

Interview with Gail Argetsinger
Monday, March 14, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Recorded over Zoom
Interviewee: Gail Argetsinger
Interviewer: Daniel Gorman Jr.
Duration: 40:54
Transcription App: Panopto

As of spring 2022, Gail Argetsinger is Associate Professor and Costume Designer in the Department of Theatre & Music Studies at the College at Brockport, State University of New York. Gail is married to Gerald (Jerry) Argetsinger, who was also interviewed for this project.

Transcript

[00:00]

Dan Gorman: All right.

Gail Argetsinger: OK. All right, well –

Dan Gorman: This is—I’m sorry.

Gail Argetsinger: Go ahead.

Dan Gorman: This is Daniel Gorman recording an interview for the Hill Cumorah Legacy Project over Zoom. Today is Thursday, March—14th? Yes, March 14th, 2022. I am speaking to Dr. Gail Argetsinger, who is a—well, why don’t you say what your official job title is?

Gail Argetsinger: OK. OK. It’s not Doctor! [laughs]

Dan Gorman: Oh.

Gail Argetsinger: OK. In theater, we have MFAs, and, you know, the ... in the arts, rather than doctorates, are the terminal degrees. But anyway, my name is Gail Argetsinger. I am a costume designer. Currently, I am the costume designer at SUNY Brockport in the Department of Theatre & Music Studies, also an associate professor. I teach costume design, costume history, costume construction, stage makeup, all of those costume-related classes there. And I had been working

as a costume designer for some time when I was contacted by the Pageant in 1979 to consider designing the show. At the time, there had—they were using costumes, but they were borrowed from the Brigham Young University Theatre Department, and they—many of them had nothing to do with the show, but they were flashy costumes. And—the show had separated from BYU and had a new director who was not affiliated with BYU. They lost those costumes and needed new ones. And I was here and capable and excited to be asked.

And so, the initial concept was that I would design 600 costumes (because there were 600 people in the show) over a period of three years, and that was going to be it. But as we got into it, where people were appearing in multiple scenes, they needed multiple costumes, and honestly, before, it didn't matter much. The joke was three rags and a bathrobe pretty much covered the costumes. A few feathers. But my intent was to differentiate the different civilizations and the different time periods and the main characters that had been chosen to be in that iteration of the Pageant.

And so, it just kept going on, and with new sets of costumes every year for about the first eight years, and I had done about 1,200 costumes instead of 600. And then in 1988, there was a redesign, a reissue of the Pageant with a new script, with a new score, new sets, new costumes, new lights, state-of-the-art special effects, everything, and I was invited to continue as the costume designer for that. And so, I—and I was there for another 10 years. And so, all in all, I did 3,400 costumes for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, and I had—not by myself, of course. I always had a group of people who are willing to work with me. Often, they were teenagers and housewives and anyone who was available. And when we would move out to the Pageant, there would be people who were in the cast who were excited to be working on that year's new project. And so that's how I got my staff.

As far as the Church is—let me just digress a bit. As far as the Church is concerned, I am a lifelong member of the Church. I'm a fifth-generation Mormon. My great-great-grandparents joined the Church in Upstate New York with Joseph Smith, and some of them joined in Denmark in the 1850s and emigrated to Utah, and they all crossed the Plains behind covered wagons and hand carts. And so, I've been—I was raised with a sense of service in the Church and a firm belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this was just a wonderful opportunity to serve in the Church, and this was the best job in the world. And I was also fortunate to have a husband [05:00] who appreciated it and supported me. He was not part of the Pageant staff when I was called, and so a lot of that meant that he was holding down the fort at home, especially after we started to have children. And so, I—and the children were always very excited to be part of it. So I—so that's where that comes from.

Dan Gorman: Sure, sure. So, I think to back up a little bit, when you began your career as a costume designer—

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: Do you—did you early on have any experience working in religious theater? Were you working more in secular theater?

Gail Argetsinger: Oh, yeah. Well, to the extent that—well, let's just say that I was going to be the world's greatest actress.

