

TV Sunday

The unlikely story of sweet SpongeBob SquarePants —

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THIS is a golden age for animation. Theaters are bursting with cartoons, and not just from Disney, thanks to creative and commercial successes from DreamWorks, Fox, Warner Bros. Pixar and the upcoming Japanese anime blockbuster "Princess Mononoke."

On TV, the major networks have never featured more toons, including "King of the Hill," "Family Guy," and the now-classic "Simpsons."

Cable channels like The Cartoon Network (with "Space Ghost: Coast to Coast"), MTV (with "Daria"), Comedy Central (with "South Park") and HBO (with the Emmy-winning "Spawn") keep illustrators hunched over their drawing boards.

So in the midst of this embarrassment of riches, it may be hard to spy the next gem.

But surely "SpongeBob SquarePants" is the sweet, good-natured cartoon with a hero who is decidedly square (in every sense of the word).

Launched this year as Nickelodeon's first original show on Saturday morning, "SpongeBob" is the sort of out-of-the-box hit TV executives dream about.

And it needs to be: SpongeBob is a naive, friendly fellow, but he's locked in mortal combat with "Pokemon," the WB smash series that also airs Saturday mornings at 10 a.m.

A genuine phenomenon, "Pokemon" comes bursting with a multimedia barrage of games, toys and tie-ins.

"SpongeBob" has none.

"Pokemon" will soon be airing 12 times a week, a flood of episodes that threatens burnout (or at least a shorter lifespan) even for the repeat-happy kids aged 2-11 that advertisers crave.

"SpongeBob" airs a modest three times a week — Friday nights and Saturday and Sunday morning.

SpongeBob will surely meet the challenge with unbridled enthusiasm and a goofy sense of fun. That's how he faces all the obstacles of life in Bikini Bottom, the undersea home where he lives with his best friend Patrick the starfish and his ornery neighbor, Squidward.

Each episode shows SpongeBob squaring past problems, whether it's his fear over a driving exam, applying for a job at Krusty Krab, or opening a bubble-blowing stand.



In an age where even kiddie shows are expected to be edgy, "SpongeBob" is clever but noticeably free of double entendre, adult asides and irony.

"We really are trying to keep it simple," admits creator Stephen Hillenburg, who also worked on Nickelodeon's "Rocko's Modern Life."

"There are no topical jokes and very little humor that relates to pop culture. Sometimes it happens unintentionally — there will be an image on the screen and someone will say, 'That looks phallic,' he laughs, 'but it's not the intention at all.'"

"SpongeBob is really optimistic and changes the way people see things. He's too naive to realize how special he is, in his odd way."

Hillenburg himself doesn't seem to realize how odd

SpongeBob is a naive, friendly fellow, but he's locked in mortal combat with "Pokemon," the WB smash series.

and daring it is to change your life because of a kid's show.

Originally a science teacher, he always loved art and drawing but thought it could never be more than a hobby. Then, when I was teaching, "Peewee's Playhouse" and "The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse" came out. I thought, 'This is really smart and funny.' That inspired me to go back to school and study animation.

"Changing careers like that is scary," he says. "But the irony is that animation is a pretty healthy career right now and science education is more of a struggle."

"Originally I thought the reverse. I thought I could never make a living as an artist, so I should learn the academics and have this solid career."

At 32, he graduated from the California Institute of the Arts, and just as SpongeBob's instincts usually prove right, Hillenburg

found himself in a seller's market thanks to an ever-growing appetite for animation.

Freelance work led to a gig on "Rocko" and ultimately a chance at his own show.

"Both my interests collided here, though now of course I'm misinforming people about what a sponge is," says Hillenburg, who insists our hero will not be outed as artificial in some future episode.

"He's shaped like a kitchen sponge but we consider him a real live sea sponge. He has parents and they look like regular sea sponges and we joke that he's that genetic square gene that occurs once in a while."

