TFEO Public Domain Players Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Narrator, Ichabod, W. Keith Tims, Brom, Katrina, James Weippert, Van Tassel, Children

W. Keith Tims 00:09
[Preroll promo.]

W. Keith Tims 00:43
Hello, and welcome to The First Episode Of, a podcast about audio drama and the creative process. I'm W Keith Tims, audio drama producer and podcaster. In this show, I listen to the first episode of an audio drama, then have a discussion with the creators about their show their methods, struggles and successes. Today, we're discussing the first episode of The Public Domain Players.

Van Tassel 01:09
[Begin clip from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by The Public Domain Players.] Or should we hear the story of the chief of all of these specters? The one who patrols the countryside, tethering his horse in the graves of the churchyard. I speak, of course of the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow. [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 01:34
The Public Domain Players is the brainchild of James Weippert. As its name implies, Weippert takes literature and stories from the public domain and adapts them for audio drama. The Public Domain Players has adapted several familiar novels such as Treasure Island, and their most recent production Dracula, written by William Muerer, into multi episode productions. They also do single episode stories, such as their first episode, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. This familiar American tale, based on the short story by Washington Irving is the story of school teacher Ichabod Crane, his beloved Katrina, his rival, Brom, and his disappearance at the hands of what may or may not be a ghost, known as the Headless Horseman. I spoke to James remotely from his home.

W. Keith Tims 02:29
Tell me a little bit about yourself as an artist and a creative.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai

James Weippert 02:32
I have been doing theater or acting or anything like that in some various form since I was 13, or 14 or so. And I'm almost 31 now. But I went to school for theater studied acting specifically, but also started playing around in directing and some other things like that. And then as time went on, slowly shifted more towards the voice side and a little bit more of just the directing side, I feel like you get to play a little bit more, if you're on the opposite side, as opposed to oh, you are just acting. Now I get to write and direct and put everything together. And it's something that I always found very interesting and is something that I just always really wanted to do.

W. Keith Tims 03:17
But you said sort of study the arts when you're around 13. What drew you to the arts at that young age?

James Weippert 03:23
Everybody thinks I'm lying when I tell them this, but I was in seventh or eighth grade, whatever grade you're in at that point. And the theater teacher from our high school came in to try and like pitch theater class of like, Hey, this is something we want people to do. And everybody did the eye roll of yeah, sure, whatever. But then she said, Oh, you get to play games and in class and I was sold. [Laughter.] So that is how it started. Oh cool. We get to play games in class. And then I happened to audition for the first show when I was in high school and I got it, it was very small part but that just like got the bug.

W. Keith Tims 04:00
How did you get into voice work?

James Weippert 04:01
I had a very cheap microphone at some low name brand that I don't even remember anymore when I was 18 or so. And I had Audacity on my computer and was just messing around doing stuff. But then when I got into college, the juniors and seniors had a, I think it was called acting for the microphone class but it was it was voiceover and the professor for it -- wonderful man but not great with computers. So he asked somebody to, to volunteer to work the recording system just for the class. It was once a week and I had nothing going on. So I figured it would be fun. And that kind of veered me off more to there of I got very good on the computer side of it. And then once it was my time to take the class I just jumped headfirst into that did a semester of it did an extra like independent study of it. I like the allure of it that you can be yeah in acting you can be anything but in voice acting especially you can be do absolutely anything at all. And all you have to do is be in front of a microphone. It's solely based off whatever you want to do with your voice. And I thought that was the best of all possible worlds.

W. Keith Tims 05:11
How did you then make the decision to say, All right, I would like to move into audio drama, how did you make that leap?

James Weippert 05:18

I always loved old time radio plays from 30s, and 40s, and everything, my dad would play a bunch of them when I was younger. I thought it was really, really interesting how you had that whole world that you could see inside your head, just based off what you were hearing. I'm originally from New York, I was living in Florida for a little bit wound up moving to Texas with my now wife, because that's where she's from. And I was a little disconnected from anyone who I would normally do stuff with, obviously, so I couldn't do things in person. So I thought back to voiceover and everything I had done with that and wanted to do something with my friends. The natural conclusion to that, for me was creating something that we could all be in remotely. So I had worked on a few different ideas and eventually kept coming back to this idea of public domain stories that I didn't have to write absolutely everything and create everything, I could take something that was already there and just kind of cut out the first two steps and then start developing. So that's what I did. And the first couple things I did it was just me emailing friends and saying, Hey, would you be cool to sit down for a day and just kind of record some stuff, and then send it to me, so I can edit together? They agreed, and it just kept going from there.

