesis, *Une métamorphose du drame*, multiple playwrights have been partnering with

theatrical companies and directly writing a play for a specific production, drawing inspiration from what is said and created during workshops or rehearsals—for example, in an improvisation led by the performers. In this type of theatre-making, the writing and staging phases are overlapping and mutually enriching. The process is no longer binary or linear; rather, it is multidimensional and interactive, based on a constant exchange between writing and staging. This could be one of the so-called *heterarchical dramaturgies* considered by Katalin Trencsényi in “Heterarchical dramaturgies,” given that the conventional, ordered and linear process of theatre-making is significantly challenged in favor of a non-hierarchical and rhizomatic process.

However, despite the fact that those playwriting practices have transcended more traditional approaches, the idea of a playwright as detached from the concerns of the stage has endured in Europe. For instance, Henri Gouhier argues that when “the playwright hands over their play to a director or editor, it is because they consider it to be finished as such” (50). In other words, “all that must or can be written is thus written and there are no other words to add” (50); only then can the production begin.

In contemporary European theatre, the playwright and their work may even be considered as obstacles to the concrete and performative reality of the stage. The involvement of a playwright would imply an intermediary creative step, handled moreover by an artist who is not in charge of production. Therefore, the script would be remote from the stage or even be a constraint to the artistic logic of the production. It is, for instance, what Hans Thies Lehmann suggests in the French preface of his famous *Postdramatic Theatre* (*Le Théâtre postdramatique*) when he affirms that the staging “must be considered as a specific artistic practice, as a stage writing act which does not have to be ordered by the logic of the written text” (9).

The researcher Rafaëlle Jolivet Pignon expresses the same view in *La Représentation rhapsodique : quand la scène invente le texte*, stating that within “productions not governed by a dramaturgical organization in the first sense of the term” (349)—that is, by a dramatic written play—but based on a score written by the directors, the meaning proceeds from “an effect of the production and not [from] a hermeneutic ascent of the text by a scenic interpretation”; thus, the text is no longer “immutable and commanding” (32).

In a similar trend, numerous contemporary artists do not base their productions on pre-existing written plays, nor do they collaborate with playwrights, arguing that they want to be as close as possible to the stage and its performative nature (Delaunoy). This dichotomy shapes interactions at the institutional level as well. According to the Belgian director Michael Delaunoy (“Vous comprenez, nous ne faisons plus que les écritures de plateau...”), the implication is that theatres explicitly favor productions proceeding from a devised and collective writing process over those based on a play written by a classical, modern or even contemporary dramaturge, assuming that the former rather than the latter would be more immediate and more connected with the here and now of the stage.

Furthermore, but less consciously, playwriting workshops are almost always conceived as if playwriting were a distinct creative act, separate from the process of staging the play. In her recent article in *Critical Stages*, “Resituating the Writer’s Workshop: Collective Strategies for Playwriting Pedagogy,” Karen Morash notes that playwriting workshops in the U.K. contain very few if any sessions on devising and stage experimentation. Moreover, workshops rarely involve collaboration between authors and other theatre artists such as actors, directors or stage designers. Karen Morash, then, suggests a reconceptualization of playwriting workshop structures to include, among other components, devising sessions and artistic collaboration.

The situation in French-speaking Belgium has been similar to that in the U.K. However, in 2022, a new playwriting workshop which incorporated devising and stage experimentations was launched by the writer Paul Pourveur and his daughter Céline Pourveur. Dedicated for the first edition to young playwrights from 25 to 35 years of age, with no more than two publicly presented written texts, their workshop gave participants an opportunity to write a play draft through improvisation exercises.

In my essay, I will first describe the specificities of their workshop from a Belgian national and pan-European point of view, based on the first edition sessions I attended and the interviews I conducted with the co-creators and four of the nine participants who volunteered to answer my questions; next, I will return to the suggestions made by Karen Morash and highlight the complexity and practical challenges of establishing such a workshop structure.

