

THE BUBBLE CANTEEN

Inspiring Creative Exploration for Drama Teachers and Students

CLINT BOLSTER

Clint Bolster is a Brisbane-based Clown, Physical Actor, Mask Theatre Specialist, and Teaching Artist with over 20 years of experience. Performing across Australia, New Zealand, and Asia, his original works—*HIGH TEA with BOOFF*, *The Bubble Canteen*, *The Mask Family*, and more—are widely celebrated in cultural and education sectors. Clint has toured internationally, performed 900 solo shows in Japanese at Universal Studios Japan, and was recently accepted into the Cirque Du Soleil database. A mentor for the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, he also serves on the board of Indel-Ability Arts and was part of *Slava's Snow Show 2022-23* tour.

The Power of a Simple Idea

The creative arts, particularly drama, thrive on inventive exploration. The greatest stories, performances, and installations often emerge from the simplest of ideas—concepts that are universal, accessible, and capable of touching the hearts of many. In the classroom, drama teachers encourage students to explore ideas that can be transformed into compelling narratives or performances. *The Bubble Canteen* offers a detailed look at how such an idea—rooted in something as simple as bubbles—was nurtured and developed into a large-scale, immersive performance that captivates audiences of all ages.

The Bubble Canteen began with a fundamental and universally recognised object: the bubble. For many of us, bubbles are associated with childhood—blowing soap bubbles in the yard, watching them float on the wind, chasing them until they pop. Bubbles evoke joy and wonder, and these qualities inspired *The Bubble Canteen*, a performance installation created by Clint Bolster, who has delighted audiences at festivals across Australia. The characters in *The Bubble Canteen*—Beryl, Annie, and Fredia—have a unique and personal origin. They are inspired by three sisters from Dublin in their 90s, whom Clint met during childhood. Raised by his grandparents, Clint vividly remembers being in the back seat of his grandmother's Nissan Pintara, accompanying her as they picked up these three women for their Sunday morning outings, to the Reach Out For Christ Church. Surrounded by the smell of mothballs, allspice, and frankincense, these moments evoked a sense of home, safety, and a touch of absurdity. This nostalgic and heartfelt connection breathes life into the characters of *The Bubble Canteen*, adding authenticity and warmth to the performance.

This installation shows how a simple idea can grow significantly with the right approach, creativity, trust, passion and resources. Bubbles have cross-cultural, linguistic, and generational divides, making them an ideal symbol for a performance meant to connect with people of all ages. Drama teachers can find valuable insights for helping students identify, nurture, and execute their creative ideas by analysing how this project moved from a concept to a fully realized touring performance.

Drama students can also learn from the works' journey, discovering how simple moments of inspiration can evolve into more significant works of art. This exploration process is critical in drama education, where students must balance imagination with the technical aspects of production.

Who Is Your Intended Audience?

Identifying the intended audience is a cornerstone of any creative endeavour. Knowing who you wish to engage with enables you to tailor your work, ensuring it resonates deeper and leaves a lasting impact. For *The Bubble Canteen*, the intended audience was deliberately broad—children, adults, families, and anyone ‘young at heart’. The simplicity and universal charm of bubbles made them an ideal theme, capable of crossing age, language, and cultural barriers to create a shared experience.

Bubbles possess a unique magic that captivates children, sparking their imagination and sense of play. Meanwhile, adults often find themselves transported back to carefree childhood moments, connecting with the installation through nostalgia and joy. This wide-reaching appeal was a crucial element in the creative planning process for *The Bubble Canteen*. By choosing a theme as timeless and universally understood as bubbles, the installation could evoke a spectrum of emotions—from delight to reflection—drawing in people from all walks of life, regardless of their background or age.

In designing *The Bubble Canteen*, the creative team deliberately aimed to make the experience as inclusive and accessible as possible. They recognised that tapping into a concept that transcends language and cultural differences could create a space where everyone, from young children encountering bubbles for the first time to older adults reminiscing about their youth, could find joy and connection. This approach ensured the installation was visually engaging and emotionally resonant for a diverse audience.

Drama teachers and students can draw valuable lessons from this approach when developing their performances. Understanding an idea’s emotional and universal elements is crucial for crafting something that speaks to a broad audience. Students should consider the following questions during their creative process:

- **Who do I want to reach with this work?**

Clearly defining the target audience helps shape the performance’s content, tone, and style, making it more relatable and engaging.

