

FUSION

A&E + STYLE + SOCIETY



►► Dance!

Christmas celebrations

See Smuin Ballet's Christmas Ballet this weekend at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

Things To Do, page C2

DEAR ABBY ►► He seems to like his children more than his live-in lover. What to do? Page C7

Just the facts: It's a good book

RECOMMENDED READING DEPT.: A few years ago I worked at the San Jose Mercury News, where I was casually acquainted with a guy named Craig Lancaster.

JOHN ORR

Arts & Entertainment

He was an editor in the sports department, I worked in features, so we didn't know each other very well, but I did watch him win a Peeps-eating contest once. *That* was disgusting.

But, that's the kind of thing people in sports departments *do* at newspapers, which is probably one of the reasons the Merc put those people off in their own room, far away from other human beings.

Lancaster is one of more than 100 people on my Facebook friends list who *used* to work at the Mercury News. I'd seen him post some information about having written and published a novel, so I sent him a Facebook note and asked him to have his publisher send me a copy for review.

The nice thing about reviewing books is that if I don't like the book, I usually don't have to write about it. If I don't like it, I just toss it aside. Same is true here. I don't have to review this book.

But, I like the book, which is called "600 Hours of Edward," and want to tub-thump for it a bit. It was published by Riverbend Publishing ("Bringing you the best of Montana and the West"), which is a small company, which means

the book may not be stacked on a table with the best-sellers at Borders and the like. It is available on Amazon.com.

It is the story of Edward Stanton, a man nearing middle age who is afflicted by Asperger's syndrome, a "high-functioning" form of autism. Edward, who narrates, has a pretty comfortable life, thanks to a wealthy father, but a lonely one. Edward doesn't always do well with other people, and plans his life around avoiding others as much as he can.

He lives by himself in a small house in Billings, Mont. (where, in fact, Lancaster now works at the Billings Gazette). Edward's father bought him the house because, as Edward quotes from Dad's lawyer's letter, "I had 'become a distraction whose presence was proving divisive in the family home.'"

Edward's father, a powerful local politician, speaks to Edward through letters from a lawyer too much of the time. Edward sees his father and mother once a month for awkward dinners at their huge home on the mountain.

Edward watches episodes of the old TV show "Dragnet" every night at 10 p.m., because like Sgt. Friday, he prefers facts. He keeps track of what time he wakes up every day, and reports it to us in this book. He glances at weather forecasts in the Gazette, but doesn't trust them. He prefers facts, so looks more carefully at the recorded temperature data for the previous day. He shops where he can use a self-checkout stand so he doesn't have to deal with a grocery checker.

Into his well-controlled life come a young boy and the boy's mother, who move into a house across the street. She has moved away from an abusive boyfriend.

Young boys are not to be denied, and the kid becomes Edward's friend. Edward helps out when the abusive former boyfriend shows up. There is a scene at a hospital. Trouble ensues. A lot of trouble, and threats from Edward's father and Edward's father's lawyer.

All that leads to some major choices for Edward. It leads to changing his life.

I liked this book very much because Lancaster gives Edward a very good voice, writes well about Asperger's syndrome, and builds a nice sense of place, which is one of my favorite parts of reading a novel. I want to go to a place when I pick up a novel.

And Lancaster takes us skillfully and sensitively through the rough ride that leads to Edward being forced to take more control of his own existence, and venture more from his cocoon and into the crazy place that is normal life.

It's a good book. I urge you to find a copy and read it. (Riverbend Publishing, 278 pages, \$14 paperback.)

GET YOUR TICKETS NOW DEPT.: I just got off the phone with Alicia Wilmunder, a cellist, board member and all-around Wonder Woman of the California Pops Orchestra. She said tickets were moving well for that fine and fun orchestra's Pops Family Christmas Special, which takes place at 3 p.m. on Dec. 20, at Venture Christian Church Theater in Los Gatos.

The last several programs the Pops has staged took place both at Spangenberg Auditorium at Gunn High in Palo Alto and at Venture Christian, but for this show, the orchestra couldn't book Spangenberg, which means there aren't as many tickets available. So, ya know, get yours before they are gone.