W. Keith Tims 06:38
So this was the genesis of the Public Domain Players, in addition to the public domain players, you also are part of the Sarah Grace Foundation. Is that correct?

James Weippert 06:47
Yes, I am.

W. Keith Tims 06:48
Yeah, you want to talk about that a little bit. And what that is?

James Weippert 06:50
Yeah, sure. The Sarah Grace Foundation is a foundation that my parents and myself more so them at the time started, after my sister, Sarah had passed away from leukemia. We saw firsthand how difficult it was to go through not just for the child with cancer, or their parents, but everybody it affects the entire family. It's just how it is. We started the foundation, because at the time going back 20 years now, there were plenty of foundations, but a lot of them focused on, oh, we'll help pay for hospital bills and medical procedures. And that's kind of it. But there's a lot of other expenses that people just don't think about, if you have to travel quite a ways to get to the hospital for treatment. Or if you have to stay in a hotel or anything like that. And then normal life, things come up having to pay rent or having to buy things for school or anything like that. So we decided to focus on that aspect of it that if we could help make general life a little bit better for the child and their siblings and their parents, that is what we wanted to do. The little things that start to slip through the cracks, those little slice of life things that you don't realize how important they could be until you have to drop them for some reason.

W. Keith Tims 08:09
I think this is fantastic. I think it's a great way to honor your sister.

James Weippert 08:13
Thank you.

W. Keith Tims 08:14
I know that you said that you wanted to put the Public Domain Players together because you want to do something with your friends. I think that's I think that's a-- you know, a lot of times I think that's, that's the core motivation for people in this space. The Public Domain Players to me, because you now have several shows out, you've got several single episode shows, you've got Treasure Island and Dracula, it strikes me very much as like a little theatre company. You've got a repertoire that you're putting on it, is there something more than just hey, let's do something that drove you to sort of form this company this way?

James Weippert 08:43
I am never one to turn away from a challenge. And from the time I started, so with the very the very first episode of Sleepy Hollow, I put it together, and I released it, and I was like, This is great, awesome. And then a few weeks later, I went back and listened to it again. And went, Oh, I could have done this. I could have done that, I could have done all of these things better. Yeah. Which I think goes for all of us. It's just kind of how you work. So I have since started using Backstage and a few other things like that. I just pushed myself out of my comfort zone of oh, I only want to I'm only going to work with my friends or whatever. And that is kind of how a lot of this just started and kept going of pushing myself to get better and get out of my own little comfort zone.

W. Keith Tims 09:34
Do you think of the Public Domain Players as like a theatre company?

James Weippert 09:37
Yes, I do. At this point in a combination of friends who I started with, people who auditioned for things through Backstage or just through emailing or social media or whatever, who have kind of become the core repertory members for lack of a better term-- but it is fitting -- who while I am reading something or past that point and working on a screen I'm already thinking, Oh, Keira would be great for this role. Larry would be great for this role. And then as I'm writing, it will kind of tailor slightly, keeping true to the character, but knowing what everybody can do with their voice and make it work in that aspect.

Narrator 10:16
[Begin clip.] Ichabod had a soft and foolish manner towards the ways of the heart. And this extended most immediately to the coquettish Katrina.

Ichabod 10:26
O-Oh, Katrina! Hello, what brings you about to the schoolhouse?

Katrina 10:31
I was riding back home after a picnic in the field and saw the children leaving. I wanted to make sure that you were coming to father's tonight for the harvest celebration. We'll all be there.

Ichabod 10:42

I wouldn't miss the chance.

Katrina 10:45
Oh, it warms my heart to hear that. I was so hoping you would say so.

Brom 10:49
Katrina! Are you ready to continue home?

Katrina 10:52
I'll be right along Brom.

