

Prometheus Unbound: Re-Imagining Theatrical Protest and Socio-Political Commentary of Yesterday and Today

By John Paul Staszal and Rob Connick

Abstract

Prometheus Bound, the Greek tragedy by Aeschylus, captures the essence of tyranny and rebellion. While this foundational text coalesces around feuding gods and emerging powers vying for control and status in a new universe, the core themes of the play speak to issues of humanity and oppression that transcend time. *Prometheus Bound* is more than a story of a titan being punished by Zeus for stealing fire from the gods and delivering it to man as a resource in their development of knowledge. The play symbolizes a figure that stands up for unheard voices, and pushes back against tyranny and injustice, providing a theatrical symbol of protest that embodies social and political issues that span history and cultural conflicts. Prometheus, as a modern symbol, serves as an active reminder that one must not accept intolerance toward equality and choices, and calls on the will of others to exemplify his example and push back against tyranny and injustice. Classical texts such as *Prometheus* provide a vehicle for revisionary concepts that encourage continued theatrical dialogue toward today's existing concerns.

The following analysis offers both a critical and subjective memory of two different productions of the same adaption of *Prometheus Bound*. The first analysis examines the original 2010 production of the adaptation titled *Prometheus Re-Imagined*, on the campus of Bowling Green State University (BGSU), and the ways the production developed its social-political portrayal through intense physical staging practices. The second analysis examines a redeveloping of *Prometheus Re-Imagined* in 2012 on the campus of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. While each production had similar goals with distinctly different sets of circumstances and resources, the results provided two powerfully unique portrayals of tyranny and protest.

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“I do not put on a play in order to teach others what I already know. It is after the production is completed and not before that I am the wiser.”

(Jerzy Grotowski Methodical Exploration)



1 - Prometheus beaten and battered for his defiance against Zeus

Prometheus Bound, the Greek tragedy by Aeschylus, captures the essence of tyranny and rebellion. While this foundational text coalesces around feuding gods and emerging powers vying for control and status in a new universe, the core themes of the play speak to issues of humanity and oppression that transcend time. As James Scully and C. John Herington, translators of our original source, posit:

Out of a far-off creation story Aeschylus has conjured a political and religious figure whose influence has expanded rather than decreased with centuries. Today his *Prometheus Bound* has transported the memories of the myth far beyond its ancient territory – even across the boundaries that have been set up by the ideologies of the twentieth century (3).

Prometheus Bound is more than a story of a titan being punished by Zeus for stealing fire from the gods and delivering it to man as a resource in their development of knowledge. The play symbolizes a figure that stands up for unheard voices, and pushes back against tyranny and injustice. Prometheus endures the tortures of Zeus as a form of rebellion. Refusing the sanctuary of release for simply submitting to the will of his tyrannical leader, Prometheus represents a theatrical symbol of protest that embodies social and political issues that span history and cultural conflicts.

Tyranny, in the instance of Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, presents a powerful construct that is beautifully challenged by defiance, endurance, and the will to stand in the face of oppressive power. Despite the adversity, pain, and torture that he endures, Prometheus refuses to submit to Zeus' thirst for power, and his need to control his mortal subject. Prometheus chooses suffering to spite Zeus, and continues to marshal support for the weak and unheard voices who endure comparable anguish. Prometheus, as a modern symbol, calls on the will of others to exemplify his example and push back against tyranny and injustice. Living in an historical moment where tyranny is witnessed daily as dominant regimes and governments implement cruel and oppressive control over their people, an example of a committed protester such as Prometheus serves as an active reminder that one must not accept intolerance toward equality and choice. Classical texts such as *Prometheus* are not only markers of history, and the concerns of ancient cultures, but similar texts

can be a vehicle for revisionary concepts that encourage continued theatrical dialogue with current issues facing humanity.

