

00:00:00	Music	Music	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:12	Jesse Thorn	Host	I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye!</i>
00:00:14	Music	Music	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team plays. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse	Host	Forest Whitaker is, of course, the star of so many great movies. He has a knack for taking <u>huge</u> figures from history and portraying them as complex, fascinating, sometimes fragile people. He played Charlie Parker in <i>Bird</i> . He played Cecil Gaines—the Whitehouse butler—in <i>The Butler</i> . He won an Academy Award for best actor for his role as Idi Amin in <i>The Last King of Scotland</i> .
			These days, you can see him on the TV show <i>The Godfather of Harlem</i> , which is wrapping up its first season on Epix. He plays Bumpy Johnson, the real-life mob boss who operated in Harlem in the first half of the 20 th century.
			When I talked to Forest last year, though, he'd just finished a film about another famous, real-life person. He played Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the film <i>The Forgiven</i> . It takes place in South Africa, just after apartheid.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
			The Truth and Reconciliation commission is in full swing, holding public and private testimony from the victims and perpetrators of past wrongs. Archbishop Tutu was the chairman of the commission, appointed by Nelson Mandela. In this scene, Archbishop Tutu is in a courtroom interrogating a colonel in the South African State Security Agency. In what looks like a small stage—sort of like a jury box—there are a handful of families seated. Each of them holds a photo of their deceased or disappeared relatives.
00:01:39	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:40	Clip	Clip	<i>[The voices echo and reverberate, as though filling a large, empty space.]</i>
			Desmond Tutu: Do you have nothing to say to these families? To David Lyon's family? Or Simba Goniwe's family? <i>[Beat.]</i> Families who have had no news of their beloved son or their adored husband for years? Do you have nothing to say that would ease their pain?
			<i>[Members of the crowd begin to speak up, in the background—talking over each other.]</i>
			Desmond: That might give them closure?
			Colonel: I will tell you this, Archbishop.

[Someone in the crowd shouts.]

Colonel: We were fighting a war against communism. I was battling a threat to us all. Communist regimes. Harsh, repressive regimes intent on making Africa theirs.

00:02:39	Jesse	Host	Forest Whitaker, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm so excited to get to talk to you.
00:02:44	Forest Whitaker	Guest	Oh, I'm glad to be here.
00:02:46	Jesse	Host	Um—did you get to meet Desmond Tutu when you were preparing for this role?
00:02:53	Forest	Guest	Yes. I mean, actually, I've known Desmond Tutu for a number of years. I met him before. I have a conflict resolution organization that works in about five different countries. Actually, our head trainer is in South Africa. So, I've talked to him about that and peacebuilding, at different times. And—but, of course, it's quite different when you're, like, working on a part where you're to depict someone. Especially someone like him, who's an icon and who, like, has such an aura, such an energy about him. You know?
00:03:24	Jesse	Host	Were you... afraid to portray such an iconic man on film? I mean, like, I saw—I just was googling around, this morning, and I saw, like, an article of South Africans who are just ready to be mad that you weren't doing the right South African accent. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> But, like, that's the <u>least</u> of your worries.

[Forest agrees.]

00:03:49	Forest	Guest	You know what I mean? I can understand, too. Like, you know, that they would question that. And even for myself, I kept questioning whether I would, at least, be able to capture the spirit of the man. And that was what I was hoping that I would be able to do. 'Cause I think there's some physical differences and a number of different things that are different. But, I mean, I wanted to capture his view on the world, his understanding of life. Because I think the one thing that he is, is centered in his beliefs. He's a very highly spiritual man and, I think, being such a highly spiritual man, he's able to have the anger and passion, sometimes, to fight against injustice. And, at the same time, have the sense of humor to be able to see that things will find their way, in time.
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He saw the film and he—he liked the film and then he actually wrote a statement about the film and about, you know, how important he thought the film was. And that was a good relief, from him, because as an artist, I always question myself. So, it'll be easy for them to, like, go at me because as soon as they do, I'll *[chuckling]* start to question myself even more. You know?

