



LELOL
STARTS!

Paging Ward Cleaver: Life in LEGO Springfield is so perfectly perfect, Homer even wears a tie at the breakfast table. But eventually, "the two worlds collide and there's an exciting, explosive climax," says executive producer Selman



For their 550th episode, *The Simpsons* hits the bricks to take an ambitious adventure into the LEGO universe BY MICHAEL LOGAN

WHEN TWO LEGENDARY behemoths get in each other's space—say, King Kong and Godzilla—results can be tragic. But when the LEGO Group and *The Simpsons* come together, it's a little slice of Springfield heaven. A very pricey slice.

In an editing bay on the Fox Studios lot in Los Angeles, final touches are being put on a special LEGO-themed *Simpsons* episode (airing Sunday, May 4) that is the

most ambitious and expensive half-hour in the program's 25-year history. Cheekily titled "Brick Like Me" and set almost entirely in a LEGO world, it's also episode No. 550, a staggering accomplishment for a primetime series. This has left the well-seasoned wisenheimers on the production team feeling an odd combination of over-the-moon excitement and enough-already boredom.

"We've literally been at this thing for two years—twice the time it takes to do one of our regular episodes—and that's way too long for comedy people to live with the same jokes," says Matt Selman, the executive producer in charge of the episode. "It's been an epic process. First, we had to convince [executive producer] Jim Brooks and our showrunner, Al Jean, that a LEGO episode was a great idea and not just an excuse for our staff of nerds who grew up in the '70s to crack LEGO jokes. There needed to be a real emotional story there."

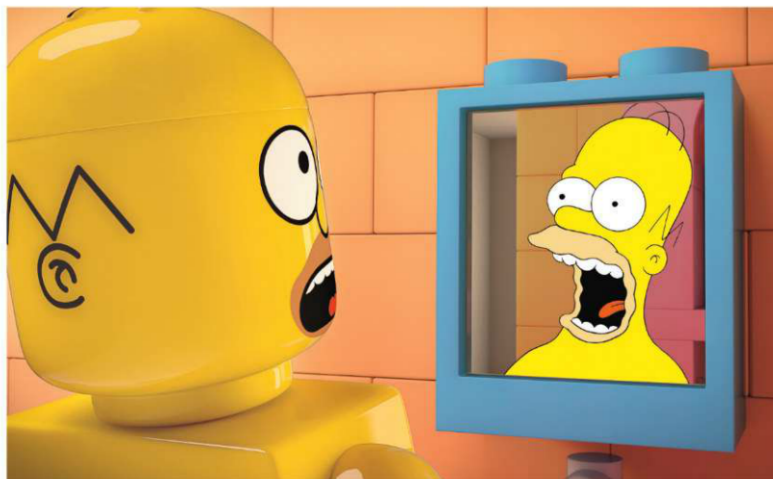
Then that story—in which Homer must choose between living in an

LEGO Marge and LEGO Homer get frisky and are clearly heading to the bedroom. Their afterglow scene, with LEGO arms, hands and feet pulled apart and scattered everywhere, is priceless. "This was a chance for us to be a little edgier than we might normally be," Wilfert says. "And because we'll likely bring younger viewers to *The Simpsons*, it was an opportunity for them to be more family-friendly."

This marriage actually began several years ago, when the 82-year-old Danish toy company approached Fox about marketing a construction set of the Simpsons' home, including

"everything fits with everything else, and nobody ever gets hurt." This world seems perfectly normal to the characters—until, that is, LEGO Homer starts having flashes of an alternate-universe life in which he's the good ol' Homer we know and love. "He begins to realize this LEGO world he's living in is not where he and his family really belong," says Kelley. "He has to figure out why they are there and what it all means."

This might seem too existential for the d'oh boy to wrap his pea brain around. "It's a bit like a Philip K. Dick novel," admits Kelley with a laugh. "Some of this will probably go



idyllic LEGO universe or the real world—had to meet with the approval of the LEGO folks. "We're pretty picky about how our brand is represented, and *The Simpsons*, which is so famous for its satire, has its own distinct point of view," says Jill Wilfert, the LEGO Group's vice president of licensing and entertainment. "No one at the show is used to dealing with creative input from the outside, so there was certainly some back-and-forth to get it all right. But, at its core, the LEGO brand is all about creativity and imagination. We respect that in others."