ORR, page C2



Sam Huie / California Pops

California Pops violinist Lori Jensen during the 2008 Christmas program.

Cracking up

Terry Disley jazzes up Tchaikovsky

BY PAUL FREEMAN
For The Daily News



Photo by Doug Baird

The Terry Disley Experience is to bring "The Jazzcracker and Other Delights" to Yoshi's in San Francisco.

DISLEY, page C2

You may have heard "The Nutcracker" a thousand times, but not the way Terry Disley reimagines it. Fusion bop brings new life to Tchaikovsky's masterpiece.

The acclaimed U.K. pianist, with his all-star group, was to celebrate the rerelease of his CD "The Jazzcracker and Other Delights" with performances at the Little Fox in Redwood on Sunday and at Yoshi's San Francisco on Dec. 23.

But with the Little Fox going dark, the performance will be held only at Yoshi's. "It is a sad loss," Disley said when he got the bad news about the Redwood City club closing. "I have loved playing there."

Disley's "Jazzcracker" as "proved to be popular with the fans," he said. "KCSM played quite a few tracks from it." The former member of Acoustic Alchemy, who has collaborated with such luminaries as Dave Stewart and Bryan Ferry, is now based in San Francisco.

In approaching a holiday project, Disley reflected carefully. "I didn't want to do the standard tunes that people do, the same old sort of sleigh

ALBUM REVIEWS

Muse channels pop, gets self-indulgent

BY KEVIN KELLY
Daily News Staff Writer

Muse, "The Resistance," Warner Bros.

When one thinks of a muse, one likely envisions a never-ending well of inspiration. The British band Muse, perhaps tempting fate, perhaps just trying too hard, fails to live up to this concept. That's not to say that the three-piece group doesn't have its moments.

Muse, which formed in 1992 as a glam rock outfit, stormed onto alt-rock's main stage in 2006 with "Black Holes and Revelations," an album that contained at least two nuggets of pop brilliance: "Starlight" and "Supermassive Black Hole" were surefire recipes for head-bobbing and hip-shaking that stayed firmly lodged in the mind long after they had ended.

"The Resistance," Muse's fifth studio album, released in September, begins with a song that might be the band's finest. "Uprising," whose lyrics seem to be a rallying cry for the YouTube generation — so long as YouTube isn't tainted by "fat cats" — is a rollicking, synth-driven bit of prog-pop that would have slayed on the roller-disco circuit. And two songs later, "Undisclosed Desires" is an unlikely marriage of strings à la The Cure's "Lullaby" and teeth-rattling Tool-like bass slaps, wrapped up in Matthew Bellamy's honeyed vocals, a trilling falsetto always reminiscent of Thom Yorke but, when done this well, exists in a class of its own.

But then "United States of Eurasia"

lurches into the mix like a drunken clown showing up late to a child's birthday party. Is it an homage to Queen and Pink Floyd? Is it a Rachmaninoff recital mistakenly taking place at Kennedy Space Center during a shuttle launch instead of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts? One thing is certain here: The band is gunning for a higher plane, evident in the near-operatic voices, quickly cascading to piano tinkles and the distant sounds of children playing. As Miyagi says in "The Karate Kid," "Man who catch fly with chopsticks accomplish anything." True artistry isn't always easy to understand, something



that is apparent when the band embarks on its three-part "Exogenesis" closer, dripping with bombast and losing this audience member.

Muse will headline Not So Silent Night alongside AFI, Metric and Vampire Weekend tonight at Oracle Arena in Oakland.

'Fall' stumbles

Norah Jones, "The Fall," Blue Note

At the same time that Norah Jones has been honing her sound, her album sales have been dropping off. Her debut, "Come Away With Me," an innocuous soft-jazz affair, has sold more than 10 million albums in the U.S. since its 2002 release. Two years later, "Feels Like Home," sales of which dipped to 4 million domestically, found Jones more relaxed and more engaging, exploring blues and country styles — after all, Willie Nelson is her mentor.