- **What emotional responses do I want to evoke?**

Identifying the feelings you want to stir in your audience—whether it’s joy, nostalgia, empathy, or wonder—can guide the creative direction of the piece.

- **How can I create something that resonates with both younger and older audiences?**

Incorporating elements that appeal to different age groups, such as universal themes or emotions, can make the work more impactful and inclusive.

- **How can I connect directly to the hearts of the intended audience?**

Consider the sensory and emotional experiences you can create. Authentic storytelling, relatable characters, and moments of genuine emotion can forge a deep, heartfelt connection.

- **Why does an audience need to experience this?**

Reflect on the message or feeling your work conveys. Ask yourself what value it offers the audience, whether providing an escape, sparking joy, fostering empathy, or inspiring thought and reflection.



How Do You Identify If Your Creative Idea Is Best Suited for That Specific Audience?

Once you've identified your audience, determining if your creative idea will genuinely engage them, is the next crucial step. This process requires careful reflection on how your idea aligns with the emotions, experiences, and accessibility of your target demographic. The creators of *The Bubble Canteen* intuitively understood that bubbles evoke joy, wonder, and nostalgia—emotions that transcend age and cultural differences. They recognised that bubbles' visual and sensory nature made them perfect for creating an immersive and interactive experience that would captivate a broad audience.

To identify whether a creative idea is best suited for its intended audience, it's essential to delve deeper into several key aspects:

1. **Emotional Impact:** Consider the specific emotions you want your audience to experience. Will your idea evoke these feelings authentically and powerfully? For *The Bubble Canteen*, the answer was a resounding yes. Bubbles naturally elicit emotions of joy, playfulness, and a sense of wonder. The team knew that children would be instantly drawn to the magic of bubbles while adults would connect through the nostalgia of carefree childhood moments. By homing in on these universal emotions, they ensured that their installation would resonate across generations, making it both captivating and memorable.
2. **Accessibility:** Evaluate how easily your audience can understand and interact with your idea. Is engaging people of varying ages, backgrounds, and abilities simple enough, or does it require a specific knowledge base? *The Bubble Canteen* was designed to be universally accessible. Bubbles are a concept that needs no explanation—they are immediately recognisable and inherently interactive. This simplicity allowed people to engage with the installation in their own way, whether by watching the bubbles float, chasing them, or simply enjoying the sensory experience. The creators specifically avoided elements requiring complex instructions or limiting participation, ensuring the installation was open and welcoming.
3. **Connection to Shared Experiences:** Does your idea tap into everyday human experiences, memories, or cultural touchpoints your audience can relate to? *The Bubble Canteen* succeeded by bringing to life the simple pleasures of childhood. The sight of bubbles drifting through the air is a shared memory for many, evoking images of summer days, playtime, and unstructured fun. The creators crafted a familiar and magical experience by incorporating these elements, drawing audiences into a moment of joy and reflection.
4. **Sensory Engagement:** Consider how your idea engages the senses to create a fully immersive experience. Bubbles are visually appealing and provide a tactile sensation as they float and pop, creating an interactive experience beyond mere observation. The creators knew this multi-sensory approach would deepen audience engagement, allowing children and adults to lose themselves in the moment.
5. **Adaptability to Different Settings:** Assess whether your idea can be adapted to various environments or audience demographics. The success of *The Bubble Canteen* partly lies in its flexibility—it could be set up in different outdoor or indoor spaces, appealing to families at festivals, visitors at arts events, and even school groups. Its adaptability widened its reach, making it suitable for various contexts where its target audiences might be present.

Drama teachers can use these principles to guide students in developing creative ideas. Encourage students to think critically about how their concepts align with their intended audience by asking:

- **How will this idea resonate emotionally?**
Is it crafted to evoke laughter, nostalgia, empathy, or excitement authentically and relatable for their target demographic?
- **Is this idea accessible and interactive?**
Can people of all ages and abilities easily understand and engage with the performance, or does it require specific prior knowledge or skills?



- ***Does the concept connect to shared experiences or memories?***

How can students weave universal themes or familiar scenarios into their work to create a sense of community and connection with the audience?