Playwriting as a Separate Creative Act: Services for Playwriting in French-speaking Belgium

In order to understand the originality of Céline and Paul Pourveur’s workshop from a national perspective, one must consider how playwriting is supported in French-speaking Belgium. Of particular relevance is the fact that the political organization of Belgium is complex. The country is structured as a federal state divided into three regions, which are Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital, as well as three linguistic communities, the French-speaking, the Flemish-speaking and the German-speaking. The French community, also known as the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (Wallonia-Brussels Federation, WBF) has jurisdiction over the French-speaking area of the country; that is, it includes most of the Wallonia region and part of the Brussels-Capital region, a bilingual area. It is an autonomous political entity with its own parliament, government and ministry, which oversee education, scientific research, sport, youth and culture.

In 1999, the WBF created the Centre des Écritures Dramatiques Wallonie-Bruxelles (shortened as CED-WB), a service dedicated to contemporary playwriting. Since its inception, the Centre has provided dramaturgical guidance to playwrights and has assisted them in the promotion and circulation of their plays. In response to this purpose, the Centre has performed several key functions and developed a number of sub-services; yet, its main activity has been to provide dramaturgical feedback for texts being written. A mentoring system and writing residencies have been organized as well. The CED-WB also founded an

award, Le Prix des metteurs en scène (Director's Award), intended to reward plays recently written by WBF writers and awarded by Belgian (performed within Belgium) and foreign (performed outside Belgium) directors.

These various measures are fully in line with Henri Gouhier's model of theatre-making. The play is always conceived independently of any concrete production and before any stage experimentations have been undertaken. Playwriting precedes all the other creative acts of the theatre. The *lecture privée* system, in which a play draft is read by professional performers, could be seen as an exception within this approach because it puts the play to the test of orality and puts the writers in contact with other artists. However, the work and attention of the performers remain focused on the acoustic dimension of the play. No staging is planned, and there are no concrete stage experimentations.

The particular mission of the CED-WB foundation might well be the basis for such a singular focus of attention. The Centre was created in response to a study commissioned by the Minister for Culture of the time and directed by the playwright, translator and performer Pietro Pizzutti. According to the [CED-WB website](#), the results of the study underscored "the difficulties of advising and supporting authors as they were creating plays, and the problems arising when their plays were ready to be produced and performed for an audience." Apparently, the needs and requests of playwrights themselves were envisioned in terms of the two-step model. Playwriting and staging were perceived as two successive phases and each would require a specific type of support: assistance with creation for the former and assistance with distribution for the latter.

Interestingly, the CED-WB has been funded exclusively by the WBF Service de la Promotion des Lettres (Department for the promotion of letters), while the Service général de la création artistique (General department for artistic creation) includes theatre within its domain. Thus, it would appear that the CED-WB is viewed as a service for creative writing in general and not for theatre making in particular. The partition between playwriting and the other creative aspects of theatre seems to be formalized within the organization of public funding itself.

Many other services to support playwriting in the WBF, often co-organized and/or co-financed by the CED-WB, follow the two-step model. One example is the Belgian version of the Lundis en coulisses, originating in France, organized by Sylvia Berruti-Ronelt and co-organized as well as co-produced by a dozen French-speaking theatres and institutions. To promote contemporary drama, this service offers public readings of plays chosen by designated artists. La Scène aux ados can also be mentioned as a similar type of service. Since 2017, representatives from this agency have solicited writing project submissions from dramaturges and assisted those selected to write plays for teenage audiences; the resulting plays are then published and performed by teenagers.