Her fourth album, "The Fall," which

debuted at No. 3 on the Billboard charts in mid-November, moved a piddling 180,000 copies in its first week. The rampant practice of pirating albums over the Internet is partly to blame, for sure, but given the choice between adventure or predictability, the general public tends to gravitate toward garden-variety musicianship. Otherwise, why would John Mayer be at the top of the charts the same week "The Fall" debuted, and Susan Boyle, a reality TV star performing bland covers, be at the top of the charts this week?

Jones employs the help of Ryan Adams, Okkervil River's Wil Sheff and experimental guitarist Marc Ribot on "The Fall." The styles are all over the place. There's a dub reggae vibe on "Even Though." Jones places herself firmly at the head of the mix on "It's Gonna Be," channeling the ferocity of Amy Winehouse as the band swirls around her, sounding very much like Los Lobos. "Chasing Pirates," the album standout, is a heady mix of pop and soul, reminiscent of Cat Power's best work, an album aptly titled "The Greatest."

Jones' voice is still sweet and syrupy as ever, which can be a downside when the music quiets down, unless you're a fan of adult alternative (oxymoron?). With the exception of "Tell Yer Mama," a Johnny Cash-type heel-kicking romp, the latter half of the album is populated by slower tempo standards that drag on the listener like quicksand.

You'll have to wait a long time to hear Norah Jones perform songs from her new album in the area. She is slated to play The Fillmore in San Francisco on April 21.

E-mail Kevin Kelly at kkelly@dailynewsgroup.com.

That's info-tainment!

We in the media are always fond of running stories about how uninformed the average American is, typically lamenting the results of some recent poll showing that, for example, more of us rubes can identify the latest "Dancing With the Stars" champion than can name the sitting vice president. And to think I was ridiculed during the presidential campaign for suggesting that Barack Obama pick Kristi Yamaguchi as his running mate.

Still, Americans' lack of general knowledge is disappointing, especially considering how much effort we've put into broadening the definition of what qualifies as "information." We are, after all, the inventors of the infomercial, a form of TV advertising that has the word "info" right there in the name, yet the only worthwhile nugget you'd ever take away from watching one of these extended commercials is something along the lines of, "So *that's* what happened to Victoria Principal."

This phenomenon also plays out with the children's entertainment that's promoted as "educational." Parents of young children are notoriously overstressed, so broadcasters are more than happy to provide us with a convenient excuse for letting our kids veg out in front of the tube. Want your children to learn a little history about the day-to-day struggles early homo sapiens family groups faced during the Paleolithic era? Perfect, they could watch "The Flintstones"! And who doubts that today's young people know so much about the long-term effects of toxic sewage exposure on adolescent reptiles thanks to all that time spent watching the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles"?

These examples might seem a tad outlandish, but it's clear that touting the dubious

benefits of even potentially harmful children's consumer products has become commonplace. Remember how we were told that, rather than being a complete waste of time, video games would help kids develop their hand-eye coordination? Or all those ads touting cereals with names like "Sugar Frosted Honey Sweetened Choco-Grahams" as "an essential part of this nutritious breakfast?" Or more recently, when makers of the line of DVDs for babies implied that repeatedly watching their inane videos would fast-track your infant's way to acceptance at an Ivy League university?

Sure, at the time many of us scoffed, but who can question that these products are the primary reason why American kids today so routinely beat other nations' children on standardized tests and engage in such healthy eating habits. Oh, wait...

I mention this all in light of my family's recent visit to Sea World, where I was surprised to note that the animal trainers provided very little informative commentary during the killer-whale show. Based on my own childhood experience at Sea World, I expected the trainers to open the show by saying something like, "Did you know that, although commonly referred to as 'killer whales,' orcas are not really whales, but rather the largest member of the dolphin family? These majestic creatures are among the most intelligent and highly evolved creatures on Earth, exhibiting dominion over the entire marine world as the sea's unquestioned apex predator. Now let's make them jump through some hoops!"

Mind you, my kids still saw plenty of orcas jumping through hoops, just without much accompanying information on the per-



formers. In this sense the show was more like a traditional circus act, where the guy holding the whip and chair rarely delivers a lengthy dissertation on life in the Serengeti before sticking his head into a lion's mouth.

