

## = The Burns Cage =

" The Burns Cage " is the seventeenth episode of the twenty @-@ seventh season of the animated television series The Simpsons , and the 591st episode of the series overall . It aired in the United States on Fox on April 3 , 2016 .

In the episode , Waylon Smithers finally comes out as gay to his boss Mr. Burns , who rejects his love . Other characters attempt to find a boyfriend for Smithers , and he falls for Julio . Meanwhile , Milhouse competes against a new boy for the lead role in a school production of Casablanca , so he can act alongside his own unrequited love , Lisa . Openly gay actor George Takei makes a cameo as himself , and the episode features a variety of cultural references , including to Grindr , Vladimir Putin , Equus and the films of Humphrey Bogart .

The episode was written by Rob LaZebnik , inspired by when his teenage son came out . Critical reception was mixed : the emotionally touching aspects of LaZebnik 's script and Harry Shearer 's portrayal of Smithers were praised . However , criticisms included the plot possibly ending the innuendo @-@ driven humor involving Smithers ' secret love of Burns , and an assumption that the character was being retconned due to changing attitudes on homosexuality since the series ' debut . The episode was covered by international media .

## = = Plot = =

Smithers declares his love for Mr. Burns after he saves Burns ' life in a skydiving accident , but Burns reaffirms his contempt for him . Angry , Smithers treats Homer , Lenny and Carl harshly , so they determine finding Smithers a boyfriend will ease the ill @-@ treatment . They invite potential partners to meet Smithers at a gay men 's singles ' party , where a neck massage from Julio snaps Smithers out of his bad mood . The two fall in love , and Smithers leaves his job at the power plant .

Smithers becomes troubled on a trip to Julio 's homeland of Cuba when Julio 's carnival outfit resembles Burns ; Julio notices and asks Smithers if he is committed to their relationship , and Smithers admits that he is not . Back in Springfield , Burns ' attempts to find a new assistant prove disastrous , and his only option is to rehire Smithers . He meets Smithers with money and other enticements to lure him back , but Smithers states that he is not swayed . Burns then says he has kept a secret bottled up : that Smithers ' performance review is " excellent " . They hug and reconcile .

Meanwhile , Springfield Elementary put on a production of Casablanca , in which Lisa gets the lead role of Ilsa . Milhouse wants the male lead role of Rick because of his love for Lisa , but he is challenged by a new boy , Jack Deforest , who dresses , acts and speaks like Humphrey Bogart . Milhouse enlists the bullies to beat up Jack , but Jack wins the fight . Principal Skinner sees this violence and declares that Milhouse will play Rick instead of Jack ; Lisa is angered as she does not believe that he is a good actor . Marge tells Lisa that it is important to tell people who are not skilled that they are , using the example of Homer . The production is a success , but at the end it is revealed that Jack was disguised as Milhouse ; he and Lisa leave hand @-@ in @-@ hand .

In an epilogue Milhouse goes to Moe 's Tavern , where Smithers teaches him that romantic setbacks make love feel better when it arrives . Moe tells the pair that he only searches for gold , not girls , and embarks on a treasure @-@ hunt with Jack and Groundskeeper Willie .

## = = Production = =

Smithers ' unrequited love for Mr. Burns is a long @-@ running gag on The Simpsons ; the producers once joked that he was not gay , but " Burns @-@ sexual " . Rolling Stone described the character 's sexual orientation as the show 's " worst @-@ kept secret " , noting how in one episode he had a vacation at an all @-@ male resort , and in another he wore " rainbow @-@ striped short shorts " in Springfield 's gay district . In September 2015 , in an interview to promote the 27th season , executive producer Al Jean announced that " we actually do a lot with Smithers this year " , adding that two episodes would deal with the character 's sexuality , including one in which he

becomes tired of Burns not appreciating him .

Writer Rob LaZebnik told the New York Post that the episode was inspired by his son Johnny , who came out as gay while at high school : " I am a Midwestern guy , so I don ' t tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve , but I thought , ' What better way to tell my son I love him than to write a cartoon about it ? ' " . He added that he pitched the storyline three years earlier , and got approval for his script from his son . Smithers ' coming out is low @-@ key , as was Johnny 's ; he told the Post that as he was " the gayest little kid " , his parents were not surprised by his sexual orientation . The episode aired five days before Johnny 's 22nd birthday , and he said he would have a viewing party because the episode would be " particularly meaningful " to him . The elder LaZebnik stated his opinion that LGBT @-@ related television can have a " real impact on people 's thinking " .

= = Cultural references = =

The episode 's title comes from the 1996 LGBT @-@ related comedy film The Birdcage , in which Simpsons voice actor Hank Azaria plays a Guatemalan housekeeper ; his portrayal of Cuban bartender Julio in this episode is similar .

In the chalkboard gag in the episode 's opening sequence , Bart backs the Villanova Wildcats , who won the 2016 NCAA Men 's Division I Basketball Championship Game the day after the episode aired . Fans wondered why the show 's staff were supporting Villanova over the North Carolina Tar Heels ; one Internet writer hypothesized that it was a reference to the season 9 episode " The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson " , in which after one of his typical alcoholic binges , Barney Gumble can only recall " giving a guest lecture at Villanova , or maybe it was a street corner . "

The episode includes a variety of cultural references . Among Smithers ' paintings of Burns is a parody of a photograph of Russian president Vladimir Putin riding a horse while bare @-@ chested . Smithers likens Homer , Lenny and Carl to The Three Stooges , and Homer chooses Smithers ' potential partners via the gay dating app Grindr . At the party , George Takei asks another man if he wants to hear " horror stories " about his Star Trek co @-@ star William Shatner , and he is pleased that the man does not know who Shatner is . A billboard outside the school 's production of Casablanca advertises that the kindergarten are putting on a production of zoophilia @-@ themed play Equus the following night . The end sequence with the treasure hunt pays homage to Bogart 's The Treasure of the Sierra Madre and The African Queen .

= = Reception = =

" The Burns Cage " scored a 1 @.@ 0 rating in the 18 ? 49 demographic , and was watched by 2 @.@ 32 million viewers , making it Fox 's highest rated show of the night .

Dennis Perkins of The A.V. Club gave the episode a B + , commenting that casual viewers would have already presumed that Smithers had come out . He described Harry Shearer 's performance and LaZebnik 's script as " touching " . Tony Sokol of Den of Geek felt that Smithers coming out was good for social acceptance , but would end the comedy around his sexuality , which is based on double entendre . He wrote that the love story had " a few subversive laugh lines " but more " missed opportunities " . He added that the school 's production of Casablanca was disappointing compared to the series ' previous adaptations of A Streetcar Named Desire and Planet of the Apes , and gave his opinion that the Bogart homages ruined the opportunity to do better parodies of his films . However , he noted that the season had a better quality of animation .

Writing in British progressive magazine the New Statesman , Anna Leszkiewicz felt that the episode was not about " coming out " , as the innuendo concerning Smithers ' sexuality had been running for decades . She felt it was retconning the series , which had made arguably homophobic jokes around the character , for modern sensitivities ; this was likened to how Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling revealed that Albus Dumbledore was gay after the series had finished . Leszkiewicz concluded that it was progress ? for the show more than for the LGBT community ? that homosexuality was being treated in a more mature way on The Simpsons , but that the change should have been made at least a decade ago .

The episode was covered by international media outlets including the BBC , The Australian , Die Welt , La Stampa , Jornal de Notícias , El Mundo , L 'Avenir , and Blesk .