In addition, the Lis-moi tout festival, first organized in 2022 by the Rideau de Bruxelles theatre, has adopted the main lines of the RRRR festival set up in 2017 by Michael Delaunoy, artistic director of the theatre at the time. The festival aims to promote unpublished and unperformed plays of emerging playwrights; as part of this process, festival organizers schedule public readings of selected plays, award the annual Claude Etienne Grant and, as a special feature of the new formula, produce and schedule the awarded play during the following season. In all these agencies, a pre-existing play is promoted or rewarded, or a playwriting project is supported independently of any other creative components of the theatre. In such an approach, playwriting is a singular creative process that always precedes the concrete realization of the play on stage.

These measures, including those of the CED-WB, are highly useful and necessary, as evidenced in their numerous applications. Nevertheless, they all correspond to a very specific model of theatre making, in which the playwright's work stops at the point where the other creative acts of theatre begin. However, as mentioned earlier, many contemporary playwrights are challenging this model.

Noting this gap between practice and institutional support systems, Céline and Paul Pourveur set up a new playwriting workshop in co-production with the CED-WB and with the support of the WBF, via their creation, mentoring and production platform Rhizom-art (see [Rhizom-art webpage](#)). Named *atelier d'écriture de plateau*, this workshop is the first playwriting service in French-speaking Belgium that directly involves devising and stage experimentations.

It is certainly no coincidence that this workshop was partly initiated by Paul Pourveur. As a playwright, Paul Pourveur writes in both French and Dutch, thus demonstrating a linguistic flexibility which few Belgian writers have achieved, and he works comfortably on both sides of the North-South linguistic border. While he first wrote for cinema and television, he started writing for theatre in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, in the mid-1980s. Therefore, his entry into theatre writing coincided with the emergence of what has since been called the *Flemish New Wave*.^[1]

Contemporary with Guy Cassiers, Jan Fabre and Jan Lauwers, Paul Pourveur began to write when new interdisciplinary and performative dramaturgies were being developed. The Flemish New Wave artists radically challenged Henri Gouhier's model, and they questioned the place and role of both the text and the playwright. Many of these artists adopted a "cynical, even violent approach" to the classical repertoire, as noted by Luk Van den Dries (14), adapted non-theatrical texts such as the novel or preferred to write their own texts without a playwright's intervention. Paul Pourveur has acknowledged that he has been marked by these mutations. As a result, he can no longer undertake playwriting without linking it, even tenuously, to the concrete reality of the stage.

In Paul Pourveur's view, this new creative framework, which put the playwright aside for the benefit of the director, impels the playwrights to redefine their practice, and he claims that "a new type of writer is needed" (93). However, as mentioned above, he has observed that no service for playwriting within the WBF has addressed this need. For this reason, he has endeavored to provide young writers with opportunities to experiment with a different mode of writing, one that includes more concretely the specific realities of the stage.

Including Devising and Stage Experimentation: The Stage as a Research Space which Supports the Writing Process

The first edition of Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop, which ran in Brussels (Maison de la Création, Neder-over-Hembeek) from March to June 2022 (the second edition is running as I write these lines), was divided into ten sessions, grouped in pairs. Nine participants with very different profiles were selected: some were first-time writers, while others had already written a few plays or novels; some were involved in other theatre activities, such as acting or directing, whereas others were less familiar with theatre.

The workshop alternated between improvisation exercises on stage, intended to assist the participants in their writing, and dramaturgical discussions around a table, which allowed participants to prepare and debrief the improvisations and to clarify their writing issues. The playwrights wrote at home, between the sessions. On one occasion, from March 24 to 26, they also benefited from a rehearsal space (the Quai 41) where they could progress together on their respective projects without the supervision of Paul Pourveur. Improvisations were part of the workshop from the very first sessions, carried out by the participants themselves, with the assistance of a professional performer, Réal Siellez, from halfway through the workshop.



