

The Hottest Family in Animated TV: Betty and Mickey Paraskevas

by Raymond Palma

How many people in this world are fortunate enough to have their works, whether it is a book, drawings, music or some other creative product shown on TV? How about being lucky enough to have it shown on the big screen across the country in theaters? Few people have had the privilege to do both; Stephen King, John Grisham, Gary Marshall and Neil Simon are among those. Having strong Hollywood ties seems to be a prerequisite. But on Saturday, October 9, 1999 two locals from Southampton, New York bucked the system -- Mickey and Betty Paraskevas, a son and mother creative team. He draws. She writes. They became a part of this elite group when their cartoon, *The Kids from Room 402*, premiered on the Fox Family Channel. Plus, this is just the first of three cartoons coming to TV. Two other cartoons of theirs are going straight to home video, with yet another cartoon going to the big screen.

First Stop

The Kids from Room 402 is based on their book, *Gracie Graves and the Kids from Room 402*, published by Harcourt Brace and Company in Manhattan. The cartoon "focuses on a classroom full of 10 year-old eccentrics, where the smallest event is exaggerated to its most comical conclusion," says Fox Family Channel's publicity manager Marlene Zakovich. The kids' teacher, Miss Graves "is a never-ending foundation of knowledge and compassion," explains Zakovich.

"The great thing about the show is that there really is no main character," says Mickey the creator.



Fox Family's *The Kids of Room 402* is based on the book by Betty and Mickey Paraskevas. © Storyopolis.



Mickey Paraskevas (middle) with Fox Family executive Brian Casentini and *The Kids from Room 402* executive producer [Fonda Snyder](#). © Storyopolis.

The cartoon is being created by the Cine-Groupe Animation house based in Montreal, Canada. After pre-production in Canada, 75 people in Chile complete the animation, a trend in the animation world where most of today's animated cartoons are being penciled overseas because of the cost-effective labor. These drawings are then sent back to Cine-Groupe, where Wade Konowalchuk, the series director, has them scanned into an SGI computer system for digital ink and paint purposes. The voice tracks are being recorded and produced in LA, and then combined with the picture in post-

production in Canada. In post, each 22-minute show takes five weeks, working eight hours a day to complete.

Cine-Groupe Animation does both feature and TV animation. Their feature film, *Heavy Metal F.A.K.K. 2*, the sequel to the popular *Heavy Metal Movie*, is among the animation house's latest endeavors. They also currently have another cartoon on Fox, *Bad Dog*. "They did a good job," says Mickey. Storyopolis Productions in LA is producing.

Lesa Kite and Cindy Begel, a comedy writing team that has written for sitcoms like *Laverne and Shirley* and *Head of the Class*, are writing the series episodes. Mickey and Betty approve the episodes and give comments before the final drafts are completed. Betty works in "our playroom," referring to their Art Gallery on Main Street in Westhampton Beach that they have occupied for six years. "When I'm home, I see all the things around the house that need to be done," she says about the house she shares with Mickey and her husband Paul in Southampton. "Mom enjoys working here and so do I," agrees Mickey. They usually stop by the gallery in the evenings where they can make their numerous calls to LA.

The Hottest Family in Animated TV: Betty and Mickey Paraskevas (continued from page 1)

The Beginning...

The son and mom creative duo got their first taste of show biz when Betty began working on Broadway. She worked as an associate for many years with Broadway producer Harry Rigby, and tells of how her father was "very critical" and that the first thing he "really, really liked" was when she started to write songs in 1976. After twenty plus years, one of her songs called, "The Day The Tall Ships Sail," is being made into a book, which will be out in stores next Fourth of July.



Mickey hanging with Junior Kroll. © Storyopolis.

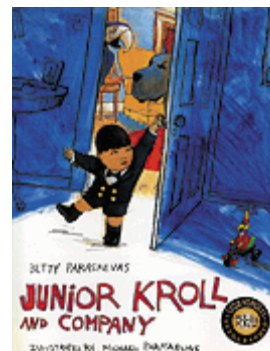
They moved out to The Hamptons twenty years ago from New Jersey. For many summers prior, they had stayed at friends' houses in the area. However, when Mickey started his first year of college at the School of the Visual Arts, they bought a home in Southampton. "People said to me, what are you doing for New Year's, and I said, 'I'm staying home -- in The Hamptons.' I love it out here. Everyone is trying to get out here and we're here already," says Mickey as he puffs on a cigar sitting outside his studio over looking Main Street in Westhampton Beach. He and his mom are usually found outside their studio lamenting about passerbies and the town in general. They told me a story about how rude one customer was to a waitress at the restaurant that their studio faces only steps away. In fact, one of their first books was called *The Strawberry Dog*, about a dog that lives in Westhampton Beach.



Another of the creations from the mother and son team. © Storyopolis.

Mickey started doing illustrations for *Time* and *Esquire* magazines during his masters program. He then began selling his first paintings in an antique shop called Tangerine in Westhampton Beach. The antique shop was the inspiration and title of the book, *The Tangerine Bear*, by Harper and Collins.

