



## ACROSS THE EIGHTH DIMENSION: REMEMBERING THE FIRST ADVENTURE OF “BUCKAROO BANZAI”

Retrospective by Dr. John L. Flynn

### Introduction

Thirty years ago, a four-year-old boy named Buckaroo Banzai witnessed the deaths of his Japanese scientist father and Texas-born mother in a fiery crash while they were attempting to penetrate the Eighth Dimension in an experimental jet car. That same young man, now a skilled neurosurgeon, particle physicist, musician and Zen warrior, must recreate the same experiment that killed his parents in order to stop a mad Italian scientist and his band of renegade aliens. Meanwhile, in a not-too-distant region of

uncharted space, a Lectroid leader stands poised to trigger World War III on earth unless the other aliens can be brought to justice. It seems that only Buckaroo, his Hong Kong Cavaliers and an Oscillation Overthruster are all that stand between earth and total annihilation. Those few, tantalizing details of plot, first revealed by publicist Terry Erdmann during slide presentations at various science fiction conventions around the country in 1984, introduced audiences to an upcoming, major motion picture release from Twentieth Century-Fox. At first glance, the storyline may have seemed to most fans to be a hybrid of the most lurid elements from pulp science fiction. But the film was far more than just a "B" movie dressed up with a multi-million dollar budget and ad campaign, and while it failed to make the top ten list of favorite science fiction films of the Twentieth Century, it remains a favorite among science fiction fans.

“The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the Eighth Dimension”(1984) was a highly imaginative, action-packed, science fiction-romance-adventure comedy from W.D Richter and Earl Mac Rauch. The film starred Peter Weller as the titular hero, Buckaroo Banzai, and John Lithgow as the villainous Dr. Emilio Lizardo. It also featured winning performances from Ellen Barkin, Jeff Goldblum, Christopher Lloyd, Lewis Smith, Clancy Brown and Vincent Schiavelli. Even though the film was dismissed by most critics as "strange" and "unintelligible" and snubbed by the majority of the movie going public for being "too hip," it has since become a cult favorite. The motion picture has also generated a fan following that is only rivaled by Star Trek, and continues to attract new devotees every year. At first, of course, it was a tough sell.

"The most typical--and difficult--question people ask me is 'What is Buckaroo Banzai about?' If I could answer that in a single interview, I wouldn't have spent two

years making the film," revealed W.D. Richter, the prolific screenwriter and erstwhile director who prefers the nickname "Rick." "I didn't want to make a straight, genre film, and deliberately chose Buckaroo Banzai because it defied all the labels."

### **The Origins of Banzai**

W.D. Richter, the soft-spoken but highly-articulate graduate of Dartmouth College (in English Literature) and the USC Film School, first discovered the work of Banzai creator, Earl Mac Rauch, while he was still a student at USC. At the time, Richter was toiling as a script analyst for Warner Brothers, and taking classes in film theory and screenwriting. He glimpsed a review of Mac Rauch's second novel, Arkansas Adios, in a campus newspaper, then sought it out to read. He was so impressed with the book that he contacted Mac Rauch through his publisher for permission to adapt it into a screenplay (for a school project). Mac Rauch was enormously flattered, and agreed. Richter returned the favor by offering him an open-ended invitation to visit him in California. Years later, after Rick had made a name for himself scripting the comedy/thriller "Slither" (1973) (for James Caan), Phil Kaufman's imaginative remake of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (1978), John Badham's "Dracula" (1979) with Frank Langella, the critically-acclaimed Barbara Streisand-Gene Hackman comedy "All Night Long" (1981) and Robert Redford's "Brubaker" (1980), Mac Rauch paid him a visit.

"One day he just appeared, so my wife Susan and I took him under our wing, found him a place to live and convinced him to make a go of it as a screenwriter," Richter fondly recalled. "Mac started working odd jobs, writing small screenplays for producers who would give him a small amount of money. Then one day, he told us about an idea he had for this thing called 'Buckaroo Bandy.' He said that he didn't think it could be a

movie, and we told him that it sounded like it might be. We gave him \$1,500, and he started writing a screenplay."