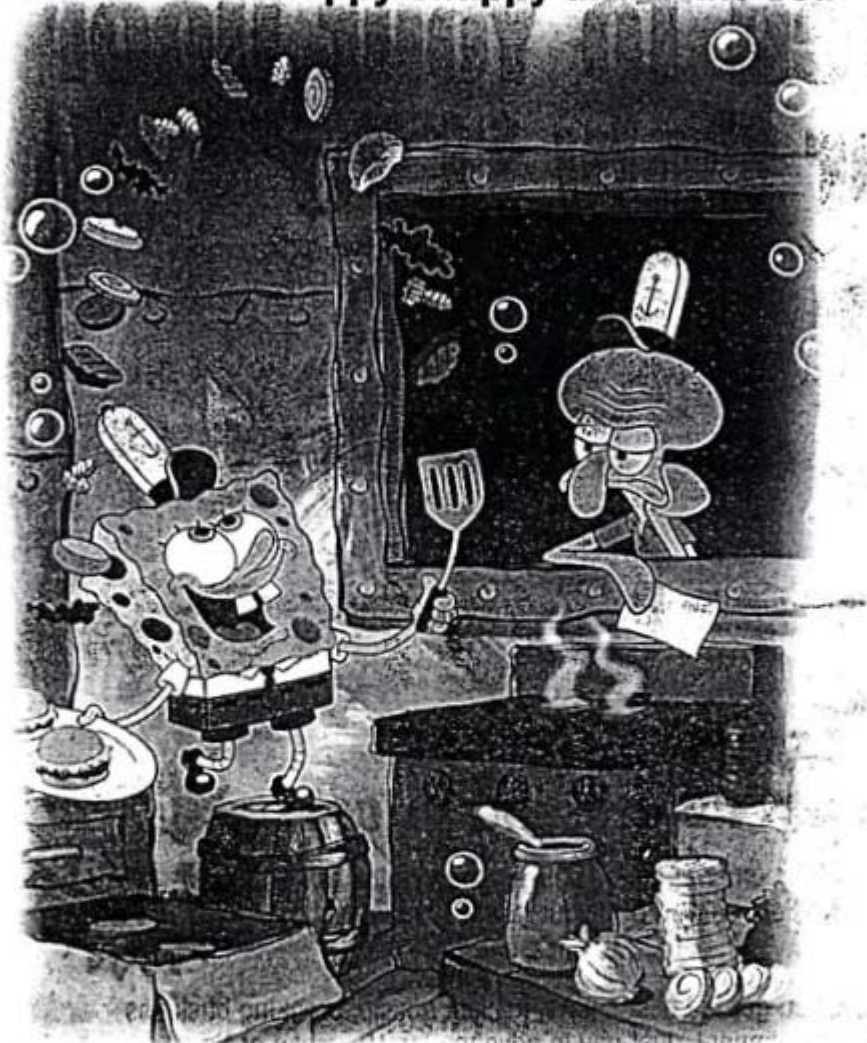
"SpongeBob" had a sneak preview right after Nickelodeon's 12th Annual Kid's Choice Awards (the channel's equivalent of the Oscars and the Super Bowl rolled up into one).

"We were very excited and always nervous and hoping people will respond well and not send us hate mail," says the 38-year-old animator, who is now married with one son.

The show's success was immediate, but even more

TV Sunday

Nickelodeon's happy chappy under the sea



gratifying was the chance a few weeks ago to tell his staff of about 50 people they'd been picked up for a second season. (Twenty more episodes due to appear in the fall of 2000 will keep them busy for a year).

Traces of Pee-Wee can be found in the goofy theme song, where a swarthy pirate bellows out, "Are you ready kids? Are you ready kids? I can't HEA-A-A-R you... If nautical nonsense be something you wish, then drop on the deck and flop like a fish!"

"That's based on sea chanteys," says Hillenburg. "When I worked with kids at the marine institute, we had a living history program where we would act like 18th-century sailors.

"We had a ship anchored in the water, a two-masted brig. They'd go on board and we'd treat them just like sailors — horribly. So the teachers really enjoyed it.

"We'd sing these songs and literally we'd start bantering with the kids. 'Are you ready kids? I can't hear you!' We'd sing 'Blow the Man Down' and even 'What Do You Do With A Drunken Sailor?', believe it or not."

Hillenburg has also tossed in voice-overs pairing Ernest Borgnine and Tim Conway from "McHale's Navy," a Tiny Tim (strong) he "always thought was hilarious," a little surf music and a lot of

Hawaiian slack guitar tunes. And he's managed to avoid "Tiny Bubbles" — "though we may cover it at some point."

Still, the overall tone is one of innocent fun. "SpongeBob may not technically be a kid — he signs on his own and has a job as a very good cook at Krusty Krab — but he has the unbridled enthusiasm of a kid.

Sure, he's a little dorky, even nerdy, but he's so self-conscious about it, so blind to the pessimism and "ill-wishes" of others that he always wins out in the end — even if winning just means just maintaining that happy glow.

Hillenburg hopes to maintain that happy tone

even as the next year brings the pressure to deliver new episodes and the inevitable crush of toys that can take the fun out of the best shows.

"I used to collect a lot of stuff, but as soon as I got into animation, I stopped," says Hillenburg. "I looked around and everyone else was doing it too so I thought, 'Why do I need to do this?' I think I just collect Post-its now.

Personally, I'd like to see not a lot of SpongeBob toys. My biggest nightmare would be to find myself strolling down the beach and have a plastic SpongeBob figure wash up on the shore. I don't hope that doesn't happen."