Narrator 10:53
It was at this time that Brom Van Brunt stepped around the side of the schoolhouse, now the hero of the country round. [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 11:02
Let's talk about the first episode, which is The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. This is a one shot standalone story. It's about 30 minutes long. Tell me what made you want to start with this particular story?

James Weippert 11:13
The time of year that I was working on it, I knew it would be done sometime around Halloween. So I just started thinking of kind of Halloween-ee stories that I was already very familiar with. So I didn't have to start completely from zero. I'm originally from New York, on Long Island, and had spent some time going up to Sleepy Hollow and exploring, knew this story, as everybody does had always liked it. And in any variation of it. So when I was trying to pick something, I knew I wanted to do something that would work in that standalone format of 30-ish minutes at most, minimal roles, so that I didn't have to work with 20 people, I could do it with five or six, things that would make it easier on me, but would also make in turn a better experience for the listener, the story that I had always loved and figured what's a better jumping off point than a story that I truly enjoy.

W. Keith Tims 12:15
It's very familiar in the culture. People are aware of it even if they don't, maybe don't know all the details. You know, I think almost, at least for me, I remember the Disney cartoon, you know.

James Weippert 12:25
Exactly.

W. Keith Tims 12:26
I did not see the Johnny Depp movie.

James Weippert 12:28
I do very much love it, although it does take some liberties.

W. Keith Tims 12:31
It's one of those short stories. It's part of the great sort of American tradition. I think that was a smart choice in terms of at least getting a title that that audiences could immediately identify with, especially if you're trying to do a one shot because it is a short story, right?

James Weippert 12:45
Yeah, exactly.

W. Keith Tims 12:45
It's been forever since I had read the story, or seen the cartoon or whatever. And I was kind of surprised at, there's some things that go on in that story that I either forgotten or just wasn't aware of.

James Weippert 12:56
Oh, really?

W. Keith Tims 12:57
And maybe my memory is wrong, but I think Disney sanitized it a bit. You know, like the, you know, in the original story, the Headless Horseman actually has his severed head on his horse, you know, but I think it's strictly a jack-o-lantern in the, in the Disney cartoon, so we got Ichabod, the school teacher who is in love with Katrina, but then there's also the rival Brom and, you know, is Katrina really two timing Ichabod? Is she not?

James Weippert 13:22
Yeah, is she just being a friend, and he's reading way too much into it?

W. Keith Tims 13:25
All that kind of stuff is detail that I was surprised. I think it's one of those things that sometimes you think you know, the story, but then you actually Oh, there's more to this than I remember.

James Weippert 13:34
Yeah. And that's part of the reason of why I wanted to focus on public domain stories. I've done some of the lesser known kind of things, but the quote unquote heavy hitters, the episodic ones of Treasure Island, Dracula, everybody generally knows the story. But if I can kind of highlight some of the lesser known pieces or bring something new to it, it's something that even if you do already know it pretty well, you might listen to it and go, Oh, hey, yeah, that's that's a cool way to do that. Or at least that's what I hope.

W. Keith Tims 14:07
Did you take liberties with the story itself? In your adaptation? Were there things that you changed? I know in the original story Ichabod actually proposes to Katrina at the party, but she turns him down and heartbroken, he leaves. That's not included in your version. So I'm just curious, did you change anything story that you wanted to tell?

James Weippert 14:26
A few minor things, in terms of how I adapt things, I try to go as strictly as possible to begin with, and then pare down or edit and make changes from that point. I'll highlight basically all of the dialogue to begin with just because that's the stuff that will be heard directly. And then I will go through and start editing of, oh, this is a very good descriptor sentence that I want to find a way to work in either through sound effects in the background or if I have to adapt it into something that a character says. As that evolves, it just kind of naturally happens for me of I will see something and go, A is this something I can accurately convey through audio without having to get to explain-y, while making it seem natural? Because that is always the biggest challenge. And then I will start to think of also from the angle I'm looking at this at, what is this going to necessarily add? So for Sleepy Hollow, I was looking at it more from the supernatural aspect. I felt at the time, maybe not quite so much now, just as I've learned more things and worked on my own process, but that the way we were presenting Ichabod and the way that actor voiced Ichabod, you could feel that he was not necessarily the most trustworthy character to be like, oh, yeah, everything he's saying or feeling is exactly true. And then the way the actor for Katrina presented it, I wanted you to feel she is a very sweet and very kind person. But like we mentioned, there's not necessarily what Ichabod is picking up. That's just what he is inferring. That's not what she's actually giving him and then the whole story with Brom that yes, the two of them are together later on.