During the next several years, 'Buckaroo Bandy' went through a dozen different changes and plot twists. "Find the Jetcar, Said the President--A Buckaroo Banzai Thriller" was the first of numerous screen treatments that Mac Rauch would show the Richter's. In that original thirty-page treatment, he had captured the rip-roaring essence that would ultimately define the final product. Not only was it hysterically funny but it was also rich with wonderful characters, terrific dialogue and strange ideas never before imagined. Unfortunately, and despite the marvelous input from the Richter's, Mac Rauch was unable to complete work on the script.

"I got about eighty or ninety pages into that one and just quit, for some reason," Earl Mac Rauch explained. "It's so easy to start something and then--since you're really not as serious about it as you should be--end up writing half of it and convincing yourself the whole thing stinks. You shove the hundred pages in a drawer and try to forget about it. Over the years, I started a dozen Buckaroo scripts that ended that way."

His next take on Buckaroo Banzai was "The Strange Case of Mr. Cigars," a fanciful yarn about a King Kong-size robot and a box of Hitler's cigars. The story had plenty of action-adventure, some exotic locales and an irresistible villain; but again Mac Rauch was unable to pull the material together into a cohesive whole. He shelved his work on Banzai for a few years to write New York, New York for Martin Scorsese and several other screenplays that have yet to be produced. Earl Mac Rauch never lost sight of his wonderful creation, and continued to add notes to an ever-expanding folder of Banzai material. (W.D. Richter recalls having in his possession, at one point, three

hundred pages of notes and dozens of incomplete scripts. Mac Rauch's own file drawers were said to be overflowing with hundreds of tales about Buckaroo Banzai.)

"It took some time, but in the seven years since he first came up with the idea, Mac had gotten some experience as a screenwriter and had learned the structure," Richter concluded. "And, once a studio calls your agent and says 'We'll pay you,' a sense of responsibility comes down on you real fast. You take it more seriously than you would just writing it for your friend."

When, in 1979, Richter and partner Neil Canton formed their own production company, they began discussing various projects that might be developed into a film. The first project they discussed was "Buckaroo Banzai," and Canton agreed that it was a great idea, after sifting through the massive pile of notes and uncompleted scripts. Both were convinced a studio would finance a "Buckaroo Banzai film" if only they could submit a completed story. That daunting task would ultimately compel the creator to sit back down at his typewriter and get serious.

Mac Rauch wrote a sixty-page treatment, entitled "The Lepers from Saturn," under their supervision, which brought Buckaroo Banzai into "the modern era" with a thrilling tale about mad scientists, invading aliens and the struggle for possession of a top-secret jetcar. Shortly before the strike by the Writer's Guild of America that brought Hollywood to a standstill in 1982, he completed the first draft screenplay. Richter and Canton shopped the script around every studio in town, but were confounded by each rejection. As a last resort, they presented the script to Sidney Beckerman, then a production executive at M-G-M/UA, with whom Canton had previously worked. Beckerman responded positively to the unusual tale, and introduced the two young

filmmakers to studio chief David Begelman. Within twenty-four hours, they had a development deal with United Artists.

Unfortunately, the script languished for more than a year in "development hell," as the writer's strike droned on without resolution. During that same time period, David Begelman left Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer--due, in large part, to his poor track record with "Cannery Row" (1982), "Pennies from Heaven"(1981) and several other productions--and all of his pet projects were placed in turnaround. "That was an anxious period of time for us," Richter confessed. "Our script was now at what was, in effect, an unfriendly studio because the man who had endorsed it was no longer there." But Begelman had not forgotten Banzai. After he formed Sherwood Productions, a small but powerful production company, the former studio head exercised a buy-out option with United Artists for the property, and offered it to long-time rival, Twentieth Century-Fox. By the fall of 1983, "Buckaroo Banzai" was ready to go before the cameras.

### **"No Matter Where You Go, There You Are"**

Once Begelman had approved Mac Rauch's revisions of the screenplay, first-time director Richter realized that his selection of the right cast and crew was critical to the success of the film. Based upon the recommendations of his partner, Neil Canton, and executive producer Sidney Beckerman, he narrowed his search to the title character, the five actors who would become the Hong Kong Cavaliers and the central villains. (The other parts would be filled by the casting directors.) Their initial choice for the role of Buckaroo Banzai, however, proved problematic. The studio wanted an obvious name, like Tom Berenger or Kevin Kline. But Richter and Canton wanted to go with a relative unknown, someone for whom this character would be his big breakthrough. The

filmmakers eventually settled on Peter Weller, likening his selection to the way Sean Connery was found for the role of James Bond in *Dr. No*.