“Atelier d’écriture de plateau,” rhizom-art asbl, FWB, CED-WB. Maison de la création—NOH. Photo: rhizom-art asbl, 2022

On March 4, Paul Pourveur opened the session with a theoretical overview of the contemporary mutations of theatre making and, more specifically, of playwriting. For the remainder of the first two days, March 4 and 5, participants presented their writing projects and, then, completed their first improvisation drill, during which time they were invited to improvise together by using themes which emerged from their presentations. According to Céline and Paul Pourveur, this exercise served a triple purpose. First, it functioned as an icebreaker to bond the group; second, it helped writers become more familiar with the stage and improvisations; finally, it allowed writers to discover the early dramaturgical and stage potential of their writing ideas. For the next segment, the nine participants had to prepare a brief abstract of the story they wanted to write and outline a situation to be improvised. During the third and fourth sessions, on April 1 and 2, each writer’s project was approached in three phases.

During the first phase, each participant had to present their abstract and situation. Paul Pourveur helped participants clarify and structure their ideas in order to refine the project and facilitate the forthcoming improvisation. He questioned the writer about specific dramaturgical points of the chosen situation—for example, who the characters were, where they came from, why they were gathered or what their points of view were. If the writer had difficulty in identifying the situation to be improvised, Paul Pourveur suggested possible situations. He also helped the participant determine the practical conditions of the improvisation exercise by

asking them about the number of performers needed, the estimated improvisation time and their expectations—for example, he might ask if there were precise instructions to be passed on or if the improvisation was unstructured.

The next phase focused on improvisation. The writer chose performers from among the members of the group and supervised the improvisation process. The format used differed according to the participants. Some took notes, others did not. Some let the improvisation unfold without interruption and rarely intervened. Others regularly intervened to guide the improvisers, by asking for an action to be performed, by passing on diegetic information or by orally expressing the character's intention. The writer ended the improvisation when they deemed it appropriate.

Finally, during the third phase, the improvisation was debriefed. The writer, sometimes with Paul Pourveur's assistance, commented on what they had observed. Once again, the content of the personal feedback depended on the participants. Overall, they underlined what they found interesting, pointed out what they did not want to retain and raised questions or identified difficulties. Then, the whole group discussed the improvisation. Everyone could share their impressions, give their opinions about a dramaturgical aspect and propose documentary or artistic material which could help the writer to progress.

This three-phase method was used for the four following sessions, on April 23 and 24, and on May 20 and 21. The improvisation exercises were based increasingly on written scenes. For each improvisation, the writer chose performers among the group, including Réal Siellez, who had joined the workshop, to first read the scene at the table. The draft was discussed afterward, and Paul Pourveur continued to provide guidance. After this preliminary step was completed, the selected performers went on stage with the script in hand. In most cases, they had to improvise following the framework of the script and could also extend the scene. But a few writers preferred participants to play the scene as written, to determine whether or not the text could work on stage, with real bodies. Then, the group commented on the stage trial. Outside the workshop, the participants could write through what had been tried and discussed in the rehearsal room.

The workshop *modus operandi* is very reminiscent of that of the Writers' Group workshops set up by William Gaskill at the Royal Court Theatre in the early 1960s. In both cases, emergent playwrights met regularly, not to write, but to experiment with stage possibilities by completing improvisation exercises likely to stimulate their writing. In both cases, improvisation sessions served as a laboratory space where writers could draw inspiration and test writing hypotheses.

However, Céline and Paul Pourveur's procedure differs from William Gaskill's method in several respects. The main difference is that the Belgian workshop was clearly organized and limited in time. It included no more than ten sessions and ended with the preparation, during the ninth session on June 16, and the execution, during the tenth session on June 17,

of a public presentation to a professional audience. For the presentation, each writer had to choose other participants to perform a scene which they had written during the workshop period. William Gaskill's workshop, on the other hand, was less delimited and oriented. Céline and Paul Pourveur's formula can be characterized as the two creators' desire to offer young playwrights a springboard towards the concrete production of their plays. This structure has been differently perceived by the participants: while two surveyed writers appreciated the final objective, one would have preferred to progress without a strict deadline to have freer experimentations, and another would have appreciated more sessions to experiment more frequently.

