



'The Simpsons,' back from the pit

Recent episodes feature more social satire and less Jerkass Homer

In "The President Wore Pearls," due to air Nov. 16, Lisa is dolled up into a charismatic student body president.

COMMENTARY

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Nov. 7, 2003 - Perhaps if TV shows can jump the shark, they can jump back, too. "The Simpsons," which in recent years seemed to have lost all trace of its original brilliance, certainly is attempting a daring feat, reaching back to its roots without ignoring just how far it's come in the 15 years it has been on the air. Perhaps Bart put it best in an episode last season: "If I may dust off an old chestnut: Ay caramba! Ay caramba, indeed."

THREE YEARS AGO, I argued [the show had lost its soul](#) advertisement and devolved into an uneven, slapsticky mess that needed to be put to a respectable death. At that point, it seemed that the show's creators — even those like George Meyer who had shepherded it through its proudest days — were hopelessly on a track to TV hell, allowing "The Simpsons" to drift toward ever-coarser humor and a lowbrow view of the world that bore little resemblance to the subtle work of earlier years.

I won't say they've fully cured themselves. Jerkass Homer, as old-time fans called him, can still dominate the screen — presumably because those younger viewers who more recently learned the virtues of the Simpsonsverse compose a large chunk of the viewing audience.

Guest star appearances often still seem incongruous, such as filmmaker Michael Moore's stint in one of the new season's early episodes.

But the show has finally evolved into a modern incarnation that retains

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tumbling down the side of Springfield Gorge.

RETURN OF A VETERAN

Rather, the episodes have turned away from Homer — both focusing back on the rest of the family again and taking time to explore the lives of secondary characters.

If it once took Lisa's piggy bank to repurchase Bart's soul, getting the show's soul back seems to have required Al Jean, a "Simpsons" veteran who joined the show for its 1989 launch and ran it during its pivotal third and fourth seasons, when it really began to evolve beyond a Bartfest and develop its intricate texture.

Jean, who took the show's helm from executive producer Mike Scully in 2001, has guided the show away from its gag-heavy, Homer-centric incarnation. With the DVD set of season three released in August, and another season of Jean-guided episodes due

in days, these are certainly brighter days for the show's long-time fans.

What's most interesting is how the show has evolved since Jean returned. Homer's personality hasn't actually changed much, perhaps because it would be nearly impossible to unspill the wine that caused his boorish metamorphosis in the show's middle years.

Rather, the episodes have turned away from him — both focusing back on the rest of the family again and taking time to explore the lives of secondary characters. Bart and Lisa have re-emerged from their father's shadow in episodes like 2002's "Bart vs. Lisa vs. 3rd Grade," which considers the horrifying prospect of the two Simpson kids in the same classroom. Secondary characters who had faded into the background — Apu and Moe, for example — have suddenly gotten lots more time in the spotlight.

A January 2003 episode, "Special Edna," was a great example: Bart leverages his storied career as ne'er-do-well to get teacher Edna Krabappel nominated as Teacher of the Year. The episode was hardly retro: The family's visit to Orlando's "Efcot Center" included a seating on "Enron's Ride of Broken Dreams." After a mere 14 seasons, Principal Skinner finally grew a spine, sort of, and belatedly proposed to the lovelorn Krabappel.

But the sensibility sure was, with everyone (OK, almost everyone) in Fox's First Family acting like their old selves again. Other characters were no longer mere props for Homer gags. Sly social satire was seamlessly woven in. It felt like the "Simpsons" of yore.

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Not only is Homer being shuffled into the background, but the show's creators seem to have acknowledged — implicitly, at least — that his jerkass incarnation really can be enervating. It's a puzzle as to whether this was a conscious directive, but when Homer has appeared recently, the writers frequently put the moral screws to him:

Last season, in "The Great Louse Detective," Homer keeps narrowly escaping attempts on his life as he rolls through his usual annoying antics. (Spoiler alert: His attacker turns out to be Frank Grimes, Jr., son of Homer's one-time nemesis — who killed himself during a spastic imitation of Homer's thoughtless antics. The original 1997 Grimes episode grated, but did underscore the travesty Homer had become.)