00:04:54	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> I like to imagine that part of that statement—which I have not read—just says, like, “It's okay that Forest Whitaker is basically one of me, sitting on another of me's shoulders.”
00:05:05	Forest	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> That's a nice—that's a nice thing to say.
00:05:08	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> But I think it's apparent that you spent attention on the physical qualities of this person who is very physically different from you. I mean, he's a kind of—I mean, as I remember him—kind of a small dude.

[Forest confirms this.]

			And you're a big dude. I mean, you, like, played high school football and stuff.
00:05:28	Forest	Guest	Yeah. Yeah. I watched him and I just studied the way he moves and the way he walks and the way he gestures. You know, and the way he speaks and the timbre of his voice. But, still there's—you're right—there's things that, uh—I'm a much larger person than he is. I have a different facial structure and all that.
00:05:48	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles softly.]</i> You speak with a very light voice—at least, you're speaking with me with a very light voice, right now. Do you think that you speak that way because you are a big guy? I'm also—I'm also pretty big, so, like, I understand the way that being big in the world kind of... affects everything around you.
00:06:08	Forest	Guest	I don't know, maybe. You know, I mean, I remember when I was in acting school and I had a teacher. His name was Jim Wilson, he used to teach speech. And he put me against the wall, and he was, like, <u>pressing</u> into my chest and he's saying, "You need to speak. You know, <u>speak</u> ." And he's like, you know, and you know my voice would be, like, bigger and boomier. He says, "Use the voice! Use your power! Use your power!"
00:06:39	Jesse	Host	He didn't feel like I was using my, uh, power as an actor and as an artist. And that I was running from it. Maybe he's right. I don't know. When did you decide you were gonna be an actor?
00:06:43	Forest	Guest	I don't think I really decided I was gonna be an actor until about, maybe, eight years into my career. You know? So.
00:06:50	Jesse	Host	<i>[Cackles.]</i> Alright, let me—let me rephrase that question, Forest.
			<i>[Forest chuckles.]</i>
00:06:58	Forest	Guest	When did you decide you would like to become an actor? I decided I wanted to explore acting when I was, like, actually... I auditioned for <i>Under Milk Wood</i> and I got the part of the manager. And that's when I kind of said, "Okay, this—I like—I like doing this a little better than the classical voice, classical music." And then that summer, I got cast in a play in a—called, at the Orpheum Theatre, uh, <i>The Beggar's Opera</i> . And I was accepted into both the music and the acting conservatories at USC. So, I went over there, and I started studying. I guess I started to <u>decide</u> that I wanted to explore acting.
			I wasn't quite sure if it was what I should be doing, you know? I wanted to see if I had, like, real—I guess—I don't know, aptitude or if it was part—you know, if it was supposed to be my destiny to do something like that. And so that's why I say it took me a long time to finally decide that this was something that I was to do and that I would continue doing. 'Cause my purposes for things are amorphous, meaning that I have, like, a purpose of, like, what I want, how I wanna live my life, or what I'm trying to understand. And I think it's trying to find the right ways to do so. And that was one way, and even tomorrow, maybe I'll figure out another.
00:08:09	Jesse	Host	<i>[Forest agrees several times as Jesse speaks.]</i> One of the things that I liked about your portrayal of Desmond Tutu, in this movie, is—that this man may <u>literally</u> be a saint... um, and I think it would be easy to tell the story of the beatific, magical man Desmond Tutu.

Because, like, yeah—I mean, I’ve—I shook hands with the man and I remember it vividly, from when I was nine years old. He is a beatific, magical man.

But, uh... you know, his story—in this movie—is about dealing with his own anger. And I wonder how you—how you approach that, as an actor. Someone who has this extraordinary reaction to his own feelings. Something that is, um—but they—but that they are just normal, human feelings.