The second difference between the two workshop approaches concerns the time allocated to the dramaturgical discussions. According to Ann Jellicoe, one of the Writers' Group playwrights (Royal Court Theatre Writers' Group), and to William Gaskill himself (*A Sense of Direction. Life at the Royal Court*), the Writers' Group members did not discuss their writing projects in much detail. Conversely, the discussion of participants' projects in Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop was clearly as important as the performance itself. The stage experimentations, as well as the clarifications, feedback and impressions shared at the table were intended to help the writer progress, and they took as much time as the improvisation exercises. Incidentally, all the participants I interviewed stressed how much they had benefited from these conversations.

Moreover, Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop was intended to help the writers progress on specific writing projects. The themes and instructions for improvisations were thus determined according to the ongoing project, whereas, as Ann Jellicoe recounts, the improvisations of William Gaskill's workshop rarely concerned a specific writing project, unless someone was experiencing difficulty and asked the other members for help (64).

A Revitalised Workshop Structure is not Easily Achieved

Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop meets most of the criteria listed by Karen Morash in her proposal for a *revitalized workshop structure* which concludes her article. In addition to calling for peer feedback and the guidance of an experienced writer, the workshop structure relies on devising and stage experimentation sessions, but without replicating collective writing structures, as writing instruction is recognized a *discipline-specific training* (Morash). Céline and Paul Pourveur's approach also allows for the selection of various profiles and experiences and places the writer in the position of dramaturg during the discussion.



“Atelier d’écriture de plateau,” rhizom-art asbl, FWB, CED-WB. Maison de la création—NOH. Photo: rhizom-art asbl, 2022

Nevertheless, apart from playwrights, this approach includes very few additional theatre artists. As I mentioned earlier, the writers themselves took charge of improvisations; only one performer was involved, and his involvement was introduced halfway through the workshop. This absence in the workshop sessions of input from other theatre artists could be viewed as a weakness in the overall approach.

Firstly, it can hinder the writing process. Indeed, although some participants fared better than others, especially those with a background in acting, I noticed that writers sometimes experienced difficulty in proposing interesting situations or lines while improvising. They often spoke at the same time and, sometimes, disregarded the proposals of others, while others remained in the background and seemed uninspired. This format could have been inspiring initially, but in my opinion, its repetition throughout the improvisation exercises weakened the foundation of the workshop. The feedback I received from the four participants interviewed tends to corroborate my opinion. Only two participants felt that they were enabled to progress in their writing due to the stage experimentations; the other two felt that they had progressed only because of the conversations. One sole participant had been directly inspired by the improvised propositions of their fellows and tried to combine these results with their previous writing material and ideas; the other one didn’t find new material on stage, but stage experimentations allowed them to limit the options. Acting is a specific artistic discipline and is not within everyone’s reach without proper training. This is especially true for

improvisation, which requires a subtle combination of ease on stage, good listening skills and physical and linguistic flexibility. The professional performer's presence compensated somewhat for this weakness in design as if Céline and Paul Pourveur had foreseen this limitation of their methodology.

Secondly, since other theatre professionals, such as director, stage designer and others, were not present, their specific skills and points of view were not really included; yet, as Karen Morash has explained, they can be useful to the writer. Réal Siellez's remarks, which he shared during the workshop sessions he attended, support this point. As a participant noticed, and as I witnessed myself, the performer approached the scripts from an actor's point of view, while the participants considered them from the perspective of a writer. In fact, the performer often commented on the characters' inner journey, examined their ways of speaking or identified particular elements with great potential in terms of acting. Giving the writers the opportunity to train with other artists is also a means of recognizing the collaborative and multidisciplinary nature of theatre, as Karen Morash has also noted.