Narrator 16:22
[Begin clip.] And so Ichabod stole his way through the house again, the merry scenes of the party now subdued and quiet, as people were lingering, delaying the late evenings and he saw Katrina there, who gave him a sly smile, and though it may have been a trick of his imagination, he thought he saw a twinkle in her eye as she watched him from across the room. And this filled him with a pride he had never known before. He went straight to the stable then, and with several hearty kicks, roused his steed most uncourteously from the quarters in which he was soundly sleeping. As he rode out, crossing around the front of the Van Tassel manner. He felt his heart sink. There, standing next to his magnificent horse was Brom Bones. And there next to him, with their hands placed delicately on his broad chest was Katrina, looking as sweetly at him, as Ichabod had felt she had admired him just moments earlier. [End clip.]

James Weippert 17:27
I didn't think it was necessary enough to include like the proposal or things that happen in the school house with Ichabod and the children or, or things like that, that as I was reading it, and then trying to hear it in my head before I put it together, I was thinking to myself, I don't know that this is going to be beneficial for the listener. So I'll take those liberties of creating a better listening experience, as opposed to going directly from page to headphone.

W. Keith Tims 17:56
Yeah, that's an interesting distinction, because this is not an audio book. Talk to me about what is the difference between what you're doing and say, an audiobook, because you do rely on a lot of narration straight from the author to set things up. And it kind of runs throughout, especially here in the first

episode. But you do set dialogue like a scene, like a real dialogue scene, you might see in an audio drama. How do you see the distinction here?

James Weippert 18:22
It is a constant battle. To me, an audio book is page to headphone reading everything that happens, you're hearing "he opened the door, and then he did this and this person walked in. And then..." whereas I am trying, and I feel personally that as time has gone on, I have gotten better with this and relied less on even some of just the narrative descriptions that Sleepy Hollow has, you hear that people actually walk in, you'll hear their footsteps, or the doors or the floor or whatever. And then speaking so that if you close your eyes, my goal is that you just by the sounds of birds chirping or whatever. And then wind, you can see the most recent example for me would be Dracula, just because it's the most recent thing I worked on. But in one of those scenes, you can close your eyes. You can see this cemetery you hear the rain and thunder and you feel that you have that just kind of heaviness in the air from that, you can hear them walking in, as opposed to in an audio book, where you are being told what to see and hear in this kind of thing. You can kind of make it your own in your head a little bit more.

W. Keith Tims 19:39
I actually listened to some of Dracula too sort of the comparison because I was curious as to how things have evolved. There is narration but it's really all from Harker's letters, at least in the first episode. I think you're making an interesting point is that part of what makes it a drama is how much do you give to the audience to craft in their own imaginations.

James Weippert 20:00
Exactly.

W. Keith Tims 20:00
And how much do you know? And and do you edit the material to sort of cut out the excess? And sort of be more in the moment? Do you feel an obligation to be faithful to the text? Because you don't have to their public domain, you can do whatever you want. I mean, there's that Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey movie that just came out now that Winnie the Pooh is in public domain, right? I mean, so you can do whatever you want with these characters. But how do you feel about being faithful to the originals?

James Weippert 20:27
I like to try and be mostly faithful, I am very open to taking my own liberties with them. But if someone has read this story before, I want them to be able to listen to it and still recognize it enough to go yep, that is Dracula, that is Sleepy Hollow, as opposed to something like that Winnie the Pooh movie, where you could look at it and be like, I mean, yeah, that's a that's a yellow bear. But this otherwise bears basically no resemblance to what you would know. When it comes to characters. I'll take a little more liberty in that the nature of public domain stories, they're all written 80 plus years ago, so they can be a little more limited in terms of character scope, or things, you get a lot of white guys who are just doing whatever. The nature of voiceover and audio drama, you can have anybody be anything. So I will gender blind cast as much as I can.

W. Keith Tims 21:25
I noticed she did that with the character, or at least, the character the actor playing Ichabod sounds like an alto voice.