[Dan laughs]

Gail Argetsinger: But guess what? I'm tall. I towered over everybody on the stage. I was not going to get cast a lot, even though I enjoyed a lot of roles in college. The reality was, when I left college, that was not going to happen. And I always could sew. Because I was tall, I could never find anything that would fit me, and my mother told me that I could have as many clothes as I

could make. She was an expert seamstress herself and taught us to sew. I learned in 4-H. And I always made my own patterns and went my own way. And when I was little, I liked to put on plays for the neighborhood, and I was really bossy, so I made everybody wear the costumes that I made them. And so, I mean, that was sort of my start.

But I did get a master's degree in costume design, and I did work in the theater costume shop in college, and I had taken little gigs around, doing costumes for various community theaters. I won a national design competition sponsored by the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and was chosen to design *Twelfth Night* there. That was really exciting because that was the largest staff that I had ever worked with, where they actually had people that made boots, and I didn't have to make them myself. And that was really good preparation for this show [the Pageant].

I had been on the faculty briefly at Brigham Young University and—I—well, Bowling Green State University as—to replace someone who was finishing their doctorate, and so I was hired as a replacement faculty, and they did twelve shows a year there. I did shows in college; I did shows in graduate school. And so—and I did shows in Rochester before I joined the Hill Cumorah Pageant. I worked for Pittsford Musicals, Brighton Theatre Guild, that kind of thing. They were local organizations that had big budgets, a great appreciation of costume, and I really enjoyed doing that. So, I—while most of the work was secular, I'd been raised on the Book of Mormon. I knew it well. I was excited about it. I love the history of it. And so, it was just—I had seen, of course, the Pageant many times—and thought that it needed better costumes. [laughter]

Dan Gorman: So, let's talk a little bit about your initial calling to the Pageant, because you had mentioned earlier that Brigham Young University's theater team had run the Pageants previously, and then this was circa 1979, I want to say?

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: There is this shift in who runs the Pageant.

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: So, could you talk about how you got involved in 1979?

Gail Argetsinger: OK, well, it was clear that there—and there was a new producer. Under the previous leadership, Harold Hansen, who was a professor at BYU, had been the producer and the director and completely autocratic in the way he did everything. And when he was retired in 1977, the new director that took over, Jack Sederholm, was a—what had been one of his [Hansen's] assistants, but someone else was called to be the executive producer and an associate executive producer. So, all of that producing that [10:00] the arrangements at Palmyra, all of the permits, all of the collecting of the cast and everything was spread out among a number of people, and not just Dr. Hansen. And anyway, Jack was trying to build a new team because they had lost the costumes from BYU. And so—and he knew me, and I lived here, and so he asked if I would do that.

That had to be ratified by general Church officers, and so I was called by a president [of] the Seventies Quorum to be the costume designer for the show. And he was the one who got the funding for it, who talked to me about it and said, “Under no circumstances are you to tie the Lamanite costumes to any specific Indian tribe. They were people who lived here long ago. We are not specifically told where it is, or who they are, and who their descendants are, so don't do that, but you can have some general, pre-Columbian American costumes.” So anyway, so that's how—that's kind of how I came to it.

Dan Gorman: Well, let's talk about that a little more because someone might be listening to this interview in the future [who is] not as familiar with the Book of Mormon. Can you speak a little

bit about the characters—the Nephites, the Lamanites—and how you approached this monumental task of designing hundreds of costumes?

Gail Argetsinger: Well, I divided it also into time periods. In 600 B.C. Lehi, a prophet, who was a contemporary of Jeremiah, began prophesying that Jerusalem would fall if they did not repent, and he was—there were attempts on his life, and so, at the direction of the Lord, he took his family and fled into the wilderness, where they were promised that they would come to a new country and a new promised land. He had four sons. The two oldest sons were rebellious. They were angry at having to leave their home and their friends and their considerable wealth, and the younger sons were more compliant. And the youngest son, Nephi, to whom the birthright fell, was the one who became a prophet in his own right after his father.