As an innovative methodology, the Pourveur approach includes devising and departs from Henri Gouhier's model, as several interconnected writing and stage experimentation phases are completed for a single script. However, Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop still, paradoxically, isolates playwright from other agents of theatre. It could be argued that the public presentation at the end of the workshop compensated for this omission. It is true that performance places the inscription of playwriting within the more general process of theatre-making. But the completion and realization on stage of the various writing projects are beyond the scope of the workshop, which is focused instead on providing the writers with tools and spaces for experimentation. It would also be interesting to determine how many projects had received professional support as a result of the public presentation.

Of the four participants I interviewed, only two, a woman and a man, were provided with concrete propositions. The former, who is also directing the production of her play, had been offered two creative residencies for the purpose of working with the performers and continuing the play. The latter had been invited by two directors to send his finished play to be read. In such a case, however, there is no guarantee that a creative collaboration including the writer will be undertaken. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but it reveals the limitations of the workshop in terms of collaborative interactions with other artists.

Another drawback to underscore, one which Karen Morash did not address in her paper, is the participants' limited knowledge of each other's writing projects. A participant who found improvisation unhelpful as a source of interesting material suggested that meetings would have been better if the writers/improvisers were better informed of other participants' ideas and intentions; I agree with this assessment. When improvisers have limited knowledge of the author's direction, desires and documentation, they are likely to face more difficulties in

producing helpful improvisations. But within the framework of Céline and Paul Pourveur's workshop structure, this would mean several additional sessions and a greater workload for the writers, who attend primarily for the purpose of developing a personal writing project.

A former playwriting program set up in 2009 by the Sala Cuarta Pared of Madrid actually managed to combine stage experimentation and collaboration with other artists. Named *En Blanco*, this project aimed to support emergent playwrights by offering them "laboratories of stage investigation and of dramaturgical creation with exploratory phases" (Luque, 42). Each supported writer received a grant and had a workspace at their disposal, where they could write a new play with the help of a director and a group of performers.

Antonio Rojano, a writer who participated in the edition 2010, explained me that the process of creation was divided into three main phases. First, the playwright composed a draft on their own. Next, the latter was used for stage experiments. For several weeks, the performers and the director tested it in front of the writer. They performed it as written and gave the playwright their feedback, but they also improvised on its basis so that other writing possibilities could emerge. Intermittently, during individual working sessions, the playwright changed and extended the script based on the identified pitfalls, the director and performers' comments and the observed improvisations to provide new material to be tried on stage. The third phase, which lasted about a month, was dedicated to the writing of a final version, based on what had been performed during the devising phase. At this point, the writer collaborated directly with other artists and their interaction significantly impacted the composition of the play. Because of their involvement with the first draft, as well as their participation in previous discussions, both the performers and the director had a clear idea of the writer's project, and their work was exclusively dedicated to that project. With respect to Karen Morash's recommendations, however, the playwright received no feedback from peers. The emphasis on collaborating with other artists came at the cost of involving other writers. Apparently, the revitalized workshop structure suggested by Karen Morash is more challenging than it seems.

Interestingly, the *En Blanco* program was discontinued in 2012, after its third season, due to a lack of funds. This kind of economic problem may be related to the fact that playwriting workshops which include stage experimentations and collaboration with other artists are expensive. A hope to avoid similar problems with funding could explain why Céline and Paul Pourveur did not include more than one professional performer in their workshop. Indeed, unless participants are students from different pathways who are collaborating as a part of their training, professional artists who interact with writers must be invited. Assuming that their work in collaborative sessions is recognized as such, these artists must be paid. Discussing this topic with Vincent Romain, CED-WB coordinator, I was informed that the CED-WB has been trying for several years to get more funding from the WBF to support such workshop projects, but has not been successful yet, perhaps because of the traditional

concept of playwriting that still informs the theatrical landscape, which I have outlined above. A revitalized playwriting workshop structure may be difficult to establish, but it is surely impossible without appropriate funding.

Endnote

[1] About the origin and problem of this designation, see Karel Vanhaesebrouck's French article "L'exception flamande: mythe ou réalité ?"

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Photo: Benjamin
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