Artisan is now making a straight-to-home-video cartoon of the book for the 2000 holiday season. The cartoon centers on a bear whose mouth has been sown on upside down and has been pawned off to what he sees as his home, a second hand store. The voices of Tom Bosley, Jenna Elfman, Howie Mandel and David Hyde Pierce are among the celebrities

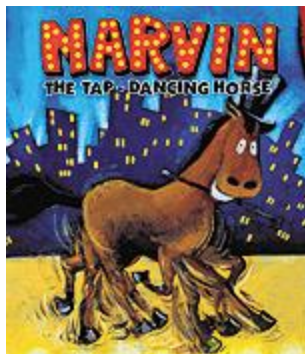


Betty and Mickey could one day rank with the likes of Stephen King and John Grisham with the amount of screen adaptations from their printed material. © Storyopolis.

in the cast. Betty re-wrote the entire hour-long show by herself. "They said I had three weeks to write the script, and it was over Christmas so here I am on Christmas Eve sitting there typing," she says. Artisan is also producing the other straight-to-home-video cartoon of theirs called *Nibbles O'Hare*. It is slated to be distributed by Easter 2001.

While Mickey was going to school he was employed as an artist for *Dan's Papers*, a weekly free newspaper covering the Hamptons. It was then, "11 seasons ago," says Mickey -- instead of saying 11 years ago, spoken like a true Hamptonite -- that he began illustrating a comic strip that his mother created and writes called, *Junior Kroll*, which is printed for *Dan's Papers*. The comic strip has also been running for five years in *Hemisphere*, United Airlines' in-flight magazine. The notoriety of *Junior Kroll* helped give Mickey and Betty exposure to the huge pool of creative movers and shakers who have called The Hamptons home. *Junior Kroll* was made into several successful books, helping to embark the duo into what is now years of successful accomplishments including, newspaper print, books, TV, movies, and the subsequent merchandising of many related children's toys, goods and gadgets.

The Hottest Family in Animated TV: Betty and Mickey Paraskevas (continued from page 2)



Marvin will be tap dancing into homes in the fall. © Nelvana.

Further Projects

Yet another book soon to be published, called *Marvin the Tap Dancing Horse*, has spun off into a second TV cartoon series from the duo. *Marvin the Tap Dancing Horse* will be about a child Eddie who gets a job working at the carnival. He befriends Marvin and his three animal friends, Elizabeth the pig, Stripes the tiger and Diamonds the elephant. "It's very sitcom orientated. It's about the trials and tribulations of putting on a show for the carnival every night," says Mickey. Marvin will be part of PBS' first ever Saturday morning children's programming block called The Book Worm Bunch for the fall 2000 television season. Marvin will be in good company. One of the other cartoons in the block will be Maurice Sendak's *Seven Little Monsters*. He is one of the most important children's book author/illustrators of the 20th century creating among other books the award winning *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of the top-selling children's books of all time. He is also the creator of *Little Bear*, shown on Nickelodeon.

The third cartoon created by the mother and son team for television is called *Maggie and the Ferocious Beast*, also based on their book of the same name. This cartoon has been running for one year as a two and a half-minute short for Nickelodeon. It is being shown between the shows, *Little Bear* and *Blue's Clues*. It will be expanded into a full half-hour series in June for Nickelodeon. Nelvana, one of the largest animation houses in Canada, whose shows include *Bob and Margaret* and *Rolie Polie Olie*, is animating the show. They were already successful in selling the series to Israel, French Speaking Africa, French speaking countries in Europe, French Canada and in Canada. The Emmy-winning *The Simpsons* also got its start by being a two minute short cartoon between acts for *The Tracey Ullman Show* back in the '80s.



Maggie will set out to find the Ferocious Beast on PBS. © Nelvana.

But Wait! There's More!

If having three shows on TV and two cartoons coming to video wasn't enough, Mickey and Betty have a feature film coming out. Leo "Spats" Ratcatcher, based on an unpublished book, is their cartoon being made into a feature film for 20th Century Fox. It's about Leo who is a private eye and his archenemy Slick-Slick Vinny Lavender.



Er! Who's that with Mickey and the Ferocious Beast? It's Anthony Edwards! © Storyopolis.

Betty says that she writes stories that both entertain and tell a good story. "Tell the kids a good story that they'll listen to — that's how you teach them," she said.

Both Mickey and Betty credit each other for their success. She says that she doubts if anybody would have paid her any attention if she didn't have an illustrator with her. "If it weren't for Mickey's art, I would not be doing all of this."

"I have no one to thank but my mother," says Mickey. "When I go on stage to accept my Emmy, she's the only person I'll thank."

Betty recalls she had tears in her eyes when she saw her and her son's names appear as executive producers when they got their first act back from the cartoon *The Tangerine Bear*. "We're sort of spectacular in Hollywood. We have three shows we're doing and a feature and everybody is talking about us," she says amazed.

"You work so hard at all this stuff and then you turn the TV on and there's your show -- it's fun!" says Mickey.

Raymond Palma is a freelance writer. He has been published in a myriad of eclectic newspapers and magazines including, The Southampton Press, The Hollywood Scriptwriter and The Comic Bible. He was a street reporter for a TV news show and has appeared as an extra on Comedy Central and MTV's Beach House. He is currently working on an animation cartoon of his own with Fran Capo, the world's fastest talking female.