The following analysis offers both a critical and subjective memory of two different productions of the same adaption of *Prometheus Bound*. The first analysis examines the original 2010 production of the adaptation titled *Prometheus Re-Imagined*, on the campus of Bowling Green State University (BGSU), and the ways the production developed its social-political portrayal through intense physical staging practices. I¹ adapted, produced, and portrayed the title character with help from an influential cast of graduate and undergraduate students who had considerable influence on the physicality and conceptual design of the production. The second analysis examines a redeveloping of *Prometheus Re-Imagined* in 2012 on the campus of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. My co-author² directed this production using his initial experience from the original production to inform his approach while creating similar voices of protest through similar experimental staging practices. Each production had similar goals with distinctly different sets of circumstances and resources, resulting in two powerfully unique portrayals of tyranny and protest.³

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

The evocative image in figure 1 and subsequent archival photos⁴ offer powerful moments that the production created in an embodied defiance of oppression and tyranny. The goal, for more than a year, as the concept developed, was to push as many personal and theatrical

¹ "I" here refers to Dr. JP Staszal.

² Dr. Rob Connick

³ In the section titled Original Production, I refers to JP Staszal, and the content of this section was developed by this author. The section titled Second Production refers to Rob Connick, and the content in this section was developed by this author.

⁴ Production photos of BGSU production provided by Olivia Talbot

limitations as I could, and to do so in a nurturing way that would develop an unrelenting passion for all who participated in the project. Like Grotowski's quote above, I did not want to put on a play in order to teach others what I already know, but rather to challenge myself and others in as many ways as possible as we created a new way of understanding the Prometheus story.

In the fall of 2010, I had the opportunity to explore the thematic power and symbolism of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, in an adaptation titled *Prometheus Re-Imagined*.⁵ The play, staged in an empty, repurposed church, pulsed in an environmental production that surrounded its audience. The production challenged its witnesses to heighten their sensitivities toward nontraditional staging practices while experiencing a classical play that speaks to current issues of gender, race and sexual inequality, religious persecution, and economic hardship. For two nights, over forty young artists on the campus of Bowling Green State University (BGSU) moved, sang, chanted, and danced together in their retelling of a story that pushed the viewer to question how they understood oppression and torture, and how they valued acceptance and equality. The production was part of the BGSU Department of Theatre and Film's *Elsewhere* season; a supplement to the department's regular season that provided students with an opportunity to explore and develop staging practices with limited budget and technology.

For years I have yearned to find a way to unpack the experience of producing *Prometheus Re-Imagined* in a formal document. Discussing the two differing productions with Dr. Connick has provided me the space to resurrect memories of a powerfully moving production that, in many ways, never should have succeeded. In addition to an extremely limited budget, minimal technology, and a restricted amount of time, several other factors

⁵ I adapted and directed the production with assistant directors Slade Billew and Brianne Waychoff

challenged the production's efforts. All participants were voluntarily managing very busy personal and academic responsibilities. Resources were limited to personal budget and what means the ensemble could donate. Due to cast size and the overwhelming number of conflicts, the entire ensemble never fully ran the production together until opening night. An unexpected seizure, and a dislocated shoulder during a dress rehearsal sent cast members to the hospital days before the opening. Despite the ever-growing list of challenges, the determination of the ensemble and the commitment they held to the meaning behind the work catapulted the production through a successful run and artistic collaboration.

The production reduced the original text and intertwined poignant poetic fragments and contemporary musical tracks from various artists who identify with multiple distressed communities. In order to draw attention to the expressive bodies of the productions, the physical relationships of the actors and the movement in relation to the text and the soundtrack became the guiding forces of the production. The goal was to honor the symbolic meaning of the original text through an adaptation that permitted intense physical experimentation and dynamic partnering. The physicality created powerful moments and riveting images that spoke to various ideas of human suffrage and oppression.

The production began with the ensemble moving throughout the space to culturally recognizable music in an amorphous, organic manner as the audience entered, as seen in figure 2. This initial sequence was developed in a fashion to establish the stylization of performance and help the audience accept that the entire space was in play. Actors crawled, oozed, stretched, snaked, climbed, rolled, and jumped throughout the space in primal fashion, groaning and squealing as a way to suggest a prehistoric time before formal language and social decorum were

developed. Additionally, as seen in figure 3, words, phrases, and symbols of hate, hope, and oppression decorated the bodies of the actors in order to visually challenge perceptions of how language would be used and valued in the performance. Many aspects of our staging practices complemented Antonin Artaud's concepts for abandoning conventional ideas of theatre where action and sound could be deployed throughout a space in order to "assault" the audience's senses and challenge their manner of meaning making. In, "From The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," Artaud called for every show to "contain physical, objective elements perceptible to all," and the use of "shouts, groans, apparitions, surprise, dramatic moments of all kind" to overwhelm the audience and confront their senses with a new and experimental theatricality (268). The audience in our production remained in a constant state of choosing, as performances happened simultaneously throughout the space.