Now, pretty early on, after the death of the father in the Promised Land, they were led to the Americas in a very long, serious sequence of events, where they were given this land [and] a promise for their posterity, and the followers of Nephi and the followers of Laman (the oldest brothers) were in constant battle with each other throughout the entire thousand years of the story of the Book of Mormon. And generally, the Lamanites did not want to follow the gospel that had been preached by their fathers, and the Nephites did; that's how it started. But it often reversed. Very many times, the Lamanites were the ones who were the righteous ones, and the Nephites were the ones breaking the rules and breaking the covenants. And so, the Book of Mormon, like the Bible, is a series of stories about this covenant people that looked forward to the birth of Christ and his atonement for the world, and also Christ visited them after his death on this continent. And he appeared to both the Nephites and Lamanites, and the people were joined and were one, but eventually they did split, and the Nephites were completely destroyed.

So how to take [an] ordinary American, mostly American cast, and put them in costumes that would reflect this time period and the civilizations, and who was righteous and who was a prophet, and all of the theatrical parts of it, was kind of daunting. And I spent a lot of time pondering this and praying about it. And anyway, that—color was an important thing. The design concept—the Lamanites were described in the Book of Mormon as [15:00] not wearing much. As a matter of fact, they wore a loincloth and a few feathers, and the Nephites were famous for their fine-twined linen, their excellent weavings. There were artificers [sic]—artificers of brass and gold and silver, and builders of buildings, and they had quite [a] complex civilization. And so that was reflected in the design.

I also use some theatrical devices like capes and feathers because we're talking about a hillside. What I would do in a movie, or what I would do in a small theater or even a pretty good-sized theater, is different than I would do on this set that is the size of a football field and is seen from three or four hundred yards away. So, it had to be costumes that would project all the way to the back, and they would be recognized in their silhouette and also in the colors and could be easily identified. We're working with a bunch of unfamiliar names, and people can—need to be able to go, "Oh yeah, that guy, and that guy," and not mix them up. Otherwise, the whole story is confusing.

So—and they also had to have various levels of detail because the actors were way up on the stage, and so there had to be [a] level of detail that would project that far. Some members of the audience were close, as in within 100 feet, and often the actors were in the audience before the show or after the show, and the costumes used needed to be well-crafted enough that they would be beautiful and interesting and well-made and fascinating to the audience members who were communicating with the actors. So—and I also found that that created a lot of pride in the

actors. They were excited to get into their costumes and to go out and greet the audience, and especially in the 1988 version of the show, they had—the play began with a processional. The music started, and they would come up out of the audience, up onto the stage, all 650 of them, and the trumpets would sound, and the play would begin. So...

Dan Gorman: And I had the privilege of seeing a version of that in 2017—

Gail Argetsinger: Oh, good.

Dan Gorman: Which is a challenge, then, doing this project when some of my students are only seeing it via video recording.

Gail Argetsinger: Right. Oh well, yeah. Not the same.

Dan Gorman: So, let's talk—

Gail Argetsinger: Not the same at all.

Dan Gorman: Let's talk a little bit, then, about the shift in 1988. So, the Pageant has been sort of rebooted once, and now it's rebooted again in 1988.

Gail Argetsinger: Right.

Dan Gorman: And can you talk about being in the creative discussions around the revamping of the Pageant?

Gail Argetsinger: Oh yes, that was really exciting to be part of that. It—the—it had started—I'm sure Jerry will talk about this more in—the history of the Pageant more, if he has not already, but it had started in 1937 with [a] play, with a true Pageant of the sort that appeared in every town across America—the Founder's Day Pageant, the Fourth of July Pageant, where all of the different organizations would do scenes on a theme. So, this was like scenes from the Book of Mormon, not tied together, not related. But, by the time the 1988 Pageant came about, nobody did that anymore, and it was all of these stories that didn't even seem to be related. And

so the idea was to take—make a Pageant that had a through story, a narrative story with a beginning and an end, and it was aimed at the non-Mormon—what was it—18- to 34-year-old [group]—non-scripture-reading public, so that they did not have to have read the Book of Mormon before that; it would show them, and it would kind of be like an introduction to the Book of Mormon and what it was about. And so, there was that shift.

There had been an enormous change and advancement in the technology of lights and sound. The colors that I had used in the Pageant [20:00] when I started doing it were extremely bright because I used to think it was lit with a 40-watt bulb.