- ***How does the sensory experience play into the audience's engagement?***

Consider visual, auditory, and tactile elements that can make the performance more immersive and memorable.

- ***Can the idea be adapted for different settings or demographics?***

Will it be as effective in a school auditorium as in an outdoor festival? Can it be tailored to various audience sizes or age groups?

Engaging the 'Young at Heart': How Simple Ideas Resonate

One of the standout qualities of *The Bubble Canteen* is its ability to create an immediate, emotional connection with audiences of all ages. Children are instinctively drawn to the bubbles' vibrant colours, unpredictable paths, and delicate dance through the air. Their faces light up with joy and wonder as they chase, pop, and watch these ephemeral orbs float away. Meanwhile, adults are transported back to the carefree days of their childhoods. The simplicity of watching bubbles drift through the air triggers a flood of nostalgic memories – summer afternoons, playful laughter, and moments of uninhibited freedom. The installation taps into a shared, universal experience that transcends generational boundaries, making it a powerful reminder of how simplicity can resonate profoundly.

This aspect of *The Bubble Canteen* offers an essential lesson for drama teachers and students: powerful, impactful ideas do not need to be overly complex. In fact, simplicity can often make an idea more relatable and accessible to a broader audience. Drama is an art form that thrives on emotions, storytelling, and shared human experiences. When a performance focuses on a simple, universally understood object or theme, it can tap into deep emotional reservoirs, resulting in an experience that feels both intimate and expansive.

Bubbles as Universal Symbols

In *The Bubble Canteen*, bubbles are a universal symbol representing joy, freedom, and the fleeting nature of beauty. These concepts resonate across different age groups and cultural backgrounds. For children, bubbles are pure magic; they represent playfulness, spontaneity, and the thrill of discovery. Their delicate forms, constantly shifting and sparkling in the light, embody the wonder and excitement of childhood exploration. On the other hand, adults often connect with bubbles on a more nostalgic level. The sight of bubbles drifting through the air stirs memories of simpler times—days when life was less burdened by responsibilities and worries. This mixture of joy, nostalgia, and the recognition of life's transient beauty creates a layered emotional experience that captivates audiences, regardless of age.

The Power of Full-Face Non-Verbal Mask Theatre in *The Bubble Canteen*

Mask theatre is one of drama's most potent tools, allowing performers to explore characters and narratives through expressive physicality. By wearing masks, actors strip away facial expressions and rely solely on their bodies to convey emotions, intention, and story. This demands heightened physicality, engaging the audience on a deeper level. In *The Bubble Canteen*, the masked characters epitomise this art form, as the performers use movement and non-verbal communication to captivate a diverse audience, including children and those from various linguistic backgrounds.

In mask theatre, the mask serves as a blank canvas, and it's the actor's responsibility to fill it with life through dynamic, intentional movements. Similarly, the performers in *The Bubble Canteen* become living parts of their whimsical world, interacting with bubbles, space, and audience solely through physical actions. Every gesture, from chasing a bubble to moments of stillness, is designed to evoke specific emotions and invite the audience into a shared experience.

A core strength of mask theatre is its universality. By focusing on body language and non-verbal cues, performers communicate in a way that transcends language barriers—a hallmark of *The Bubble Canteen*. The show's success lies in its non-verbal narrative, using the performers' interactions with bubbles to create a universally understood form of storytelling.

Drama students can learn valuable lessons from this approach. Exercises in mask work or physical theatre, such as conveying emotions while wearing neutral masks, teach students to use their bodies to express feelings and intentions. They can explore how subtle shifts in posture, pace, or gesture can transform a character's mood and narrative.

Another key element of *The Bubble Canteen* is how performers fully inhabit their playful, whimsical roles, using grand, sweeping movements to illustrate the magic of bubbles or gentle gestures to emphasise their fragility. This mirrors mask theatre's tradition of exaggerated physicality to bring characters to life. Through exercises like embodying objects—a swaying tree or a drifting balloon—students learn how to convey stories and characters without words.

The physicality in *The Bubble Canteen* creates an immersive, shared sensory experience. This mirrors how mask theatre invites audiences into a world of non-verbal storytelling. Teachers can facilitate understanding by conducting exercises where students can express narratives, such as losing and finding a treasured item, solely through physical actions. Like mask theatre, *The Bubble Canteen* reveals the emotional depth of non-verbal communication. The performers' interactions with the fragile bubbles metaphorically capture fleeting joy and wonder. Drama students can explore themes like hope or loss using mime or movement-based storytelling, tapping into the powerful, silent language of physical expression.