2 - Experimental Movement



3 - Language and image as text

As time moved beyond the expected start of the show, a differentiated figure, painted white and covered with language, emerged and began to observe the primordial event. His engagement with the ensemble, as seen in figure 4 below, established the mythical moment when Prometheus encountered mankind; the moment he made the choice to oppose Zeus and risk his life for a developing species. Following a performative segment consisting of unified chants, songs, and a collection of various movements styles meant to symbolize human evolution, the audience was blitzed by a group of breakdancers, as a surprise element implemented to not only shock the audience, but to signify a sharp jump to our current historical moment. A blackout immediately followed in an attempt to assault the audience's senses and indicate a distinct break from the utopian moments they had just witnessed.



4 – Prometheus encounters mankind

In darkness, barely illuminated by small roaming flashlights, bodies were mercilessly beaten and pummeled to establish a harsh reality of consequences for both Prometheus stealing from Zeus, and for those individuals who get caught opposing dominant cultural injustices. While the premise of Prometheus (the Titan) remained at the center of the production, the text traditionally dedicated to the title character was fragmented and dispersed to five symbolically connected Promethei representing oppressed communities. As the lights were restored, lifeless bodies of various Promethei lay sprawled throughout the space, tied and connected to the motionless figure representing the titan Prometheus at the center, as seen in Figure 5 below. Decisions were made to tie the following pairs together and connect them to the Prometheus in the center of the space: two men, two women, a biracial couple, an actor with religious symbols covering her body, and an actor with financial symbols covering her body.



5 - Prometheus connected to Promethei

The remainder of the ensemble created the chorus and the other main characters of Aeschylus's original text. Poignant moments were decided upon and staged to develop the necessary narrative arch of the story we wanted to tell. Prometheus's punishment of being chained to a mountain by the characters of Power, Violence, and Hephaistos, the god of craftsmen and metalworking, established the torturous verdict that he must endure for eternity pictured in Figure 6.



6 - Prometheus being chained

Prometheus's reoccurring punishment of being chained and tortured by the feathered hounds of Zeus seen in figure 7 signified the horrific conditions of his sentence.



7 - Prometheus tortured by the feathered hounds

Moments of sympathy from the chorus as seen in figure 8, and the empathy from Io, the horned girl forced to live a life of deformity and isolation at the hand of Hera, seen in figure 9 established the voices of others that were willing to support the oppressed and oppose injustice.



8 - Sympathy from the chorus



9 - Empathy from Io

Finally, the reinforcement of Zeus's will by Hermes seen in figures 10 and 11 signified the dominant tyrannical force that the oppressed must constantly oppose.



10 - Hermes



11 - Prometheus defies Hermes

The performance concluded as Hermes exited, and the ensemble donned more personal attire, as each member had one final encounter with the main Prometheus remaining in the space. As the processional of ensemble members ended, I, portraying the painted Prometheus, broke from the stylized nature of the show to address the audience. After thanking the audience for attending and being witness to the work, I invited them to join the ensemble in one final moment of movement as a way to break away from the darkness they had just experienced, and move as a communal celebration of art, life, community, and acceptance. The performance dissolved in a collective dance without staging a curtain call or bows to signify participation in a play and conclusion of a work. As the music ended, conversations continued, appreciation and gratitude were shared, and the space slowly emptied as the meaning and significance of the performance circulated in the minds and on the lips of those in attendance.

The ensemble rigorously trained for two weeks, developing a physical vocabulary based on strong physical connection, bodily awareness, intimate relationships, and trust. In a laboratory style rehearsal process, the ensemble explored physical connection and trust in a process-oriented approach to physical training. We developed a working knowledge of our individual and collective strengths, and explored moments of physical imagery that played heavily on the trust of partnering, as well as the exuberance of exceeding what was previously believed to be physical limitations. Many of the ensemble members were not initially comfortable with the ideas of singing, chanting, and exploring several ways to abstractly create sound and movement through space. Some members were even frightened with certain physical demonstrations that were initially exhibited in the modeling of the types of partnering and movement work that the production wanted to develop.