Weller, who was born on July 24, 1947 in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, had already spent several years on stage in North Texas and New York. Although Peter had originally wanted to become a scientist, he soon discovered that his talents as a jazz musician (at North Texas University) and as an actor (at the Manhattan-based American Academy of Dramatic Arts) brought him much greater recognition. Two of his most notable performances were in David Rabe's "Streamers" and David Mamet's "The Woods." The pastel blue-eyed thespian with the classical features was soon tapped for feature films, and garnered several high-profile roles as LeFores in "Butch and Sundance: The Early Years" (1979) and Diane Keaton's lover in "Shoot the Moon" (1982). He also continued to develop his skills as a jazz trumpeter (despite his movie roles), and pursued an interest in Japanese culture, notably Zen meditation. For the role of Buckaroo Banzai, Weller projected an air of strength, intelligence and vulnerability behind a contemplative exterior. His strong characterization of the title character ultimately made the film come to life, and led to other genre roles in "Leviathan"(1989) and "Naked Lunch"(1990), and as the armor-clad cyborg in the first two "Robocop" movies. "I was leery about Buckaroo Banzai at first," Weller later admitted.

"I read the script on a plane to Los Angeles to meet David Begelman, and wondered what the film's point-of-view would be. Would it be campy? Would it be a cartoon? Or would it be the sort of wacky, realistic film that would catch people sideways--and not be a cartoon. I just couldn't get a take on the part, but I was finally convinced to take the role by Rick Richter. He didn't do anything other than sit me down

at the Hotel Carlyle and tell me the story for Buckaroo. I thought it was wonderful. Buckaroo Banzai is a guy who operates as a neurosurgeon, drives his car through a mountain, and then finds time to play Rock'N'Roll with his band. After Rick had finished telling me the story, he had become my avatar--I felt willing to do any movie he wanted."

Lewis Smith was cast against type as Perfect Tommy, the lead guitarist, jet mechanic and chief heartthrob of the Hong Kong Cavaliers. The role of New Jersey, the newest member of the Hong Kong Cavaliers and Buckaroo Banzai's cowboy sidekick, was awarded to Jeff Goldblum. Clancy Brown also brought an impressive body of television and motion picture work to his characterization of Rawhide, Buckaroo's most trusted friend. The well-know character actor Christopher Lloyd was cast, partially for comic relief, in the role of John Bigboote, the evil Lectroid from Planet Ten. Bronx-born Ellen Barkin, who grew up in the tough borough of New York, was the perfect choice for Penny Priddy, the off-beat sexy woman who captures Buckaroo's affections. The pivotal role of the insidious Dr. Emilio Lizardo, the alien-possessed mad scientist who starts the plot in motion with his escape from a mental hospital, was given to the consummate professional, John Lithgow. Initially, the studio had suggested that W.D. Richter and Neil Canton consider an unknown for the part. But Earl Mac Rauch, who had written the Strangelove-like character with Lithgow in mind, was determined to see him play the role. John's turn as the tormented air traveler in the George Miller segment of "Twilight Zone--The Movie" (1981) had critics buzzing, so much in fact that the filmmakers were afraid he might pass on another broad characterization. The part was offered to Lithgow, and he voiced very similar concerns.



"I just read the script and thought it was the wildest thing ever," Lithgow reflected years later. "Rick and Earl are completely deranged. They were dead set to have me play Lizardo, and dressed up the character with an Italian accent, wild hair, false teeth and a limp. I just wasn't sure, but Rick is tremendously persuasive, and eventually he won me over, claiming what a real feast for an actor this wonderful Jekyll and Hyde character was."