What little commentary we did hear at Sea World consisted mainly of the trainers punctuating the stunts with clichés such as "chase your dreams" and "believe in yourself." I felt like we were at some sort of motivational team-building exercise, except that instead of walking on hot coals or doing "trust falls," we were intermittently being doused with a few thousand gallons of ice-cold seawater by a giant mammal.

Frankly, I appreciate that Sea World is willing to swim against the pretend-educational tide. Audiences come to be entertained by sea creatures doing a bunch of tricks, so why bother pretending that we're all students in Intro to Marine Biology? That said, I didn't quite understand the connection between the orcas and the inspirational messages about chasing our dreams. Am I supposed to think, "Gee, if these folks can train a killer whale to swim upside down, then by golly, maybe I will open that Beanie Baby store, after all!"

Not that I didn't get anything out of the show. After watching these massive creatures demonstrate such remarkable intelligence, I realized that I'd been taking the entirely wrong approach to boosting my own kids' smarts. That's why, as soon as I came home, I tossed out all our "educational" flash cards, DVDs and video games and replaced them with an above-ground pool, some hula hoops and a bucket of fish. Harvard, here we come!

Readers wishing to express their astonishment at Malcolm's own apparent lack of intelligence may e-mail him at Malcolm@CultureShlock.com.

DISLEY

From page C1

bell's type thing. I didn't want it to be cheesy. I wanted to have some depth to the material. People hear the same repertoire constantly. It's in the stores from Thanksgiving. I'm trying to offer something different."

A couple of years ago, he went to see "The Nutcracker" for the first time. "The melodies are fantastic. They're powerful, strong melodies that stick with people."

"I started to think it might be cool to do a jazz version of it. I was doing the arrangements in the spring and the weather was spectacular. I had to keep all the shades drawn. Otherwise, you can't get into the Christmas vibe at all," he said, with a chuckle.

"I had a CD of the original score. I just started to pick out melodies that I thought were the important ones to cover, like 'The Sugar Plum Fairy,' obvious things like that. Then I put together a finale where I just used some of the same themes and rearranged them."

Disley treated "The Nutcracker" with respect, but not with a confining over-reverence. "I took a lot of liberties with some of the things. 'The Russian Dance,' is like a cool, sort of Miles Davis jazz waltz. Some people hear it and they don't even realize what it is."

"I just decided there wasn't any point in

MUSIC PREVIEW

WHAT: The Terry Disley Experience

WHERE: Yoshi's, 1330 Fillmore St., San Francisco

WHEN: 8 p.m. Dec. 23

TICKETS: \$16-\$22; 415-655-5600

doing it, unless you come up with something new on the idea. So I did stray away from the original quite a lot."

He worked on the arrangements at home and had them fully realized in his head prior to entering the studio. "Once we began recording, it was just a matter of trying to get as cool a jazz vibe as possible on all the pieces."

Of the result, Disley said, "It sounds like Bill Evans playing Tchaikovsky. There's not much electronics involved. It's pretty much a straight-ahead sounding disc."

Venues seeking something fresh and different for the holidays, have been clamoring for Disley to recreate the musical excitement live.

At Yoshi's, Disley will perform the suite in its entirety.

Joining Disley will be some of the Bay Area's finest musicians — Sheldon Brown (woodwinds), David Scott (trumpet), Jason Lewis (drums), Dan Feiszli (bass), Marquinho Brasils (percussion) and Lorn Leber (guitar).

Listeners are rediscovering "The Nut-

cracker" through Disley's inventive work. "Purists might resist. One of our older fans was, like, 'Oh, I don't want to hear somebody else trying to do 'The Nutcracker.' Some people just don't want you to mess with it. Other people just really have loved it. Generally, it's gone over really well. People enjoy the new renditions."

"You can apply this idea to any piece of classical music. Just take the themes and don't be scared about doing something completely new with it."