00:09:05 Forest Guest

Yeah, I think you’re right. I mean, I think one of the things that he’s struggling with is, he’s faced with his own question of whether he can live by what he’s—what he preaches. His own faith, you know? Which is that he can—that you can forgive and that you can love, even the most heinous of crimes or the most, you know, destructive individuals.

Although, something I was reading, recently, that Martin Luther King said—when he was talking about, uh... And this is—this is—this is a paraphrase of a quote. “When your enemy is vulnerable, to not take advantage of that vulnerability, to not try to harm, to not try to hurt—” It’s a quote—I wish I had it with me, right now, so I could give it to you. But it was really interesting to look—that that was one of the keys that he was talking about, when he was talking about love, was the ability to be able to—even when your enemy, those who’ve done things to you, done wrongs to you, hurt you, said bad things against you, whatever—that when they get in the position where they need you—and he even says when they just need to get a new job or when they need to do this, where you could easily sabotage their advancement as a human being, that you choose not to.

This is a part of the greatest aspect of love, you know? And I’m trying to understand that. I’m continuing to try and understand that, ‘cause I continually get trials and tribulations in my own life, where people do things that are harmful and hurtful in some ways, to me, but I still, like, I’m trying to understand them. And at times, it can even feel, like, dysfunctional and uh, almost dependent—codependent—to try to, like, be like, “No. They did that, but I know that, inside of them, they’re a good person.” And I know they tried to harm me, but to—at the same time—recognize that there’s still something divine in each individual. Even when in South Central, I remember very seriously saying to my mom, I said, “Ma, you know if you look at people really closely and you listen to them, you can tell where they’re from and what’s happened to them!”

00:11:08 Jesse Host

My mother said, “Oh really?” [Chuckles.] You know? But I spent my life pursuing that same premise, in some ways.

We’ll have more with Forest Whitaker when we return from a quick break. Still to come: Forest Whitaker gives me the business for having the temerity to ask Forest Whitaker about *Battlefield Earth*.

Fair enough, Forest Whitaker.

00:11:24 Music Music
00:11:26 Jesse Promo

It’s *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Brassy transition music plays.

This message comes from NPR sponsor: Squarespace.

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00:11:58 Promo Promo

[*Music fades.*]

Music: Dreamy, mysterious music plays.

Speaker 1: *Planet Money* is the man who popularized recycling by making a deal with the mafia. It's the bedroom beats-maker making hits for Drake and Nicki Minaj and the woman trying to get her money back from Venmo. *Planet Money*, from NPR.

00:12:14 Promo Promo

[*Music fades.*]

Elliott Kalan: Have you ever watched a movie so bad, you just needed to talk to somebody about it?

Dan McCoy: Well, here at *The Flop House*, we watch a bad movie, and then talk about it!

Stuart Wellington: Yeah, you don't have to do anything! We'll watch it and we'll talk it. We do the hard work.

Dan: Featuring the beautiful vocal talents of Dan McCoy—

Stuart: —Stuart Wellington—

Elliott: —and me, America's rascal, Elliott Kalan.

Stuart: New episodes every other Saturday at [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org), or wherever you get your podcasts, dude.

Stuart & Dan: Bye byyye!

Elliott: Bye bye!

00:12:46 Jesse Host

[*Cheerful outro music.*]

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Forest Whitaker, is an Academy Award-winning actor who has performed in dozens of films, including *Bird*, *The Last King of Scotland*, *Black Panther*, and my personal favorite—*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*. He's also on TV, these days, starring in the crime drama, *The Godfather of Harlem*, on Epix.

He and I talked last year.

I wanna talk a little bit about some of the other amazing roles that you've had, in your career. One of my favorite movies—I was gonna say, one of my favorite movies of yours, but I'm just gonna straight-up say, one of my favorite movies—

00:13:26 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Jesse: —is a movie called *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*.

00:13:29 Jesse Host **Forest:** Oh, cool.
[Forest agrees several times as Jesse speaks.]