[Dan laughs]

Gail Argetsinger: There were—you know, it was so dark and dim, and the director called it mood lighting, but it was really hard to see the colors. And then I needed to change all the crowd costumes, too, in 1988 because the lights came up, and there was—everything was—and some of it just needed to be toned down so that it was more balanced. The sound would—there was a vast improvement. It had gone to—one of the sound mixers had worked on *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, and this, you know, so it was that level of technology. And at the time, the Pageant began—actually 20 years into it, 1957—Harvey Fletcher, who was the inventor of stereophonic sound, is Mormon, and he did his first run of a stereophonic sound thing at the Hill Cumorah Pageant. And they were these huge speakers—nine feet tall, really long; you could stand in them—that were up on the hill, booming out. But it's nothing compared to the nuances of sound that could be gotten by 1988, certainly not by now. And so, there was that.

The Pageant needed to be designed costume-wise in a way that would portray these characters. And we had a new magnificent set by a very talented designer, Eric Fielding, and that was kind of a space set that was—that had all these different levels and staircases that could

create the different scenes. And so, it was it was a major upgrade. Our special effects director was a motion picture special effects director, and so it was more than just the occasional spurt of fire here and there or explosion. It was major. And so, while that dissipated later, as they lost people who were licensed to do that, there at the end, at—in—at its time, it really was quite wonderful. So, that's why it needed to be completely redesigned as far as the costumes.

Dan Gorman: So, let's talk a little bit as we move toward the end of [our?] interview—let's talk about the costume shop, as it were—

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: For the Pageant during—well, really at any point in your twenty-year-tenure. Where was the costume shop located? Was there one location? And, you know, who were the people working under you on these designs?

Gail Argetsinger: Well, generally, the costume shop was in my basement [laughs], so I would work all year on those costumes, and we would get things to the point that we could take [them] out to the hill two weeks before the show opened. And then I would have people come out there who were on the staff, or who had come out of the cast, who had the skills to work on these things, and then we would finish them there in—under my direction. Now, this changed a lot because, when I went out there, there was one building that was behind what is now the visitor center. It was a big brick building. There was an upstairs which was air-conditioned, and it [was]—it had a few of the principal costumes in it. And the other thing was the director's office, and downstairs was the nurse's station. There was nowhere for me to be. And I got out there my first year, and we set up sawhorses and plywood—sheets of plywood—out on the ground and used that, and also we rolled out bolts of fabric under the hanging costumes, on the floor in that air-conditioned space, cutting things out if we had to. By the end, we had the use of that entire

building, and it had been renovated into a good costume shop with drying rooms because, oh, guess what? It sure does rain on the Pageant.

[Dan laughs]

Gail Argetsinger: And it's just—I mean, it's Upstate New York. Even when it's dry, it's damp, you know? So, we needed these drying rooms, and we have laundry facilities, and [25:00] we had a wig shop. That was one of the things that I introduced, is that they—when I started, we were using these dreadful crepe-hair wigs, and it was observed by a friend of mine that, in this one character, it looked like squirrels were attacking his face. And that was very accurate. And so, I investigated with the help of our producer some professionally made beards and wigs. Bob Kelly, one of the major wigmakers in New York, agreed to train a person for us. So, one of my friends, Barbara, the late Barbara Williams, went and was trained there as a wigmaker, and she made beards and wigs with her crew of mainly teenagers and produced all of this [sic] incredible cinema-quality beards and wigs. And that was a big advance in the in the costumes also.

Always, it was—the words I would not allow in my costume shop, and still don't, is [sic], “It's just a costume.” Oh, no. It is a work of art with as fine of craftsmanship as you can produce to make this costume, illustrate who this character is, to tell the story, to help the actors tell the story, and so it was just a great joy to do it, also.

Dan Gorman: Gail, you've mentioned before that the Pageant, in your opinion, went downhill in quality toward the end.

Gail Argetsinger: Oops. Yeah, well... Well, for example, there is—every costume designer has to choose. There's no such thing as an authentic costume unless you take something from the time period, put it on a person on the stage, and even then, it's not authentic because they're not from the time period, you know? So, you choose those things that you are going to emphasize

and celebrate. And one of the things that I did was the amazing textiles from the pre-Columbian Americans and the heavy fringe and the incredible tapestry weaves and patterned weaves. They were extraordinary and some of the finest textiles in the world. And that's what I chose. And so, all of the shawls, even on the crowd costumes, they all had some kind of shawl or veil or something like that, and we fringed out the strings on every one of them. And the cast members did this and tied knots in it so that it was actual fringe and not drapery fringe sewed on the bottom, you know, that—of an old piece of drapery fabric.