John Lithgow was born in Rochester, New York, on October 19, 1945, and educated at Harvard University. He turned to acting in the late sixties, and studied at the prestigious LAMDA in London. Returning to New York, he found work in a variety of stage roles off-Broadway and did a handful of television shows. His first screen appearance was in *Dealing: or The Berkeley-to-Boston Forty-Brick Lost-Bag Blues* in 1972. The role of the villainous partner in Brian DePalma's "Obsession" (1976) brought Lithgow critical acclaim, and landed him key roles in "The Big Fix"(1978), "All That Jazz" (1980) and "Blow Out" (1981). He earned two Academy Award nominations for his performances as the transsexual football player in "The World According to Garp" (1982) and the sex-starved husband in "Terms of Endearment" (1983). John brought this incredible zaniness to his fractured portrayal of the mad doctor possessed by the evil Lectorid dictator John Whorfin (all the aliens are named John something or another). With a bright red fright wig, pale skin, green teeth and an Italian accent that sounds like Bela Lugosi on helium, Lithgow created yet another memorable character. Both Richter and Mac Rauch confessed their delight at snagging the Harvard-educated actor for such an important role.

On the other side of the camera, Richter employed some of the best technicians in the industry as well. For his cinematographer, the first-time director relied on the meticulous craftsmanship of Fred Koenekamp. Koenekamp, who began his career as a film loader at RKO after the war and graduated to the role of cinematographer in 1966, had won an Oscar in 1974 for his work on “The Towering Inferno.” His technical brilliance and expertise with the camera had earned him quite a reputation. Richter was fortunate to lure him away from veteran director Franklin Schaffner. For the overall look of the film, he called upon production designer J. Michael Riva, who had scored big with Redford's “Ordinary People” (1980), and set decorator Linda DeScenna, the Academy-award nominated source behind “Star Trek-The Motion Picture” (1979) and “Blade Runner” (1982). For costumes, Agnes Ann Rodgers, the designer behind “Return of the Jedi” (1983), was a logical choice. And for the all-important special effects, Richter employed the talents of Michael Fink, Peter Kuran and a small army of their fellow craftsman.

### **“It’s Not My Planet, Monkey Boy!”**

The high-concept, action-adventure, sci-fi comedy began its principal photography during the second week of September 1983 on locations in and around Southgate--a decaying industrial suburb of Los Angeles. For many of the labyrinthine interiors of Yoyodyne Propulsion Systems (in New Jersey), the production crew shot at an abandoned Firestone Tire Factory. There, beyond the cracked grey walls of the grimy old factory, where grease and suit had built up over thirty years, John Bigboote and John O'Connor (Vincent Schiavelli) marshalled their band of bug-eyed aliens. Richter remembers the conditions at the factory being very poor, and the smoke pots (used to

create a very thick atmosphere) didn't help. The air was often very heavy and difficult to breathe. The cast and crew were actually glad to move onto the next location, unaware that conditions there were even worse.

By mid-October, they had moved onto the dry lake north of the San Bernardino Mountains in order to lens the jet-car sequences. "The desert scenes were hard because we got hit by some very severe winds," Richter explained. "We had the desert painted with colored material to mark the jet-car tracks, and the wind picked it up and threw it into our pores. It took days for some people to get it out." The desert shoot did give Richter the opportunity to bond with his cast and crew, and also taught him some valuable lessons about directing, not the least of which was the craft of moviemaking. If he could succeed under these difficult conditions, then he would succeed. Additional shots on the backlot and in soundstages at Twentieth Century-Fox were completed by Richter and company toward the end of the shoot.

During post-production, W.D. Richter shut down the production for a week so that he could assess a rough cut of the film with Neil Canton. Rick knew that he had to cut thousands of feet of raw footage down into a workable, two-hour time frame, or Twentieth Century-Fox would hire its own editor to do the job. He reluctantly trimmed much of the footage that explained the backstory, and eliminated several references to Buckaroo's parents. In the prologue, audiences were introduced to Dr. Sandra (Jamie Lee Curtis) and Dr. Masado Banzai (James Saito), and shown how an attempt to break through the eighth dimension proved fatal to the two of them. The sequence also explained how Buckaroo Banzai got his name and made clear his budding scientific curiosity. Richter replaced the information-laden prologue with a title scrawl, similar to

those in the “Star Wars” films, which explained all that. Executives at Sherwood Productions were also concerned with the excess humor on the part of the evil aliens, and demanded two additional cut, one which would have explained the Lectroid's hunger for dry-cell batteries. Rick was later upset with himself for authorizing that particular cut, but he also knew that there were trade-offs. What he wasn't prepared for was the ad campaign that followed.