In season 13's "The Parent Rap," both Homer and Marge are dinged for their parenting skills. Hard-boiled Judge Constance Harm (a welcome addition to the troupe) revels in putting them through the paces, including a stint in the stocks. As Comic Book Guy notes half-sagely, "Worst parents ever!"

In this year's "Barting Over," Bart discovers his young stardom in breath freshener commercials as "Baby Stinkbreath" and Homer admits he squandered Bart's riches. Bart becomes so angry with his adlebrained dad that he goes to court to become emancipated and move out of Evergreen Terrace.

Homer's comeuppance has reached the point that even *he* acknowledges his own intolerability. In last season's "Brake My Wife, Please," not only is his driver's license taken away, but his sudden desire to walk everywhere runs Marge so ragged that she runs him over — and then has to spend all her time nursing him. By episode's end, Homer realizes he's become such a drag that he throws Marge a huge thank-you bash. Not exactly an epiphany, but shreds of hope that Homer might in fact redeem himself. (The episode's added bonus: a laugh-out-loud opening subplot at the Springfield Aquarium that included Milhouse's secret desire to be a nurse shark.)

NO TURNING BACK

Many of the show's newer fans insist it has always been on the right track. Of those who submit opinions about the show to Jumptheshark.com, which debates when shows begin to slide downhill, "Never Jumped" remains, curiously, the clear winner.

For every hardened fan who wouldn't mind seeing Homer pilloried, there is a younger viewer who was raised during the show's more herky-jerky days. I can assume that's one reason why Annoying Homer, even if he's been taken down a few pegs, hasn't been supplanted.

Plus it's simply impossible to turn back the clock. A "Simpsons" that reverted back to Jean's glory days — assuming writers could conceivably reverse 10-12 years worth of television — simply wouldn't work anymore. The snarky-but-soulful tone that emerged in the first few seasons would feel awkward.

Though pop references sometimes seem to have been Krazy Glued into the script, "The Simpsons" remains an effectively cultural reflector — mocking, among other things, the lesser TV lights that surround it and the networks that create them. (In "Day of the Jackanapes," which Jean wrote, two TV executives are blown to bits before melding, "Terminator 2"-style, into liquid cyborgs.)

SIGNS OF HOPE

Whether it goes out with the fire of a Guatemalan insanity pepper or stumbles to an embarrassing collapse like an overfed monkey remains a choice the show's staff will continue to face, but there's a new whiff of hope in the air.

So what's ahead for "The Simpsons"?

The show has survived darker days — the focal point perhaps being the ungraceful handling of Maude Flanders' demise — and created a new hybrid "Simpsons" that frequently allows the show's best core values to shine through without turning away a new crowd. It was a dangerous highwire act, and I'm frankly surprised they pulled it off.

If one new episode, "The President Wore Pearls," is any indication, the show's changes are continuing and its quality is getting even stronger. With a nod to "Evita," the teachers at Springfield Elementary anoint Lisa the student body president so they can use her as a pawn. It gives screen

time to the boys in Lisa's life — Bart, Nelson, Milhouse — and Homer's solipsistic mumblings are kept to a minimum.

Farther down the road, there is always the specter of the show ending for good and a much mumbled-about "Simpsons" movie. Jean recently told IGN.com the cast had signed on for three films, but neither a script nor a timeline was in place, and has hinted the show certainly might reach 20 seasons — a prospect likely to generate even more speculation about its future.

Whether Fox will allow the show to die remains a [complicated bit of showbiz economics](#) since "The Simpsons" is no longer a mere show. Most fans in the United States can get at least one daily dose, to say nothing of its overseas syndication. And with the arrival of long-awaited DVD sets, even the most rabid viewer can indulge and freeze-

Indeed, "The Simpsons" has become an iconic American brand and re-established a deserved position near the top of the pop-culture pile — at least for now. Whether it goes out with the fire of a Guatemalan insanity pepper or stumbles to an embarrassing collapse like an overfed monkey remains a choice the show's staff will continue to face, but there's a new whiff of hope in the air.

And it doesn't smell like donuts.

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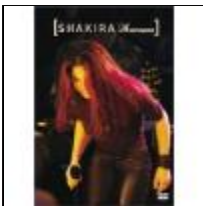
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