And there were some other things like that, and color was a very important part of mine because it [represented]—it was an emotional response to each one of these stories, and the staff would come in, the wardrobe staff would come in, and it took two days, but they would wash and put together all of the items that went into a single costume that would create all these different color schemes. And after I left, the wardrobe staff thought that would be too hard, so they randomly combined pieces of costumes. And the idea was, well, then they could be in any scene. But what happened was that it did not differentiate the scenes. It did not. It didn't tell the story in the same way, and I had really expert seamstresses and stitchers, male and female, and artists—craftsmen working on the costumes, and that wasn't always true. So, I just—that was—I felt that at the end it was difficult to tell the Nephites from the Lamanites because they were all the same shape, even if they weren't the same color, you know, the color [of] the costumes. So that was part of it. But the other [thing] was the special effects, is that they generally disappeared...

Dan Gorman: So now for the Pageant—

Gail Argetsinger: Toward the end of the Pageant.

Dan Gorman: Well, now that the Pageant has ended, the set has been dismantled, costumes—

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: Given away—

Gail Argetsinger: Yes.

Dan Gorman: Everything else. What do you [30:00] want the legacy of the Pageant to be? What do you feel it is? How do you think it affected the people who participated?

Gail Argetsinger: Well, I know that it affected the people who participated in it because we experience the most profound spiritual experiences while we're there. I mean, it's [eyes widening; nodding] *amazing*—true miracles, as well as just the wonderful feeling of being—of the privilege of giving service and telling this story and sharing this story that meant so much to all of us. And externally, people who came and watched the Pageant were very moved by it also, and there was—and it all—sometimes, they joined the Church. Not often, but—there was in our little congregation, in Greece, New York, one year we had 105 convert baptisms that were from Pageant referrals in one year. So, and, uh, you know, it's like any conversion. They didn't all stick, and they didn't all stay at grace. They, you know, moved around. But this was happening throughout the area.

And so, the attitude of the people in Palmyra changed toward the Pageant and the Church slowly, but very positively, over the years, from outright warfare and hatred to embracing it as their Pageant, and doing battle with some of the people who would come out and try and destroy it every year. So, there were so many positive effects, and... I think it was time [for the Pageant to end]. It did not get the crowds that it had used to. It was—it needed to be redone again, and that was going to cost millions of dollars, honestly. And the Church resources—the people who make those decisions have to consider the impact of it. And so, it had turned—I mean, it was a *wonderful* experience for the people who were in it, but it was [sic] still cost a lot to do it, and it

was turning out to be a really, really expensive—for the—youth conference, you know? So, that is one of the reasons that it was discontinued.

But also, Christ no longer descended. I mean, we had—he appeared 60 feet in the air and descended, and it would [happen] just magically, and then went back up and was gone. We had—the angels were flying, the volcanoes exploding, light effects that were just years beyond before they appeared on Broadway, that were just—that enhanced—they did not overtake it, but enhanced the story. And it's one of the reasons you have outdoor dramas—drama—because you could shoot flaming arrows at the fort and ride in on horses. We even had horses. So, it's an exciting medium, and it's exciting for people of all ages to watch, and I miss that, but it had become ... unmanageable and had kind of gone down. My humble of period—opinion.

Dan Gorman: Gail, is there any last comment or story you want to share before we conclude this interview?

Gail Argetsinger: [pauses] I will share one. And this is what—this is the kind of thing that it, regardless of whatever else is going on in the world, helps me know that, when we're giving service, it is important, and it is valuable. My first year of the Pageant, I was working with this stuff called Rosco weave filler, and it—they don't use it anymore. It was this—it was latex rubber, and you could force it through a cake decorating tube, and it was flexible, but when it dried, you could paint it gold and silver. It would stick on costumes, and it would—it could be quite decorative. What we have now is silicone caulk, which is actually better, but you get the idea of what that stuff was like, and it was all the rage in costume technology [35:00] at the time. But this was very expensive. It was always backordered. I had ordered it from West Germany. And we had it all over several scenes in the Pageant.