View *The Bubble Canteen* at Brisbane Festival 2023
on Vimeo - <https://vimeo.com/863129371>

Incorporating Simplicity into Drama

Drama students can take this lesson into their own creative processes. The most straightforward ideas are often the ones that connect most deeply with people precisely because they are rooted in shared human experiences. Encouraging students to brainstorm around universal symbols, objects, or simple activities can lead to more resonant and accessible performances. For example, when planning a scene, instead of starting with a complex narrative, students might begin with something as simple as a single object—a toy, a piece of clothing, a cup of tea—and explore the emotions, stories, and memories it can evoke.

Exercises focusing on everyday objects' emotional impact in the classroom can help students understand how simplicity can transform into something extraordinary within a dramatic context. For instance, an exercise could involve students bringing in an object with personal significance. They would then explore how that object could be used in a performance to convey different emotions or tell a story. This practice demonstrates that even the most ordinary items can become symbols of more profound meaning when approached thoughtfully.

Exploring the Depth in Simplicity

It is crucial to emphasise that simplicity does not equate to a lack of depth. The power of *The Bubble Canteen* lies in the concept that bubbles—though simple—are rich with metaphorical meaning. They are fragile, transient, beautiful, and unpredictable, mirroring the complexities of human emotions and experiences. The bubbles' fragility echoes the delicate nature of happiness and the fleeting moments of joy that we try to hold onto. Their unpredictable movement reflects life's uncertainties, while their brief existence is a poignant reminder of life's transient beauty.

Drama students can be encouraged to reflect on these deeper meanings and think critically about how they can use simple symbols to convey complex feelings and narratives. For example, they might consider how an umbrella, an old photograph, or even a simple chair could represent themes of protection, memory, or solitude. By exploring the metaphorical potential of everyday items, students can add layers of meaning to their performances without the need for elaborate sets or intricate plots.

Empathy as a Guiding Principle

While joy provided the atmosphere of *The Bubble Canteen*, empathy was the driving force that connected the performers with their audience on a deeper level. By placing themselves in the shoes of their audience, the performers anticipated the emotions that might arise—joy, wonder, nostalgia—and used this understanding to guide their actions. They recognised that the sight of bubbles could evoke childhood memories, a longing for simpler times, or even a moment of reflective quiet amidst the chaos of daily life.

This empathetic approach is crucial in all forms of performance. By understanding and responding to the audience's feelings, actors can create an experience that resonates personally. In *The Bubble Canteen*, the performers exhibited empathy through their movements and interactions with the audience. They adjusted their performances based on the reactions of those around them, whether it meant inviting children to chase bubbles, slowing down to share a quiet moment with an adult, or gently acknowledging the awe in a child's wide-eyed stare. This dynamic, responsive interaction turned a simple bubble show into a living, breathing exchange between the performers and their audience.

For drama students, leading with empathy means consciously thinking about what their audience might feel at each performance moment. Exercises in role-playing, where students must react to different emotions or scenarios as their characters, can enhance this skill. For instance, students can practice embodying different characters while responding to an audience (their peers) displaying various emotions, such as excitement, sadness, or curiosity. This practice teaches them to be adaptable and responsive, allowing their performances to resonate more profoundly with diverse audiences.

Leading through empathy and joy doesn't mean every performance has to be light-hearted. Instead, it means understanding how to use these qualities to create a meaningful, shared experience with the audience.

In *The Bubble Canteen*, joy was the surface layer that drew people in, while empathy added depth, ensuring the experience was fun and emotionally resonant. The fleeting nature of the bubbles and the performers' whimsical actions hinted at the beauty and transience of joyful moments in life. This subtle blend of emotions allowed the installation to connect with children and adults, evoking memories of innocence and the bittersweet realisation of time passing.

Drama students can experiment with this blend by creating scenes or short performances that explore joy alongside other emotions, such as nostalgia or hope. They can start by identifying an element that brings joy—a playful game, a cherished memory, a simple object like a bubble—and then explore how to layer that joy with empathy. How would their character respond to a hesitant or contemplative audience member? How can the performer's movements or expressions shift to reflect a shared understanding of that person's emotional state? These questions help students delve deeper into their characters and performances, making them more nuanced and powerful.