To help individuals overcome fears and apprehensions, the initial creation process was focused on exploring comfort levels and boundaries, and finding physical, psychological, social, and spatial limitations.

In many ways, the initial rehearsal process emulated certain elements of experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski's early approaches of working with actors. Grotowski initially called for approaches to actor training that resembled research and methods implemented in a scientific laboratory. Modeling his directorial rehearsals in a fashion that resembled the Bohr Institute, a scientific laboratory that compiled data in order to profit from potentialities of the content, Grotowski developed a theatrical method of investigation that pushed actors to surpass limitations through confronting personal barriers in the process of developing new self-knowledge. Grotowski pushed his actors "to stimulate a process of self-revelation . . . in order to obtain the required reaction" (278). He worked for his actors to be able to "eliminate from the creative process the resistances and obstacles caused by one's own organism," and developed his actors to be able to articulate a process, discipline it, and develop it into signs that were embodied stimuli from the outside world (278). In no way did our work mirror the intensity or duration of training executed in Grotowski's theories so vividly addressed in his discussions about *poor theatre*. However, our work did push the actors to make physical and mental discoveries that empowered their previous understanding of personal limitations, and fed into the development of the performance structures we were creating.

The BGSU production was a capstone project fulfilling the requirements for completion of a graduate certificate in Performance Studies, bringing together various ideas, styles, and concepts that engaged a postmodern approach to performance. The production highlighted the relationship between text and practice as a practical example of various

performance methodologies combining to challenge ways of thinking about adaptation, experimentation, sociopolitical commentary, and performance. I had been heavily influenced with styles of training and devising based in methods attributed to Grotowski's earlier work with the Polish Laboratory Theatre. I also carried inspiration from extensive study of Richard Schechner's production *Dionysus in 69*, and rigorous experiences developing solo performance work influenced by Butoh dance methodologies. However, it was a summer intensive with the dance theatre Pilobolus that coalesced the conceptual ideas that were passionately whirling in my mind. The intense ensemble-based training that I received from Pilobolus instilled a fundamental understanding of teamwork and physical exploration, while fostering collective trust and security with bodily experimentation in the development of communal performance. As our rehearsal process began, I focused on continuously introducing process-oriented exercises and activities. Conceptual moments that were once caged in the corners of my imagination began to escape, taking on a structure created from the work and passion of the young artists. Focused play and physical experimentation both inspired and empowered the group as they became aware of personal and collective strength, and comfortable with moving and creating beautiful sounds and imagery together.

As a shared physical vocabulary emerged, confidence grew, and the ensemble separated into smaller groupings to further refine their work as chorus members, Promethei, and henchmen of Zeus. Text was initially abandoned in order to focus on the physical power and presence of the body, allowing the actors to train and prepare for the needed vulnerability the production required. Once a foundational base was established, physical staging practices were developed in smaller sessions that permitted the various groupings to work more aggressively based on their

comfort level and knowledge of ensemble capabilities. As a result of the intimate group work, there appeared to be a heightened sense of ownership of the work when the entire ensemble reconvened. Having a chance to showcase the physical work that groups were developing in a larger setting seemed to enhance the passion of the work each member was completing. Even though we were never able to meet as a complete group, the physical and emotional bonds we developed while building the structure created an intense sense of responsibility, not only for fellow ensemble members, but for the content and meanings of the production.

While I can't speak for the experiences of those who witnessed the production, I believe the play carried significant meaning and offered valuable moments to discuss and critique. The experience of developing a classical work staged to challenge a modern understanding of theatre, dramatic literature, theatrical staging practices, and contemporary social issues developed an exceptional group of artists willing to accept adversity in the creation of a piece they believed would speak volumes to the social-political commentary of the current moment of 2010. At that moment, we believed conversations regarding gender, race, sexuality, religious scrutiny, and economic failure were at an all-time high. Gay marriage was not yet nationally recognized. Racial issues raged as our nation's first black president neared the completion of his second year in office. Our economy still struggled to recover from the recession and financial disaster that resulted in the economic bailout of 2008. Discussions of gender equality raged on, and religious, political, and economic concerns heightened as governments and dictatorships fell throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa. Unfortunately, the reality is, the world we live in today may be filled with even more tyranny, hate and oppressive control than we ever thought before.

