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## Springfield fever

### 'The Simpsons Movie' arrives, 18 years in the making.

By ETHAN SACKS

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The Simpsons are going Hollywood.

Not to Hollywood, mind you. That's been done before, in one of the 400 episodes of the TV series featuring America's (and much of the world's) favorite cartoon family. In fact, there aren't many places - or plots - that haven't already been visited by Homer Simpson, the disturbingly inept employee of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, and his nuclear family over the last 18 seasons.

So what fresh ideas did the show's creators come up with for Fox's "The Simpsons Movie," opening Friday, the franchise's long-awaited foray onto the big screen?

"Well, the original concept ... was Homer falls in love with a pig, and then it just wrote itself," says creator Matt Groening, laughing.

Other details have been harder to come by. To keep the plot a surprise, the studio did not screen the movie for the press. Fans attending test screenings were entreated not to leak details.

"I'll be happy to tell you anything about the plot of the movie - in about two weeks," the movie's director, David Silverman, told the Daily News.

Instead, the focus has been on a guerrilla marketing campaign almost as animated as the movie itself. For the month of July, 11 7-Elevens in the United States - and one in Canada - were recast as "Kwik-E-Marts," after the show's fictional convenience store, home of the "Buy Three for the Price of Three" promotion.

Certain tidbits, however, have reached the Internet, such as the revelation that Bart Simpson, the mischievous, serrated-haired 10-year-old, briefly appears nude.

"It's not that big a deal," says Groening. "If you look at the Simpsons and note how simply they're designed, you can imagine if you see Bart's doodle, it really is literally a doodle."

There was nothing simple, however, about making "The Simpsons Movie" while continuing to churn out episodes for the series' upcoming 19th season.

Silverman says close to 100 animators worked more than 18 months on the movie, and brand-new animation techniques were devised to show crowd shots of most of the population of Springfield. In the end, there were 100 speaking parts.

And all this after it took four years just to come up with a script that everyone could agree on.

"We were writing up until a week and a half ago," says producer James L. Brooks, who knows a thing or two about movies as the Academy Award-winning writer-director of "Terms of Endearment" and "Broadcast News."

Impressed by Groening's "Life in Hell" comic strips, Brooks commissioned the artist to come up with material for animated shorts that would play on the "The Tracey Ullman Show." The first aired in April 1987. Dan Castellaneta

(Homer) and Julie Kavner (his loyal wife, Marge) were "Tracey Ullman Show" veterans who are still voicing the same parts almost two decades after that show went off the air.

To keep the live audience entertained during the changing breaks between skits, several of the animated bits were strung together and played on a screen.

"You'd be working on the show and you'd hear these giant laughs and you'd come out and it was that reel," says Brooks. "And that was one of the things that led to us making a show out of it."

So that's what they did. And 23 Emmys later, the series is still going strong - though maybe not the craze it was back when everyone was doing "The Bartman" dance.

"It may not fit the times as well as it used to," says Elayne Rapping, a pop-culture expert and professor of American Studies at the University of Buffalo. "[But] it must be doing something right. There is obviously still an audience."

Superman isn't around this summer, but the multiplexes have been clogged by the likes of Spider-Man, Shrek, pirates and giant transforming robots in an unprecedented spate of blockbuster releases.

But Brooks says after watching a scene of Homer spouting a monologue while trudging through a snow-filled landscape, the big lug deserves the promotion from the small screen.

"It just got me that Homer was on the big screen," says Brooks. "I felt really sort of awe at the character - he looked iconic to me."

Groening, for one, isn't worried about the competition.

"Minute per minute," he muses, "we probably have more jokes in our movie than 'Harry Potter' or 'Live Free or Die Hard.'"

#### **The quotable Homer**

*Light is the task where many share the toil.*

- Homer, the ancient Greek poet

*Kids, you tried your best and you failed miserably. The lesson is, never try.*

- Homer Simpson, on TV

*And what he greatly thought, he nobly dared.*

- Homer, the ancient Greek poet

*I'm normally not a praying man, but if you're up there, please save me, Superman.*

- Homer Simpson, still on TV