### **The Theatrical Release**

Not really knowing how to label or even promote its new film, Twentieth Century-Fox turned to a couple of experts. On the advice of two science fiction fans, Fox hired Terry Erdmann and a team of publicists to begin spreading word at “Star Trek” conventions. Their promotion included a few tantalizing film clips, a thirty-minute introduction to the strange world of Buckaroo Banzai and free bright yellow and red head-bands for those who bothered to stay and listen to the presentation. (For the first six months of 1984, those brightly-colored head-bands were a ubiquitous fashion staple at science fiction conventions; now they are a valued collector's item.) Beyond that, Fox made no attempts to sell the picture to a mainstream audience with a traditional promotion.

"Nobody knew what to do with ‘Buckaroo Banzai,’” studio publicist Rosemary LaSalamandra told Max Rebeaux in a CFQ interview. "There was no simple way to tell anyone what it was about--I'm not sure anybody knew."

The film was originally slated for a June 8th release, then rescheduled for August 15th. With the tag-line "Beings from another dimension have invaded your world.

You can't see them . . . but they can see you. Your only hope is Buckaroo Banzai," the studio promoted the picture as a straight action-adventure, highlighting guns and the battle with evil aliens and de-emphasizing the relationship between Buckaroo and his Cavaliers. When it was finally released to 356 screens in twelve regional markets in August 1984, "The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the Eighth Dimension" faced stiff competition from several other genre favorites, including "Star Trek III: The Search for Spock," "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," "Gremlins" and "Ghostbusters." The film debuted with a strong promotional campaign to attract science fiction fans, but little was done to attract mainstream America. By the second week of business, it was clear that Twentieth Century-Fox had hatched a turkey.

Surprisingly, a few critics actually did like the picture. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times considered it wildly imaginative; Paulene Kael, infamous for her dislike of genre films, used the words "radiant" and "whimsical," while Newsweek simply wrote "bless its demented little heart." But the majority of reviewers either chastised or simply ignored it. By the end of September, despite a last-ditch effort by the studio for a wide release, the motion picture had finished well out of the running. "The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the Eighth Dimension" did not fare much better in the international markets, either.

The film's failure to garner a mass audience has been blamed on everything from the 1984 Summer Olympics to a handful of vengeful studio executives. But the simple fact of the matter was that Twentieth Century-Fox had mishandled its own property. By attempting to sell it to a particular audience, the studio executives lost track of a much larger picture.

## **Yoyodyne Systems**

The cheerful sign at Yoyodyne Propulsion Systems, which promises that the Future Starts Tomorrow, pretty much sums up "Buckaroo Banzai's" novel approach to its grade-B movie material. "Focus on everything at once, and nothing," Buckaroo tells his colleagues, reminding us of the duality of Richter and Mac Rauch's unique creation. The film is both irreverent and intelligent, silly and mercilessly satirical, sophomoric and just plain fun. Nothing is as it seems, and everything is important. Earl Mac Rauch's dizzy story plunges audiences into very familiar territory, with its mad Italian scientists, invading aliens and Rock'N'Roll heroes; but first-time director W.D. Richter manages to keep the outrageously hip images flashing at such a break-neck pace that the film requires multiple viewings just to enjoy every demented gag.

The fact that the title character, perfectly executed by the largely-underrated Peter Weller, is a world famous neurosurgeon, particle physicist, musician and two-fisted hero merely enhances his identification for us as a modern Everyman. He does, in fact, have the "right stuff" to confront the forces of chaos and entropy that threaten to reduce the world to mediocrity. Buckaroo and his band of adventurers (the Hong Kong Cavaliers) as well as his network of part-time helpers (the Blue Blaze Irregulars) are the last of the brave souls who push "the outside of the envelope." So, when drives through solid matter into the eighth dimension with his jet-car, he's not just blazing a new trail; he's also calling upon a select few, who recognize the call, to join him metaphorically on a new quest of adventure and scientific curiosity. Dr. Emilio Lizardo, on the other hand, represents an intellect that has been suppressed and confined by convention. His

madness reveals what can happen to exceptional minds when they allow themselves to be possessed by drugs, societal pressures or simple mediocrity.