SECOND PRODUCTION



12 - Edinboro's cast warming up before the performance⁶

When I started Laugh/Riot Performing Arts Company, I knew that we needed a memorable play to announce our arrival to the Erie theatre scene.⁷ We decided to open with Staszel's *Prometheus Re-Imagined* for a variety of reasons, notably: flexible casting, mixture of genres, heavy use of physicality through movement and dance, and a poignant message that at times mirrored the political and social upheaval occurring both nationally and globally.⁸ While the productions may have ended up quite different from each other, the themes of community and standing up against tyranny for the greater good resonated in both productions.

Where Staszel's original production included a large, diverse cast of (mostly) undergraduate and graduate students at Bowling Green State University, our cast included only two college students from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (where Laugh/Riot was a resident theatre company). Our cast of twelve, ranging from the ages of five to sixty years old, included four elementary school children as well as five people over

⁶ All photographs from the Edinboro production are the property of JM Sutton and are used with her permission.

⁷ In this section, I refers to Rob Connick and not JP Staszel.

⁸ It should be noted that I was cast as one of the chained Prometheus characters in Staszel's original production, which gave me a familiarity with this script.

the age of thirty. We used a much smaller cast out of necessity – the talent pool available was significantly smaller at EUP, which does not have a theatre major. Instead of a host of actors representing various aspects of Prometheus, I played the title role. We condensed the speaking parts down to five other actors (the children and the two students from EUP would join us a week before we opened and served as our chorus). The range in ages involved created a familial atmosphere that highlighted the play's themes of sacrifice and community. Our production made use of a fully operational black box theatre (The Old Union Theatre in the Diebold Center for the Performing Arts), so while our talent pool and cast were significantly smaller, we had more design elements at our disposal.



13 - A photograph from warmups showcasing the age range of the actors



14 - Io using the chain to find Prometheus in the middle of the ocean

While the original production used flashlights to enhance the house lights for their lighting, we used a fully realized lighting plot. Our sound played through a digital sound system instead of coming from a local device. We used the upper track in the theatre as a playable space to which Prometheus could be tied. Like the original production, we kept the simplicity of the costuming, and arguably went with an even more basic look. The entire cast wore gray and black as their base, except for Prometheus. That costume used a white undershirt as a nod to Staszal's body paint in the original production. When an actor left the ensemble and became a featured character or an animal, they would put on a costume piece or use a piece of fabric to set them apart – Io used a cow-print sheet, the Daughter of Ocean used a blue belly dance costume, Hephaistos wrapped a chain around his shoulder.



15 - Daughter of Ocean and Prometheus attacked by animals



16 - Prometheus attacked by animals

The script's combination of music, poetry, dance, and traditional scripting meshed with physicality inherent in the staging to create a piece of theatre unlike anything else in the area at that time. Reviewer Erin McCarty commented on the importance of movement and its impact on the production: "Violence is prominent, but conveyed stylistically. This does not diminish the impact of the brutality, but neither is it gruesome. By turns joyful and ferocious, the visual spectacle draws the audience in,

and the play concludes not with traditional bows, but with an invitation to join in a celebratory dance” (“Review” 26). In addition, the constant dance and movement “keeps the story moving quickly, forcing those seated around the open floor to experience the show first and contemplate its meanings later” (26). These aspects may have been what set us apart from other companies, but the themes in the script served as the backbone for our artistic mission.



17 - Prometheus' followers being carried in to be beaten

While Staszal’s devised piece pulls many modern pieces into its text, at its core remains the ancient myth based on the Titan punished after bringing fire to humanity. The messianic symmetry between Prometheus and Christ stays at the forefront of any interpretation of the story. While Christ's purpose and sacrifice have been explicitly stated for millennia, Prometheus' gift of “fire” has remained much more open to interpretation. McCarty draws connections between “the blazing gifts that Prometheus presents and the light of the arts, particularly dance” (26). What McCarty views as important in the arts became the “fire” from Prometheus in our production: knowledge.