Uh, which was directed by Jim Jarmusch in the—I guess 1999. And... *[laughing through his words]* it's—it's one of those movies that's very difficult to explain to people, 'cause it doesn't sound like a real movie.

[A beat, where Jesse gets himself together.] Um, basically, you are the title character. And you are a hitman and a, sort of, samurai. Like a—like a warrior. And—but you live in a contemporary city... and, you know, it's like a—it's like a crime drama, in some ways. I mean—and in some ways it's—in some ways it's a comedy, as well. But, it really hinges on your performance as... It—you know, at the center of this film, as this... as this actual... you know, you have to believe in bushido, or whatever. And we have to believe that you believe that with no explanation. There's no—it's not as though everybody is—there's like a lot of scenes of other people going, like, "Oh yeah! That's *Ghost Dog*. He's like this because blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

Right? Like, you're just in that world and you're natural to that world. Did that role come to you through audition or was that something that Jim Jarmusch wrote for you?

00:15:07 Forest Guest Uh, Jim wrote the movie for me. I mean, he—in some ways—was thinking that this character was his representation of me. What happened was we met, and we said we'd like to work together. And then about a year later, he said, you know, "Let's sit—can we get together and talk?" And he had an idea and, uh... then he proceeded to—for like, for months for the—for about a year, like, meet me in LA and we would just have, like, these—sometimes—four or five hour conversations and then he would go back to New York.

And then, one day, he said, "Okay, I have enough. I'm gonna go write the script." And he wrote *Ghost Dog*. It has some thematics that we were talking about, even at—in a different way, you know? I think the movie deals with purpose and whether you can live and die by what you believe. And I think that was a test that goes on with him. It's quite challenging film, but it taught me a lot, because obviously the character is quite different than me, but taught me a lot as I was working on it. You know, trying to understand some different things.

00:16:17 Jesse Host *[Forest agrees intermittently as Jesse speaks.]* I was trying to think. I saw this movie when I was a senior in high school, and I was trying to think of why it was so... resonant for me, as an 18-year-old. And I think, maybe, it had to do with time that I spent, as a teenager, in the city that I grew up in... you know, I used to walk around a lot... as a teenager.

Um, and... there's a quality that you can have from living in a city that is your home, which is... you know, in a way, you can be—you can be both alone and not alone. And in a place where you're totally anonymous, but also where you entirely belong. Like, it all belongs to you, in a way? At least it feels that way. And you did.

And that felt like a—*[stammering]* it seemed like, maybe, that was the thing about... *Ghost Dog* that must have animated me so, that... you know, he has this quality of loneliness, certainly. And he is living, you know, an ascetic life.

But, there is a way that you relate to the city when you live in the city that I thought was very beautifully observed, in that film, as—you know—wild and surreal and ridiculous as it is.

00:17:49 Forest Guest I mean, it—I think you, like you said, you're being—if you're alone, like that, walking on your own—I mean, you—one of the things that was challenging about the character, to play the character, was the silence. And that's what I—the movie really taught me about, was silence. And you see him just driving, sometimes, in the movie, like, for five minutes. Just looking at different things and moving forward through that. And I think there's something that people can understand.

[Forest makes several sounds of agreement and acknowledgement as Jesse speaks.]

00:18:18 Jesse Host I think of that scene where, um, you walk past the RZA, who made the music for the film. And you guys just kind of dap each other and keep walking. Um...

00:18:32 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Jesse:** You know, it has...

00:18:39 Forest Guest **Forest:** That's—*[stammering]* that's some different—that's interesting, because *Ghost Dog* represents, also, like an urbanite. There's, like, a number of urban figures, like, that—for myself—it reminds me of, like, the Vietnam vets that I knew, as a kid. Like, my cousin and stuff, were in their fatigue jackets and having come back from the war and living in the community, not doing any—you know, not knowing what they did. Seemingly mysterious, but yet they exist and... the meeting that he has with RZA is like, he—we recognize that there are many of them. There's not one. There's many of them, like that. You know? And, uh. That was—that was an important statement to make, because there's... there are, you know like, a lot of kids, like you say—like you were. Wandering. Just looking.