James Weippert 21:31
Yeah, it's my friend Keira. She is phenomenal. She is now a professional voice actor, among other things, but she has been in, I want to say, every Public Domain Players thing so far, because she has such a great control over her voice that she can be almost anything.

Children 21:51
[Begin clip.] Listen, now everyone. Who has any questions from our lesson today. Any of you?

Children 21:58
(in unison) No, Mr. Crane.

Ichabod 21:59
I don't want any of you forgetting any of your studies while working the harvest over the fortnight, hm? Our books are just as important as our fields. Are they not?

Children 22:11
(in unison) Yes, Mr. Crane.

Ichabod 22:14
Good. Now, then, you are dismissed, run along, you must all be getting home before it gets too dark. And I know you all have your chores. Hurry along. Now. Remember to study your verse. (children exit, door closes) Just enough time to sit in the sun and do some light reading myself. [end clip]

W. Keith Tims 22:43
I've done adaptation myself, I have I've done several adaptations of classic works. I've done like Medea and Shakespeare and things like that. Sometimes I think you have the ability to take viewpoints that existed in earlier works that maybe need to be questioned, or pointed out or underlined, or even destroyed and reframe a work that is in the public domain for our audiences today.

James Weippert 23:08
I fully agree there have been a few stories. I'm hesitant to name some of them because I there's ones that I might still do. Yeah, but things spanning from being written in the 1600s up to early 1900s. But even in that wide timespan. Yeah, there's a lot that is kind of problematic. So yeah, it's it's wrestling with some of that of is it something that I would even want to try and take on at the moment? Or is it something that I read and go, You know what, I could do X, Y, and Z and just kind of reframe this whole thing like you said, yeah,

W. Keith Tims 23:41

How do you decide which works to adapt?

James Weippert 23:44
Most importantly, I have to like it in some way, since I'm going to be spending a bunch of time with it. Past that I like to try and pick something that I think will be a challenge for me. And in turn, can be if not an actual challenge, something very fun for the actors who will be working on it. Like right now I'm currently working on just as another short because it just entered the public domain. And it's a story I already like Hills Like White Elephants by Hemingway. That has been analyzed to death. But it has a certain story and viewpoint that it's taking much of which has to do with even if it's not obliquely stated it has to do with abortion and things like that, which is a very hot topic. If I'm looking at that, especially as a man I'm trying to think of how is this a challenge and how is this something also that is going to go out there and be received? Because yeah, I can take any random thing that is a known name, and like Treasure Island or Dracula, for example, but everybody knows that. The name alone will draw people to it. And that is a big help because it's really hard to publicize and share things. So that's the other aspect of it that someone might not necessarily know the name Hills Like White Elephants, the majority of people know Hemingway, if I can brand it with that. And that's part of the reason I've avoided things like Shakespeare so far, because I love Shakespeare, but everybody does Shakespeare. What would I be gaining per se, or Public Domain Players be gaming by putting yet another Shakespeare thing out there versus something that might not be quite as well known. I can take that and have it be a new thing for people, which is why I've tried to do outside of the quote unquote, heavy hitters, stories that are a little bit lesser known.

W. Keith Tims 25:20
What do you struggle with?

James Weippert 25:43
Everything? (laughter) Balance is the hardest part for me, because I do all of this in my free time. And in a quote unquote, real job, I am a chef at the moment. But because of that, I work on a normal week, maybe 50 hours.

W. Keith Tims 26:03
Yeah, restaurant hours are terrible.

James Weippert 26:05
Exactly. It's balancing that I go work 10 to 12 hours on a day. And then I come home and I have to weigh the I want to write another five pages, or I need to edit another 10 minutes of this episode together. But also I am exhausted. So just that is easily the hardest thing for me. And then this is something I truly love and want to share with people. So even if I am just exhausted and tired from a day, I will force myself to do that you know what I can do four or five pages of adapting? That'll take me 15-20 minutes. And I can be done. But I still did something for the day.

