

Marge vs. the Monorail

"**Marge vs. the Monorail**" is the twelfth episode of *The Simpsons'* fourth season. It originally aired on the Fox network in the United States on January 14, 1993. The plot revolves around Springfield's impulse purchase of a faulty monorail from a conman. The episode was written by Conan O'Brien and directed by Rich Moore. Recurring guest star Phil Hartman provided the voice of Lyle Lanley, while the American actor Leonard Nimoy made a guest appearance in this episode.

"Marge vs. the Monorail" has been widely praised by fans and critics and is generally considered one of the best episodes of the entire series.^[4] Writer Conan O'Brien has claimed that, of the *Simpsons* episodes that he wrote, this was his favorite.^[5] Leonard Nimoy's unexpected guest appearance was also widely praised.^[6] Despite this, the episode attracted some criticism when it was first aired due to the somewhat abstract and less situational nature of the plot, particularly from voice actor Yeadley Smith who in 1995 described the episode as "truly one of our worst".^[7]

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Plot

After being caught by the Environmental Protection Agency dumping nuclear waste in the city park, Mr. Burns is fined \$3 million. At a town meeting held to decide how to spend the money, a fast-talking salesman named Lyle Lanley convinces the townspeople to buy a city monorail, with everyone aside from Marge being won over. Homer later becomes the conductor for the monorail after being selected at random by Lanley. Still doubtful about the monorail, Marge visits Lanley to question his motives, and discovers his intention to run off with bags of money skimmed from the monorail project while everyone else falls victim to a faulty train.

"Marge vs. the Monorail"	
<i>The Simpsons</i> episode	
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Promotional artwork for the episode	
Episode no.	71
Directed by	Rich Moore ^[1]
Written by	Conan O'Brien ^[1]
Showrunner(s)	Al Jean & Mike Reiss
Production code	9F10
Original air date	January 14, 1993 ^[2]
Chalkboard gag	"I will not eat things for money" ^[3]
Couch gag	The Simpsons sit on the couch, followed by four rows of Springfield's residents sitting in front of the family. ^[1]

Marge immediately drives to North Haverbrook, a previous purchaser of one of Lanley's monorails, and discovers that the town is in ruins. She meets Sebastian Cobb, the engineer who designed Lanley's North Haverbrook monorail, who explains that Lanley embezzled construction funds through shoddy workmanship and materials, and that the entire project was a scam. Realizing Marge believes him, he offers his assistance in helping to prevent the same fate from happening to Springfield. At the maiden voyage of the Springfield monorail, Lanley arranges for a well-attended opening ceremony, which will divert the town's attention while he escapes on a plane to Tahiti. His flight is later interrupted by a brief and unexpected stopover in North Haverbrook, whereupon the townsfolk storm the plane to attack Lanley as revenge for ruining their town.

Back in Springfield, the monorail departs just before Marge and Cobb arrive late (due to Cobb stopping for a haircut), and the controls soon malfunction because of Lanley's sabotage, causing the train to over-speed around the track, endangering Homer, Bart, and the passengers. Marge and Cobb contact Homer by radio, and Cobb tells Homer that he will need to find an anchor in order to stop the train. Improvising quickly, Homer pries loose the large metal "M" from the logo on the side of the monorail's engine, ties a rope to it, and throws it from the train. Eventually the "M" catches on the giant donut of the Lard Lad Donut sign and the rope holds, stopping the monorail and saving its passengers. A closing narration by Marge looks back on the Monorail as the last "crazy" purchase Springfield residents ever made, except for several more she proceeds to name, including an escalator that leads to nowhere and a 50-foot magnifying glass.^[2]^[3]^[8]

Production

Conan O'Brien conceived the idea when he saw a billboard in Los Angeles that just had the word "Monorail" on it, with no other details or explanation.^[9] He first pitched this episode at a story retreat to Al Jean and Mike Reiss, who said the episode was a little crazy and thought he should try some other material first. O'Brien had previously pitched episodes where Lisa had a rival and where Marge gets a job at the power plant and Mr. Burns falls in love with her; both went well. James L. Brooks "absolutely loved" this episode when O'Brien presented it.^[10]

Leonard Nimoy was not originally considered for the role as the celebrity at the maiden voyage of the monorail, as the writing staff did not think he would accept, because William Shatner had previously turned the show down. Instead, George Takei was asked to guest star as he had appeared on the show once before. After demanding several script changes,^[6] Takei declined, saying he did not want to make fun of public transportation as he was a member of the board of directors of the Southern California Rapid Transit District (now the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority). As a result, the staff went to Nimoy, who accepted.^[10]

Commentary	Matt Groening Al Jean Mike Reiss Rich Moore David Silverman Conan O'Brien
Guest appearance(s)	Phil Hartman as Lyle Lanley ^[1] Leonard Nimoy as himself ^[2]
Season 4 episodes	September 24, 1992 – May 13, 1993
	1. "Kamp Krusty" 2. "A Streetcar Named Marge" 3. "Homer the Heretic" 4. "Lisa the Beauty Queen" 5. "Treehouse of Horror III" 6. "Itchy & Scratchy: The Movie" 7. "Marge Gets a Job" 8. "New Kid on the Block" 9. "Mr. Plow" 10. "Lisa's First Word" 11. "Homer's Triple Bypass" 12. "Marge vs. the Monorail" 13. "Selma's Choice" 14. "Brother from the Same Planet" 15. "I Love Lisa" 16. "Duffless" 17. "Last Exit to Springfield" 18. "So It's Come to This: A Simpsons Clip Show" 19. "The Front" 20. "Whacking Day" 21. "Marge in Chains" 22. "Krusty Gets Kancelled"
Seasons	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5 · 6 · 7 · 8 · 9 · 10 · 11 · 12 · 13 · 14 · 15 · 16 · 17 · 18 · 19 · 20 · 21 · 22 · 23 · 24 · 25 · 26 · 27 · 28 · 29