It's a big thing about society, right now. We have to start to claim some of the kids, too, that are... wandering and trying to find their place.

00:19:34 Jesse Host Forest, we spent the better part of an hour talking about some of the incredible highlights of your career. But I also saw, in the movie theater, the movie *Battlefield Earth*.

[Forest make a sound of agreement.]

00:19:55 Forest Guest Which is, um... and I... mean no disrespect to you, definitely the worst movie I've ever seen in a movie theater. *[Laughs.]* That's funny. I think... I think, uh, the movie, it was—it was possibly a little lost, between being able to have the finances to be a high-tech movie and not—and not deciding that it was gonna be a low-tech movie, and just being um... you know, simple and on the ground and not try to find ways to appear larger.

For me, it was interesting, because—as a—as a kid in high school, one of some of the first lines I ever remember saying, you know, in a—I definitely did in a class, other than by myself somewhere, in my room—was from *The Island of Doctor Monroe*. You know? In *The Island of Doctor Monroe*, the character, he says, *[making his voice low and gravely]* “I am—I am not an animal. I’m a man!” You know? He’s like—and uh, that reminds me—that—so, the character of Ker, which is the character I played in *Battlefield*, was me kind of almost paying tribute to that.

And so, for me, I don’t really have the same feelings around the movie that *[chuckling]* that other people do.

[Jesse laughs.]

Because it resonates with something, with me. And then, like, you know—some of the movies that I do that people might say, “Why is he doing that?” But I’m going—I might be doing it for totally different reasons, man. *[Chuckles.]* You know? That it reminds me of something or trying to understand something or whatever. That may be abstract to somebody else. I get it. I got you, though.

[Laughs.]

00:21:17 Jesse Host
00:21:19 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Forest, great news. I’m gonna play a clip from it, here.
Forest: *[Cackles.]*

Jesse: And...

Forest: Funny.

00:21:27 Forest Guest
00:21:29 Sound Transition
Effect
00:21:30 Clip Clip

Jesse: I was—I was gonna set it up, but I think it’s probably even better without the setup. I’m gonna be frank with you.
[Chuckling nervously] Okay.
Music swells and fades.

[Planetship and another member of the council cackling mockingly.]

Planetship: Man animals! Operating machinery! *[Cackles.]* Have you blown a head gasket? I will be the laughingstock of the universe!

Terl: Which is why you should have me take a group of man animals, with equipment, out to a remote area—better that you don’t know where—and try and train them.

Ker: Have them do some test mining, that way if it doesn’t work out, no one will know. *[Laughs lowly.]*

Terl: Right.

Planetship: And if it does work, I will be vaporized! It is against the law!

Ker: According to regulations, a Planetship faced with a profit threatening situation is relieved of all other ordinances to pursue, to protect, and to acquire said profits.