Disley hopes this year's "Jazzcracker" concerts will be successful enough to make them annual events, eventually even expanding into stage productions with modern dance incorporated.

While Disley ponders interpreting other classical works, he has just released a new album covering classic rock. "We Play Requests" features Disley's take on such artists as Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and Radiohead. Fan requests led to this CD. More information can be found at terrydisley.com.

Pianist Disley, a native of London, England, relishes exploring many musical avenues and performing solo, as well as backed by a variety of combos. "I like having a lot of different hats to wear. Right now I'm getting my Christmas hat ready."

E-mail Paul Freeman at romper333@comcast.net.

ORR

From page 1

But you can bet it's going to be a fun show: That's the way Cal Pops rolls.

This program includes music from "It's A Wonderful Life," "White Christmas," "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas" and plenty of other popular sources. Alan Dale will be on hand to narrate "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Brazzissimo, a brass tentet which includes six members of the Pops, will "put people on the edge of their seats," said Wilunder.

Get tickets at the Web site, www.californiapopsorchestra.org or by calling 650-856-8432 during business hours Mondays through Saturdays. But don't dawdle.

VOICES OF THE ANGELS DEPT.: I lent both my ears to The Ragazzi Boys Chorus in Palo Alto last week, and thoroughly enjoyed the program. Boys choruses started because in the bad old days women weren't allowed on stage ... but there is something wonderful about boys' voices raised in really great music, and the Ragazzi is one of the best boys choruses anywhere.

Highlights of the program for my ears included "Dixit Maria ad Angelum" by Hans Hassler, which is a powerfully moving, beautiful piece of music; the old French carol "Pat-a-pan"; "Glory Hallelujah to duh Newbo'n King," an African-American spiri-



John Orr / Daily News

Joyce Keil talks to the Ragazzi Boys Chorus during rehearsal for the program happening on Sunday.

tual with plenty of bounce and happy faces; and "Still, Still, Still," an Austrian carol, which caused me to write the word "Wow" in my notes.

It's fun to watch these boys, some of whom find ways to make their blazers look rumpled or otherwise ill-fitting, and some who look like they just stepped out of GQ; some of whom look deadly serious to be

singing in front of an audience, and some who just look like they are having a good, goofy old time.

The "Old-Fashioned Christmas" program repeats on Sunday at 4 p.m. at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 1 S. El Camino Real, San Mateo. \$10-\$25. www.Ragazzi.org or 650-342-8785.

E-mail John Orr at

Things to do

DANCE

Smuin Ballet The Christmas Ballet, 2009 Edition. 8 p.m. today and Saturday, 8 p.m. Sunday; Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View; 650-903-6000 or www.smuinballet.org. 8 p.m. Wednesday-Dec. 18, 2 and 8 p.m. Dec. 19, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Dec. 20, 8 p.m. Dec. 22, 2 p.m. Dec. 23, 24, 26; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 700 Howard St., San Francisco; 415-978-2787 or www.smuinballet.org. \$18-\$56.

"The Nutcracker." The San Francisco Ballet. Through Dec. 27. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness, San Francisco. \$18-\$236. 415-865-2000, www.sfballet.org.

"The Nutcracker." Palo Alto Children's Theatre. 7 p.m. today; 2, 7 p.m. Saturday; 4:30 p.m. Thursday; 7 p.m. Dec. 18; 2, 7 p.m. Dec. 19; 2 p.m. Dec. 20. Palo Alto Children's Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto. \$5 children, \$10 adults. www.cityofpaloalto.org/childrenstheatre

"The Nutcracker." Ballet San Jose. Through Dec. 27. San Jose Center for the Performing Arts, 255 Almaden Blvd. \$30-\$85. 408-288-2800, www.balletsanjose.org.

Holiday Festival of Dance, "The Greatest Gift of All." San Mateo Parks & Recreation Department. 5:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. San Mateo High School gymnasium. 506 N. Delaware St., San Mateo. \$9 advance, \$10 at door. Under 12 free. 650-522-7444.