That's no corporate bull. Though "Brick Like Me" is definitely tamer than most other *Simpsons* episodes, Wilfert did approve a sequence where

Warning: This episode may require repeat viewing! "There's a scene set in the comic book store that's full of secret meta references," says Selman. "Lisa has a poster in her room that's a LEGO Friends version of Malibu Stacy. The stained glass in the church has a wooden duck—a salute to one of the first LEGO creations from the 1930s"

minifigures of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie and neighbor Ned Flanders, which went on sale in February. While that merchandising was still in the works, Wilfert pitched another idea: "We went to the guys at *The Simpsons* and said, 'Wouldn't it be fun if you did your opening couch sequence LEGO-style?' They quickly came back to us and said, 'Forget the couch; let's do an entire episode!'"

Selman and longtime staff writer Brian Kelley devised a storyline that kicks off in a blissful LEGO version of Springfield where, notes Marge,

over the heads of our younger audience." But no worries. The episode is packed with wisecracks, sight gags and hidden Easter eggs sure to satisfy *Simpsons* purists, plus something the show rarely indulges in—sweet, unabashed sentiment. In one scene, Homer reluctantly helps daughter Lisa build a toy princess castle and, to his shock and amazement, he has a good time.

"In speaking his goofy version of the truth, Homer admits what a lot of us dads secretly feel—that we don't really like playing with our kids," says Selman, a father of two.

THE SIMPSONS
Sundays, 8/7c, Fox

"Let's face it, playing with stuffed animals or having a tea party is really boring for adults. But if you're actually building something with your children, then it's a completely different experience—one that's much more stimulating and satisfying and cool. Parents and kids have been bonding that way over LEGO bricks for decades."

the team to work in a whole new way. "With this style of animation, everything needed to be locked in very early on, meaning we had to settle on our story and our jokes and commit to them with no room for screwups," says Kelley. "On top of that, every character we used had to be built from a 3-D model, which took a lot of time and money."

characters and their minifigures are both yellow," says Jean. "Both styles are similar and deceptive in their simplicity. When you get right down to it, LEGO is just bricks, and Matt Groening's design for our characters is really just eyeballs and a few lines—easy enough for any kid to draw."

There's another common denominator: nostalgia. "We all grew up

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If that sounds an awful lot like the theme of the recent blockbuster *The LEGO Movie*, well, it is. But the guys at *The Simpsons* swear there's been no rip-off.

"None of us saw the movie until very late in the process—long after our story was set," says Jean. "Any similarities are completely unintentional." Adds Selman: "We didn't even know there *was* a movie. Nobody at LEGO told us about it until after the point of no return. But, at the eleventh hour, we did manage to sneak in a little wink to the film."

Beyond that, there wasn't much opportunity for last-minute tinkering. While nobody at the show will talk about the episode's true cost, all agree that the extensive CGI forced

But no one got stingy. A big church sequence gave the execs a chance to include almost all of Springfield's citizens, cost be damned. "We pushed as much as we could to get everyone into those pews," Kelley says. "We were like, 'More characters! More characters!' because we knew our audience would hate us if any of their favorites didn't get to be LEGOs. You won't see Señor Ding Dong or the Grumple, but I think we crammed in everyone else."

This isn't the first time the LEGO Group has teamed with an entertainment giant—it also has multimedia merchandising deals with *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*. "But, in a way, the LEGO-*Simpsons* hookup is an even easier fit—and not just because our

part of each other's lives," says Kelley. "We are major LEGO fans at *The Simpsons*, and the LEGO master builders are huge fans of our show. It's been a fantastic, rewarding experience to pull this off together. After 550 episodes, we really needed that shot in the arm. Now we're pushing ourselves for more big episodes. Onward and upward!"

And nobody on the rowdy *Simpsons* team took issue with the softer approach. "Some of our episodes can get a little outrageous and push the envelope, but we would never be rude to our friends at LEGO," says Selman. "Let the guys at *South Park* do their own LEGO episode and go nuts. For us, it was all about sending a love letter."