Now, we were out at the hill at this point, working, and it was the day before the Pageant was open, and I still had five or six costumes that needed to get this on, and they were principal costumes, and the director told me, “You know, you have to have these costumes so—for us to use this afternoon in the rehearsal, so that the actors can get used to wearing the costumes.” But it was the kind of day that we don’t get all that often, but we certainly can. It was 100 degrees and—

Dan Gorman: Ugh.

Gail Argetsinger: 100-percent humidity. It was a steam bath, and this stuff that usually set up in two hours would not set up. It was *just too damp*. And so, I said, “It’s not dry. They can’t wear the costumes. It’ll fall off.” And he said, “Well, you’ll have to put it back on tomorrow, then, because they really need tonight.” And I understood it.

So that night, the actors wore these costumes out on stage. All of the goop fell off.

[Dan winces/laughs]

Gail Argetsinger: And I came in the next morning at five o’clock to try and fix it with my assistant, who was a cake decorator, you know? She could—she was really skilled at doing that, and she met me at the door, and she said, “I didn’t tell you last night because you were so tired and discouraged, but—you needed your sleep—but we are out of goop.” And I said, “No, no way. What? Go get all the barrels that we have,” and we scraped them down, and we cobbled together a Cool Whip tub that— [gestures with her hands] That was it. And I said, “Is this going to be enough?” And she said, “No, but we’ll go as far as we can,” and that [sic] we cried, and we cried, and finally we just prayed and said [choking up], “We have worked all year, we have done everything we can. 10,000 people are going to come see this tonight, and it has to be right. Please. Please make there be enough.”

I don't know what possessed me to even have the nerve to ask for that [wipes a tear away], but I did. And I—we just felt this feeling: Everything is going to be all right. And she filled up her pastry tube, and she was working on one of the costumes and ran out and went back to the Cool Whip tub, and it was full. [shrugs] She did this again and again. I was there. It was full, until we were done, and then it was gone. That happened in so many different costumes, in so many different scenes, not with the goop, but with other materials that were short, that, after prayer and supplication, there was enough—not too much, *just* enough.

It's a true principle. It defies everything I know about the law of physics, but there it was, again and again, and I testified at that, and that I and others in my company—it was usually not alone that these things happened—that let us know that the Lord thought it was important. That he wanted us to finish. I don't know why he chose to fix the costumes when there's so much else wrong with the world. But I believe it is to teach a spiritual truth. And I feel so privileged to be part of that.

Things like that and greater happened every year that I worked on the Pageant. And they happened to others, too. And so that's why we did that. It was—we weren't paid, you know. This was—this—the Lord pays much better.

[laughter]

Gail Argetsinger: I would much rather have that going on in my house, in my basement, than fancy vacations or a bigger house. And so, it was an incredible privilege to be part of that in any way. I am humbled because I gave it everything I did, [40:00] but believe me, it was not all me. It was not only the help of other people. But there were [sic] so much inspiration and help and watching the Red Sea part before me when I couldn't find what I needed to find... Just truly amazing.

So anyway, that's my final testimony of this, and I think that the Pageant had a lasting effect in this area, and I think it was—its time had passed, and there will be other avenues where that message and that—that spirit can be taught in other ways.

Dan Gorman: Well, Gail, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing so candidly your experiences.

Gail Argetsinger: OK, thank you.

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Subject: Hill Cumorah Project, Argetsinger Family, Theater, Twentieth Century, Twenty-First Century, Costuming, Special Effects, Miracles, Book of Mormon

Description: Prof. Gail Argetsinger recounts her experiences designing costumes for the Hill Cumorah Pageant from the late 1970s to 1997. She first joined the Pageant administration when Jack Sederholm replaced Harold Hansen as director. Argetsinger designed new costumes, and what was intended to be a brief assignment continued for years, including after the 1988 launch of the “New Pageant.” Topics discussed in the interview include the logistics of Pageant costume design and construction, Argetsinger’s belief that the Pageant had run its course, Argetsinger’s disappointment that the costumes she made were later altered, and her testimony that miracles occurred during the Pageant.

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