W. Keith Tims 26:46
Yeah. So how do you measure success?

James Weippert 26:49
It's not a very good way to measure it in terms of getting more people to listen. But my ultimate measure of success is Did somebody enjoy this? If I'm putting something out there, and one, well, I guess three people, my wife, and my parents are the default who are going to hear it, so if one person beyond them, hears it, and whether I know it or not enjoys it? Great. That's ultimately what I want. Because I'm not making any money from this or anything. I'm doing it because I love it. And then I'm giving other people the opportunity to do things as well. So I just spend my own money to pay actors and get other stuff done, because I think they deserve it for the work they're putting into it. So yeah, ultimately, it is Did anybody get to hear this and have even like a slight smile, when it was over of hey, that was really good. That was a good way to spend my 30 minutes. Beyond that. It is tracking, listens, and metrics and all that kind of thing to see. And hopefully, as each episode goes on, you get even just a listen or two more than you did on the previous one. Just trying to keep building on stuff like that. That is part of the helpful thing also of having forced myself to branch out from my own friends sphere, working with people who I don't know, they then tell people they know of how to listen to things. And it just kind of organically grows from there. But yeah, ultimately, at the end of the day, if I know somebody was able to enjoy something that I made, then it was a success to me.

W. Keith Tims 28:26
What lessons have you learned about creating audio drama that you can share with people who might want to create the room.

James Weippert 28:31
Number one, if you want to do it, just start doing it, download Audacity and start playing around. It is not hard to get started, it is tough to keep going. Find something that you really love or enjoy, whether it's writing and creating your own new things or adapting something else like I'm doing right now. Just make sure that even through however much work and effort, and however much of a slog it could be at any given point that and at the end of the day when you're working on it that you do still enjoy it. Because that's the most important part. You shouldn't be working on something that you don't like anymore.

W. Keith Tims 29:10
You have a lot of responsibilities in your life it sounds like. this project. I'm sure it takes up a lot of time, especially if you have to do it piecemeal, 15 minutes, or 20 minutes there. What do you get out of this?

James Weippert 29:21
I truly love it, all of it. I love the process of finding a story that I might not have been super familiar with and reading it and being like, Hey, this is really good. I love talking to actors who I might know or I might not know. And then learning more about them and giving them something that they're excited about. I get everything back from them. And that's exciting to me. I get to listen through and hear like all the fun that people have. Because one thing I always tell actors I'm working with to do is like don't edit your stuff. If you make mistakes or if you're whatever send it to me because that breaks up what I'm listening to and then I love putting the thing out there and getting the random tweet or message or something from someone saying, Oh yeah, I heard this and like, this was so cool. I love the way you did whatever.

And that makes me feel good, but because I know oh cool, the thing I did worked, I know they enjoyed it. And that makes me feel awesome that like cool something myself and all these other people put effort into is good for somebody like it, it made their day better. So it is just taking my time making sure I don't burn myself out by trying to do too much, but making sure that I do it because at the end of the day, it is a just fulfilling experience.

Narrator 30:39
[Begin clip.] (horses running) Looking back to perceive his fellow traveler Ichabod was horror-struck on perceiving that he rode atop his horse, but he was entirely headless.

Ichabod 30:51
(Ichabod gasps.)

Narrator 30:52
His horror was still more increased then on seeing that the riders head which should have rested on his shoulders, instead, was carried before him on the pommel of his saddle, staring lifelessly forward at Ichabod. (Horse whinnys)

Ichabod 31:13
Gunpowder! Faster you old beast! [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 31:17
Adaptations like those done by the Public Domain Players is a great way to bring older but familiar stories to audiences today. But it also offers an opportunity to examine, critique, and reframe those stories to reflect on how our ideas have changed over time. It's also a chance to experiment with form, translating works from one medium to another. [Begin theme music.] You can listen to the Public Domain Players productions on most major podcast platforms, or see our show notes for more information. The First Episode Of is written and produced by W. Keith Tims. All the opinions expressed in this show belongs to the people who expressed them and not necessarily to anyone else. The theme song is "Mockingbird" by David Mumford. This show is a production of Alien Ghost Robot Creative Media. If you want more information, want to sign up for our newsletter, or are an audio drama creator and would like to be on the show, visit our website at thefirstepisodeof.com. We're happy to be a part of the Audio Drama Lab, a Discord based resource for audio drama development and networking. Check it out at audiodramalab.com. Keep telling stories. It's the only way we're going to get out of this mess. Until next time.

W. Keith Tims 32:43
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