Cultural references

The episode is a partial spoof of the 1962 film *The Music Man*, with "The Monorail Song" strongly resembling the Music Man's "Ya Got Trouble" and with Lyle Lanley being a doppelganger for Harold Hill.^[1]

The episode starts with a tribute song to *The Flintstones* as Homer heads home from work and crashes his car into a chestnut tree.^[1] Later, Leonard Nimoy makes a guest appearance as himself. References are made to his role in *Star Trek: The Original Series*, and an allusion to his role as the host of *In Search of...* from 1976 to 1982. Kyle Darren, the caricature of Luke Perry star of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, appears as well.^[11] Mayor Quimby uses the phrase "May the Force be with you" from the *Star Wars* franchise, confusing it with Nimoy's work on *Star Trek* (and—at the same time—believing Nimoy to have been "one of The Little Rascals").^[12] Homer's Monorail conductor uniform is based on uniforms from *Star Wars*.^[13] When Mr. Burns is brought into the court room, he is restrained in the same way as Hannibal Lecter in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*.^[1] Homer briefly serenades Marge in their bedroom with a line from the folk song "The Riddle Song".^[14]

Reception

In its original American broadcast, "Marge vs. the Monorail" finished 30th in the ratings for the week of January 11 to 17, 1993, with a Nielsen rating of 13.7.^[15] The episode was the highest-rated show on the Fox network that week.^[15]

"Marge vs. the Monorail" has frequently been selected in lists of the show's best episodes. In 2003, *Entertainment Weekly* released a list of its Top 25 episodes, ranking this episode in fourth, saying "the episode has arguably the highest throwaway-gag-per-minute ratio of any *Simpsons*, and all of them are laugh-out-loud funny."^[16] In his book *Planet Simpson*, Chris Turner named the episode as being one of his five favorites.^[17] In 2006, *IGN* named the episode the best of the fourth season.^[18] John Ortved of *Vanity Fair* called it the third best episode of the show, due to, "An amazing musical number; Leonard Nimoy in a random guest appearance... Besides being replete with excellent jokes, this episode reveals the town's mob mentality and its collective lack of reason. This is the episode that defines Springfield more than any other."^[19] In 2010, Michael Moran of *The Times* ranked the episode as the ninth best in the show's history.^[20]

The authors of the book *I Can't Believe It's a Bigger and Better Updated Unofficial Simpsons Guide*, Warren Martyn and Adrian Wood, called it "an unsurpassed episode. It's hard to know where to start dishing out the praise — Leonard Nimoy's guest appearance, the Monorail song, Marge's narration, the truck full of popcorn..."^[1] Robert Canning of *IGN* strongly praised the episode, stating "It is by far one of the most loved episodes of *The Simpsons* and can safely be called a classic by any fan. From beginning to end, there's joke after joke after hilarious joke. There's nothing in this half-hour that doesn't work, and no matter how many times I watch this episode, it never, ever gets old."^[21] Todd VanDerWerff of *Slant Magazine* named it the show's best episode, stating "It's the one you think of when you think of a *Simpsons* episode", and is "maybe the show's funniest, and it most perfectly encapsulates what may be the show's overriding theme: People are really stupid and self-serving, but if you give them long enough, they'll eventually bumble toward the right answer."^[22]

Leonard Nimoy's appearance as himself has been praised as being one of the show's best guest appearances.^[6] In a list of the 25 greatest guest voices on the show, released September 5, 2006, *IGN.com* ranked Leonard Nimoy at 11th.^[23] Nathan Ditum ranked his performance as the 13th best guest appearance in the show's history.^[24] Nimoy would make a second guest appearance in season eight's "The Springfield Files".^[23]

Conan O'Brien has said that of all the episodes of *The Simpsons* he wrote, this is his favorite.^[5] Homer's lines "I call the big one Bitey" and "Doughnuts, is there anything they can't do?" are among series creator Matt Groening's favorite lines.^[25]

Conversely, the episode was not initially well received by many fans of the show's earlier seasons, as it was a particularly absurd early example of the show taking a more joke-based cartoon approach to comedy, rather than the more realistic situational style of comedy it had employed in its first few years. In 1995, during the production of the seventh season, Yeardley Smith said of the episode as "truly one of our worst – we [the entire cast] all agree".^[7]

In 2012, "Marge vs. the Monorail" was the second-place finisher in a *Splitsider* reader poll to decide on the best episode of any television sitcom, losing to the *Community* episode "Remedial Chaos Theory".^[26]

Conan O'Brien and Hank Azaria performed the monorail song live at the Hollywood Bowl from September 12–14, 2014 as part of the show "The Simpsons Take The Bowl".^[27]

See also

- 58th Primetime Emmy Awards, where episode writer Conan O'Brien performed a parody of "Ya Got Trouble"

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External links

- "Marge vs. the Monorail" (http://www.thesimpsons.com/#/recaps/season-4_episode-12) at The Simpsons.com
- "Marge vs. the Monorail episode capsule" (<http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/episodes/9F10.html>). *The Simpsons Archive*.
- "Marge vs. the Monorail" (http://www.tv.com/the-simpsons/marge-vs.-the-monorail/episode/1356/summary.html?tag=ep_list;title;11) at TV.com
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