Unlike most films that treat their audiences like moronic children who must be spoon-fed every plot twist and complication, the motion picture assumes a certain degree of intellect on the part of the audience. This could also explain why some people just don't get it. *Buckaroo Banzai* dispenses with all but the most essential elements of the story, and proceeds to dazzle us with high-concept ideas and outrageous non-sequiturs. (By the way, what was that watermelon doing there at the complex that New Jersey (Jeff Goldblum) stumbles upon?) Regrettably, the only real misstep Richter takes is in substituting a common scrawl for his extended prologue. The prologue with the delightful Jamie Lee Curtis and James Saito has been restored to the special edition of the DVD, and at long last audiences can now see the footage that Richter was too timid to use in the film's initial release.

While the movie only hints at the backstory, assuming its audience is intelligent enough to fill in the rest, the novel by Earl Mac Rauch is far more detailed. It is more than a novelization. "Written" in first person by the group historian Reno, the story makes references to past exploits, confidential government records, and Buckaroo's fiendish arch enemy--the fearsome Hanoi Xan. In fact, a great deal of original material, possibly from Mac Rauch's early failed scripts, found its way into the \$3.50 paperback from Pocket Books. As a long-time fan of Sherlock Holmes, I was particularly impressed with how the author developed the Blue Blaze Irregulars, Buckaroo's nationwide network of helpers, along the lines of the Baker Street Irregulars. The novel reads like a pastiche

of Conan Doyle's work, and is well worth the investment of time and expense to acquire this book.



## **Future Adventures??**

Since the release of “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the 8th Dimension” in 1984, the film has continued to gain in popularity, achieving near cult status. The special edition DVD release last year not only generated new interest but also spawned a fan club. Many science-fiction buffs who had failed to catch the film on the silver screen were genuinely surprised by how good the comic book farce with the strange title played on television. The motion picture has also achieved a certain notoriety among the late-night crowd, rivaling “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” as the most popular draw on the midnight marquee.

Over the years, its continued popularity as a cult favorite has given rise to rumor and endless speculation about a sequel. In fact, fans have long discussed their notions about the follow-up promised at the end of the original film—“Buckaroo Banzai Versus the World Crime League”—at conventions, in fanzines and on the Internet. America Online recently created the Banzai Virtual Institute, a virtual institute folder that provides science fiction with a forum to discuss their favorite hero. But unfortunately a hostile management, which controls the rights, has doomed the scientist-adventurer and his Hong Kong Cavaliers to obscurity. (When Sherwood Productions became Gladden Entertainment, David Begelman turned away from experimental ventures, like “Buckaroo Banzai,” for more lucrative mainstream films.) Now, nearly two decades after its release, the likelihood of a sequel seems more distant than ever.

"There has always been a tremendous amount of interest on the part of the movie going public for us to make a follow-up movie," Richter recently explained. "We've even had several financial sources come to us with offers to finance the sequel, but every offer

we've received has hit a dead end because Begelman won't release the rights. He simply doesn't want to do anything further with 'Buckaroo Banzai.'"

Several years ago, in fact, ABC-Television approached Richter and his screenwriting collaborator Earl Mac Rauch with an offer to develop an hour-long series based on the original film. Network executives even guaranteed them a tremendous amount of autonomy with the project, a rare consolation considering their limited experience with the medium; but Begelman balked at the idea, preferring to let "Buckaroo Banzai" linger in obscurity rather than see it as a weekly series. Richter and Rauch tried to circumvent his authority, by authoring a concept, titled Heroes in Trouble, which was similar in nature. The carbon-copy was not exactly what the network was looking for, and rescinded its offer for a series.

W.D. Richter, who has since moved onto other projects (including the scripting chores for Jodie Foster's big budget "Home For the Holidays"), still maintains a desire to produce a sequel. "It could become a tremendous hit if it were made in the right way for the right amount of money, especially in today's climate of sequel-mania," he said. "It's just kind of depressing pursuing something you want and always running into brick walls." Until Richter can find a way through the brick walls with his own specially-designed overthruster jet-car, his very original multi-dimensional, science fiction-romance-adventure comedy will continue to live in the hearts and minds of fans both here and in the eighth dimension.

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