00:22:21	Sound Effect	Transition	Terl: And there you have it. Music swells and fades.
00:22:22	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Jesse: W-when I had—I haven't seen the movie since I saw in the movie theater.
00:22:27	Forest	Guest	Forest: I have to see again! 'Cause I—was trying to remember that scene, you know. <i>[Laughing.]</i> I don't have—you know, it's funny, too, because like—the other day, I went into—we were gonna do a—oh! I went into a pitch meeting! To talk to them about a TV series that I was thinking about doing and, like, the writer, he saved, like, that he was gonna say, "And, you know, <i>Last King of Scotland</i> , <i>The Butler</i> , and uh, <i>Battlefield Earth</i> ." <i>[Jesse laughs.]</i> You know, that was his big joke. And everybody busts out laughing, in the room, and I was like, "What's the problem?" <i>[They both laugh.]</i> I don't have a problem! I don't have the problem you guys have with that movie! And I—and he, later he was like, "I just couldn't—I didn't wanna tell you, 'cause I thought you might tell me no!" You know. And I was like, " <u>Why?</u> It's—you know, <i>[laughing through his words]</i> I don't have a problem. It's funny." So. It's always funny to me. I think if it were—if it were, like, a—if it were a dower... terrible film, I wouldn't be talking to you about it eighteen years later. If it wasn't remarkable, if it wasn't, like, astonishing.
00:23:10	Jesse	Host	Jesse: If it hadn't burned itself and its memory through the verve that everyone threw into it...
00:23:24	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Forest: But let me ask you a question. Let me ask you a question. Jesse: Yeah. Forest: Did you not have more interest in, like, <i>The Butler</i> or— Jesse: <i>[Laughs.]</i> Forest: —one of the other ones? I mean—no, because—'cause I don't have a problem with it, but I'm just like wondering what the intention—what's your—what's your intention? I just think it's—I just think— <i>[Forest chuckles.]</i> To me, like, one of the amazing things about movies—which are such a collaborative artform... <i>[Forest agrees.]</i>
00:23:42	Jesse	Host	

Is that—and, is that no one who works in movies is incompetent. It is way too hard to be incompetent and get a job, because it's all gig-based. So, you know, everybody—you know—there are exceptions. You know, there are millionaires who direct their own films and pay for them themselves, but like—if you're making a real movie, everyone has to be good at their jobs, or else they would never get another job. And god knows you're good at your job! God knows John Travolta and Barry Pepper are great at their jobs! You know. Everyone involved in the film is amazing at their job.

And it's just remarkable, to me, that sometimes it goes wrong! [Chuckles.] You know what I mean? Like, sometimes it doesn't work and that is, like, the most—the least that it has worked in anything that I've ever seen. And—but, I enjoyed it.

00:24:44 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Forest: [Laughs.]

Jesse: Like, it's a—

Forest: Wow! That shit's profound.

Jesse: It's really enjoyable in its disastrousness, you know what I mean? That's why I say, I genuinely have no ill will about the movie.

Forest: Oh no, it's okay!

Jesse: And, you know, like—I got in *Ghost Dog* first, right? That's one of my favorite movies of all time.

[They laugh.]

Forest: I know, but you could have, like, went to *The Crying Game*. You could have went to, like—

Jesse: [Dissolving into laughter.] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!

Forest: But no, you chose that! But I'm like—[stammering] it should be provocative, but I mean, I just don't have the same feeling about it.

[Forest laughs.]

Jesse: That's fair. That's very—that's very—that's more than fair, Forest.

00:25:18 Music Music

Slow, celestial music fades in.

00:25:20 Jesse Host

Well, Forest Whitaker, I am so grateful that you took the time to come on *Bullseye*. Thank you so much for doing this.

00:25:24 Forest Guest

Sure. No problem. My pleasure. [Amused.] Good talking to you.

00:25:28 Music Music

Music plays uninterrupted for a few moments.

00:25:33 Jesse Host

Forest Whitaker, from last year. An all-timer. His latest show, *The Godfather of Harlem*, just aired on Epix. Also, if you haven't seen *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*, definitely watch *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*. I love it so much. Brilliant movie. He's brilliant in it.

00:25:51 Music Music

Previous music is replaced with bright, dreamy music.

00:25:54 Jesse Host

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is produced at MaximumFun.org headquarters, overlooking MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California—where we have spent the entire fall

roasting. I mean, just absolutely roasting. And our colleague, Christian, was nice enough to buy the office ice-cream sandwiches.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our production fellows are Jordan Kawling and Melissa Dueñas. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, AKA DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And there are so many years of *Bullseye* interviews available to you. You can find them on our YouTube page. You can find them in your podcast app. You can find them on our website, MaximumFun.org. We're also on Twitter and Facebook. [Twitter.com/bullseye](https://twitter.com/bullseye), that's one place you can go to follow us. And I think that's it.

00:27:02 Promo Promo

Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]