From Classroom to Concept: Turning Ideas into Reality

In drama education, students are often challenged to think creatively, but one of the most difficult aspects is bringing their imaginative ideas into the real world. The leap from concept to reality involves careful planning, resource management, and collaboration—skills as essential as the creative process. *The Bubble Canteen* is a prime example of how a seemingly simple idea can transform into a large-scale production through meticulous preparation and technical expertise. The installation was not only about bubbles but about creating a multi-sensory experience that captured joy on a grand scale.

Producing 12,000 bubbles per minute might sound straightforward but requires extensive planning, equipment management, and constant troubleshooting. The installation had to be reliable enough to operate in different environments, from sunny festivals to potentially windy or rainy conditions. Drama students can gain insight from this process by considering all the practical elements that go into a performance or installation.

Teachers can introduce students to these logistical aspects by breaking the production process into manageable parts. Lessons cover lighting design, sound engineering, set construction, and technical support. For example, teachers could assign students a project to design a performance that includes a complex technical effect, such as a simulated rainstorm. Students must think through how to create the impact safely, what equipment is required, and how to manage it during the performance. This exercise provides practical experience in problem-solving and resourcefulness.

Additionally, drama students can benefit from learning how to collaborate effectively. The success of *The Bubble Canteen* hinged on its creative concept and the teamwork of designers, technicians, and artists who contributed to the installation's sensory and visual elements. In the classroom, students can work in designated roles—such as director, set designer, technical coordinator, or actor—within a group project to mimic the collaborative nature of professional theatre production. This experience teaches them to communicate, delegate tasks, and support one another in bringing a complex idea to life.

Securing Resources and Support: A Lesson in Creative Collaboration

For many drama students entering the world of performance, one of the most significant challenges is learning how to secure the necessary resources to turn their creative ideas into reality. *The Bubble Canteen* is an inspiring case study of how artists can navigate this aspect, from acquiring financial support to building collaborative networks. The installation received commission funding from the Brisbane Festival in 2023, illustrating that creative projects often rely on external support, whether it be grants, sponsorships, or partnerships.

Drama teachers can help students develop these skills by incorporating lessons on grant writing, sponsorship proposals, and budgeting. For example, students could be tasked with writing a mock grant proposal for a performance project. This exercise would involve outlining their artistic vision, explaining the potential impact of their project, and detailing how they would use the funds. Teachers can guide students in thinking about how to present their ideas compellingly, emphasising both their project's artistic merit and practical feasibility.

Budgeting is another critical skill. Students can be assigned to develop a budget for their project, considering all potential costs such as materials, labour, venue rental, marketing, and technical equipment. By researching suppliers, comparing costs, and making decisions based on their budgets, students learn the importance of financial planning and resource management in the arts.

Collaboration is equally crucial in securing resources. *The Bubble Canteen* was a collaborative effort, requiring the expertise of the three sisters who conceived the idea and production designers, sound engineers, and technical managers. In the classroom, teachers can create opportunities for students to collaborate on projects that span various disciplines. For instance, a school-wide production could involve students from drama, visual arts, music, and technical theatre classes, each contributing their unique skills. This interdisciplinary collaboration mirrors the professional world, where projects often rely on a diverse range of expertise to bring a concept to fruition.

Touring a Concept: Expanding the Reach of a Creative Idea

Touring a performance or installation is a thrilling opportunity for any artist, but challenges require adaptability and strategic planning. *The Bubble Canteen* successfully toured multiple festivals, including the Brisbane Festival, Mackay Festival of Arts, Rockhampton River Festival, and Cairns Festival. Each new venue presented unique conditions—the layout of the space, the local crew's technical capabilities, or the weather—that the team needed to adapt to without compromising the integrity of the installation.

In the classroom, teachers can simulate the touring experience by asking students to perform the same piece in various spaces around the school, such as the auditorium, an outdoor courtyard, and a hallway. Each location will present challenges related to acoustics, lighting, audience proximity, and space

limitations. This exercise teaches students to think creatively about adapting their performance to different environments, reinforcing that flexibility is critical to a successful tour.