FAMILY

West Bay Model Railroad Association 2009 Christmas Show. 7-10 p.m. today, noon-6 p.m. Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Model Railroad Building, Merrill Street between Ravenswood Avenue and the Menlo Park Train Station. Free; donations appreciated. Raffle for a new train set. Model Trains in three scales (O, S, and HO) on display and operating. 650-322-0685.

Gamble Garden — Children's Holiday Puppet Shows. 10 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Saturday. Gamble Garden, 1431 Waverley St., Palo Alto. \$10-\$15. 650-329-1356 x201 or www.gamblegarden.org

Santa Lucia Festival. 7 p.m. Sunday. First Lutheran Church, 600 Homer Ave., Palo Alto. Tomtens, Star Boys, Gingerbread children, and Santa Lucia's court with songs sung in Swedish and English directed by Julia Simon. Free.

MUSIC

Schola Cantorum San Francisco. Works by Guerrero, Morales, Esquivel, Heredia, Cristo, Lobo, and Cererols. 8 p.m. today. First Lutheran Church, 600 Homer St., Palo Alto. \$10-\$25. 510-528-1725 or www.sfems.org.

Madrigal Tea & Dinner Concerts. 3:15 p.m. today and 5:45 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Palo Alto High School Choral Department, under the direction of Michael Najjar, perform music mixed with comedic entertainment. Silent Auction and Holiday Gift Boutique. Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, 600 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto. \$15-\$75. www.palychoir.com. Sold out.

"Peter and the Wolf." San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, conducted by Donato Cabrera, narrated by Linda Ronstadt. 3 p.m. Saturday, Flint Center, 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino; 1 and 4 p.m. Sunday, Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. \$15-\$57 Davies Symphony Hall; \$15-\$48 Flint Center (children 17 and under half price); 415-864-6000 or sfsymphony.org.

Ragazzi Boys Chorus "An Old-Fashioned Christmas." Directed by Joyce Keil. Sarah Wannamaker on organ. 4 p.m. Sunday, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 1 S. El Camino Real, San Mateo. \$10-\$25. www.Ragazzi.org or 650-342-8785.

Fortnightly Music. Piano, vocal and chamber music works of Ravel, Puccini, Mozart, C. Floyd, and F. Martin. 8 p.m. Sunday. Palo Alto Art Center Auditorium, 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto. Free. www.fortnightlymusicclub.org

Philharmonia Baroque Chamber Players, with Marc Schachman, oboe. "Mozart & Haydn: Conversations Between Friends." 7 p.m. Sunday. Music at Kohl Mansion, 2750 Adeline Drive, Burlingame. \$15-\$42. 650-762-1130 or fax 650-343-8464 or www.musicatkohl.org/tickets.

THEATER

"A Civil War Christmas." By Paula Vogel, presented by TheatreWorks, directed by Robert Kelley. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. No shows Dec. 24 and 25. Closes Dec. 27. Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto. \$24-\$62. 650-463-1960 or visit theatreworks.org.

"A Christmas Pudding." Holiday memoir mixed with poems, short stories and song. Through Dec. 19. Bus Barn Stage, 97 Hillview Ave., Los Altos. \$24-\$32; 650-941-0551, www.busbarn.org.

"Christmas, My Way: A Sinatra Holiday Bash." Conceived by David Grapes and Todd Olson, Book by Todd Olson. Directed by Daniel L. Demers. Revue features 40 songs. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; 2 p.m. Saturday and Dec. 19. Closes Dec. 20. Hillbar Theatre, 1285 E. Hillsdale Blvd., Foster City. \$17-\$34. 650-349-6411 or www.hillbartheatre.org.

"Aurélia's Oratorio." Written and directed by Victoria Thierree Chaplin. Berkeley Rep's Roda Theatre, 2025 Addison St., Berkeley. 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 7 p.m. Wednesdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Special 2 p.m. matinees Dec. 12, 17, 26, Jan. 1, 14 and 23. No matinee on Dec. 6 or Jan. 24. No evening performances on Saturday, Tuesday, Dec. 24, 25, 27, Jan. 1 or 13. Closes Jan. 24. \$13.50-\$86. (510) 647-2949 or www.berkeleyrep.org

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