When discussing the show during a preview interview, I was asked why this show would resonate with a contemporary audience. What would today's "fire" be – that thing so dangerous that those in power would silence those who distribute it to humanity? Knowledge and language seem to be the most dangerous things to mankind, not only today, but throughout history (or at least modernity). With the technological developments in the 21st century, it could be argued that knowledge – and misinformation – are as strong a weapon for and against populations as any literal weaponry. Antonin Artaud takes the artist's role in espousing knowledge a step further. While writing about Vincent Van Gogh, Artaud argued that artists do not go insane, but instead have seen the world as it really exists and can no longer hide those aspects that often are ignored. Artists, Artaud continues, inhabit a space of madness that allows them to be marginalized as insane because of their search for truth and authenticity:

And what is an authentic madman? It is a man who preferred to become mad, in the socially accepted sense of the word, rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honor. So society has strangled in its asylums all those it wanted to get rid of or protect itself from, because they refused to become its accomplices in certain great nastiness. For a madman is also a man whom society did not want to hear and whom it wanted to prevent from uttering certain intolerable truths. (485)

Whether through fine arts, poetry, theatre, music, or dance, artists have the capability, and arguably the responsibility, to show the world as it really exists, to allow those taking in their art to see the world beyond them, even if it puts them at risk of being silenced by those in power.



18 - The followers are beaten

With knowledge and language as the kernel of fire in *Prometheus Re-Imagined*, the violence against Prometheus brings up not only the messianic imagery mentioned before, but also recalls current events, both explicitly and innocuously. The scene where the guards beat Prometheus' followers before dragging him on and beating him could easily be seen in current news footage. Hephaistos' chaining of Prometheus, which becomes too much for Hephaistos to stomach, also would not seem out of place when imagining what happens to political prisoners today. The story may be thousands of years old, but the violence used to suppress change and revolution feel as current as any contemporary script.

CONCLUSION

As we enter into 2018, our country and the world appear to be more divided with hate and opposition than in 2010. Our democratic practice has potentially been corrupted by an outside government, and the possibility of American collusion with a foreign government to impact our election seems more than likely. Our political rhetoric has accepted

hateful, violent, and sexist language as the new normal. We are on a scary path towards rejecting and insulting our allies with political decisions that appear to speak to select supporters of our new commander-in-chief, while ignoring most of our country's population. At a moment when our country was on the edge of accepting transgender rights and identities as part of a national conversation that champions those rights and freedoms for all human beings, our current leader attacks transgender military professionals, and continues to push forward an agenda that emphasizes hateful language against various races and religions. In addition to all of the current political and social uncertainty within our borders, the world braces for the possibility of nuclear war; political leaders continue to feud in their quest for power and control, passing devastating rhetoric through social media as acceptable modes of communication and governance.

It was Horace who argued that the purpose of theatre is to teach or to please, and that it was better if it could do both. While human nature will always value the power of entertainment to amuse and relax, we can never underestimate the ability of theatre and its political potential to produce controversial ideas and images that elicit aggressive criticism and reactions. Such a powerful example of political theatre was emphasized during the Public Theatre's summer 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in New York City's Central Park. The play was disrupted by protesters who objected to the bloody scene in which the title character, played by an actor costumed and styled to resemble President Trump, is stabbed to death. Reactionary critiques continue to analyze that production of *Julius Caesar*, and the overall power of theatre to affect the world around us, as a mode of protest or platform to elicit a reaction toward controversial topics. Considering the turmoil and controversy our nation and the world appears to be gripped with, it may be time for more artists and theatrical institutions to revisit Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and similar classical

texts. The text and symbolic meaning attached to the character Prometheus has the powerful potential to produce socio-political commentary that can create valuable meaning, provoke heated discussions, and motivate opposing forces to work toward peace, acceptance, and justice. Like our experimental productions of *Prometheus*, and the Public Theatre's summer 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in New York City, artists must continue to explore classic texts for ways to catapult the sociopolitical relevance of previous historical markers into vehicles for revisionary concepts that continue to spark theatrical dialogue, and resistance to issues and concerns facing us today.

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