Moreover, students should consider the logistical aspects of touring. Teachers can introduce concepts such as packing and transporting sets, managing props and costumes, and coordinating with local crews in new venues. For example, students could create a 'touring plan' for their performance, detailing how they would move equipment, set up in different spaces, and adapt their technical elements to suit each venue's conditions. This planning helps students anticipate potential obstacles and find solutions, an essential skill for any artist looking to take their work on the road.

Touring also offers a unique chance to engage with new audiences and gather valuable feedback. Each audience brings its own perspective, influencing how the performance is received and how the performers themselves adapt in response. For *The Bubble Canteen*, the varying reactions from different festival audiences helped the creators refine and evolve the installation over time. Drama students can replicate this experience by performing for diverse groups—peers, teachers, or community members—and using feedback to enhance their work.

Longevity: Keeping a Creative Idea Fresh and Relevant

One of the ongoing challenges that artists face, is ensuring that their work remains fresh and relevant over time. *The Bubble Canteen* has maintained its charm and appeal through careful adaptation and evolution. While the central concept of bubbles has stayed consistent, the creators have introduced new elements and refined the installation to keep it engaging for repeat audiences. Revisiting and improving the performance is crucial for its long-term success. For Example, Different versions for specific areas of Australia – *The Bubble Canteen*, *The Bubble Lab*, *The Bubble Station*.

Drama students can learn from this approach by understanding that a project does not necessarily end once performed. Teachers can encourage students to revisit their work after some time, asking reflective questions such as:

- What aspects of the performance worked particularly well?
- What elements could be enhanced or altered to deepen the audience's experience?
- How can new layers or variations be added to keep the piece fresh?

This process encourages students to view their performances as evolving artworks rather than static products.

Teachers can also introduce students to the idea of sustainability in the arts. *The Bubble Canteen* incorporated environmentally conscious practices, like using biodegradable bubble solutions, to minimise its ecological impact. As global attention increasingly focuses on sustainability, students need to consider the environmental footprint of their own projects. They can be encouraged to use recycled materials in set design, reduce waste in production,



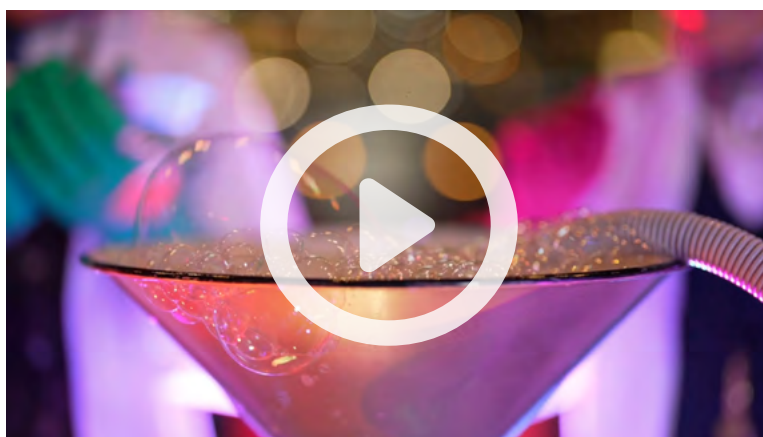
and think creatively about eco-friendly alternatives to traditional theatre practices. This aligns with current social values and teaches students to be responsible creators.

Sustainability also involves ensuring that performance remains meaningful and adaptable over time. Drama students can think about how their work can evolve with changing audiences or contexts, exploring ways to adapt their content, style, or presentation to keep it relevant. This ongoing adaptability ensures that their creative ideas resonate and engage audiences, regardless of when or where they are performed.

Conclusion

The Bubble Canteen provides a rich and inspiring case study for drama teachers and students. From its origins as a simple yet enchanting idea to its development into a large-scale touring installation, the project exemplifies the blend of creativity, practicality, and collaboration necessary to succeed in the performing arts. It teaches valuable lessons on transforming an idea into reality, securing resources and support, collaborating effectively, and keeping a concept engaging over time.

As *The Bubble Canteen* continues to evolve and tour, it is a testament to the power of inventive exploration, adaptability, and creative problem-solving. By studying this project, drama students can gain insight into what it takes to bring an idea to life—and how to sustain its magic, relevance, and impact over time.



View *The Bubble Canteen* at Brisbane Festival 2023 on Vimeo –
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