

Alexis Larson

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Animator Biography Essay

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The Macabre Appeal of Tim Burton

On the 25th of August, 1958, Timothy Walter Burton was born in Burbank, California; the perfect location for leading him down the path of his life's career. Burton was primed for becoming an icon in the film industry known for his dark & enchanting aesthetic; partly thanks to to circumstance, his own creative genius, & a deep interest in the horror genre early in life. As far back as his late childhood to early teens, he was invested in making short films using stop motion captured on 8mm film. His introspective nature permitted Burton to develop a passion for creative arts, such as drawing & painting, eventually leading to his enrollment in CalArts (The California Institute of Arts), Burton would go on to graduate from CalArts at age 22 (1980) with a major in animation. After graduation, h moved into working for Walt Disney Studios, however, his employment with the animation monolith would be short-lived.

A year after joining Disney studios and working on the likes of *The Fox & The Hound* (1981) & *The Black Cauldron* (1985) Tim Burton created his first short film as a industry professional. The 6-minute-long film, titled *Vincent*, mimicked the black-&-white aesthetic of old-timey films of Hollywood's Golden Age of Horror/Monster flicks. This initial foray into creating his own content established a unique tone of dark fantasy for an audience of all ages, which was eventually followed by another short film, *Frankenweenie* (1984). Conflicting reports indicate that after *Frankenweenie*, Burton found himself growing tired of working for Disney, or

that they may have fired him for wasting company resources on films that were too frightening for the studio's young target audience.

Whether he was fired, or exited of his own accord, Burton's departure from Disney did little to impede his growing success. He was recruited in 1984, by actor Paul Reubens, to direct a comedy film in 1984: Pee-wee's Big Adventure. The success of that project was followed a few years on, when Burton was able to create Beetlejuice (1988); a raunchy & comedic ghost story that touched on dark & macabre topics such as death, suicide, & the afterlife, while somehow marrying that taboo nature with fantasy, horror, and humor. Despite the film being live-action, it would eventually get an offshoot animated series. In a twist of irony, Disney would eventually purchase the rights to Beetlejuice to air on the Disney Channel.

Following Beetlejuice, Burton strayed into a superhero film genre, though picking the hero who is likely considered one of the darkest of the bunch, by creating Batman in 1989. A massive indicator that Burton was truly a master of his field was that his Batman was the first film in history to earn over \$100 million within its first ten days after release. Once again, his filmography would inspire a spin-off animated series: Batman: The Animated Series. His success would continue as he merged a bright & cheery, stereotypical American suburb with his quirky & dark humor in Edward Scissorhands (1990). The draw of finding elements of beauty & humanity in the eerie & unsettling seemed to be more & more evidence as the years went on until his name would become synonymous with imagery of monochrome darkness.

In 1991, Burton returned to his childhood roots of stop motion & his college major in animation, producing a film that would become a cult classic: The Nightmare Before Christmas. The original story was meant to be just a children's book in poem form, akin to The Night Before Christmas which it parodied as a horror/monster interpretation. Luckily for fans worldwide, it

was brought to be big screen and became a massive success. The film was a technological marvel & was even a musical with composer/vocalist, Danny Elfman. Yet again, Burton's work would be chased by his former employer, Disney, and this film would become the facade of the Disney theme parks for a quarter of each year, from October through December.

Despite his success with the animator feature, Burton would return to live-action for Warner Bros, contracted sequel, *Batman Returns* (1992), and bringing in actors he'd worked with in the past, Johnny Depp playing the title character of the 1994 film, *Ed Wood*. In 1995, the third installment of his installment in his Batman trilogy, *Batman Forever* (1995) was completed. He returned to stop motion animation briefly once again to create *James and The Giant Peach* (1996) based on a book of the same name by author Roald Dahl, followed by *Mars Attacks!* in the same year; though neither ended up particularly successful, the latter was a complete flop at the box office, while the former did get a couple nominations for Academy Awards.

Despite the setback of these less than stellar productions on his rap sheet, Burton would continue working hard. In 1999 he brought Danny Elfman & Johnny Depp on to production once again in his Supernatural & terrifying interpretation of the American folklore tale: *Sleepy Hollow*. The film won Best Art Direction during the Academy awards for that year, as well as two British Academy of Film & Television Arts awards for Best Costume Design & Best Production Design. Despite the massive success of *Sleepy Hollow*, upheaval in his personal life would lead Burton to drastically change directions in style as he went on to direct a new interpretation (though expressly stated as "not a remake") of *Planet of the Apes* (2001). Despite the film's financial success, it received mixed reviews.

In 2003, Burton directed a quirky live-action film, *Big Fish*, in which a father tells the story of his life to his son, though greatly exaggerated, as parents often do to capture their child's

attention. It seemed that this film set Burton back on track for his notable success, by receiving four Golden Globes & an Academy Award nomination for returning composer Danny Elfman's musical score.

Two years on, Burton cast one of his favorite actors, Johnny Depp, once again in his reinterpretation of another Roald Dahl book, *Charlie & The Chocolate Factory*. The film adhered more closely to the book than the first film interpretation, *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* (1971) though some additions were made & liberties taken. Despite the alterations to the source material, the movie would receive a nomination for Best Costume Design at the Academy Awards.

Burton would finally return to stop motion animation once again in 2005 for an original story film, *Corpse Bride*, Johnny Depp was cast as the voice of leading character, Victor & Helena Bonham Carter as title character, Emily. Danny Elfman once again headed the composition for music in Burton's film. Production of the animated film would prove to be quite difficult for them as it was being produced at the same time as *Charlie & The Chocolate Factory*, but both were quite financially successful.

In 2006, Burton directed a music video titled "Bones" and then he was picked up by DreamWorks & Warner Bros. to produce a live-action version of a Broadway musical: *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The gore-filled musical won Burton & crew multiple nominations & awards including Best Director & Best Art Direction.

In 2009, Burton entered the CGI animation film genre when he was inspired by an animated short film by Shane Acker from 2005, simply titled: *9*. The short film lead Burton to produce a feature-length film of the same name, as Burton partnered with Acker as the story writer. 2010 saw Burton produce a new interpretation of of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*,

setting his film 13 years past the events of the original stories. This intense & epic dark fantasy interpretation would eventually receive a sequel in 2016 titled *Alice Through The Looking Glass*. Burton worked on multiple films throughout 2012, including *Dark Shadows* & *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, and then a personal project of recreating *Frankenweenie*, his animated stop-motion short film from 1984, which was distributed once again by his old employer, Disney.

Subsequent films from 2014 and on, that Burton produced, include: *Big Eyes* (2014), *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children* (2016), and a remake of the 1941 animated Disney feature, *Dumbo* (2019). Though he has dabbled in a myriad of genres, it seems Tim Burton's passion for the creepy & the kooky, mysterious & spooky, is inescapable, as he is reportedly (announced in Oct 2020) working on a live-action series of *the* iconic ooky family: *The Addams Family*.