film, in some ways, is just a visual comment on the differences in perception of what is good and bad.

Critics of Burton's work have constantly pointed to what they term his inability to tell a coherent story, and with Batman Returns *he was again accused of sacrificing the narrative for the sake of the visuals.*

I guess it must be the way my brain works, because the first *Batman* was probably my most concentrated effort to tell a linear story, and I realize that it's like a joke. I realized from *Beetlejuice* that there are some people who can do that, and that's fine. In any of my movies the narrative is the worst thing you've ever seen, and that's constant. I don't know why people are so into that because there are lots of movies that have a strong narrative, and I love those. But there are other types as well. Do Fellini movies have a strong narrative drive? I love movies where I make up my own idea about them. In fact, there'll be movies that maybe aren't even about what I think they're about. I just like making things up. Everybody is different, so things are going to affect people differently. So why not have your own opinions, have different levels of things you can find if you want them, however deeply you want to go. That's why I like Roman Polanski's movies, like *The Tenant*. I've felt like that, I've lived it, I know what that's like. Or *Repulsion*, I know that feeling, I understand it. *Bitter Moon*, I've seen that happen. You just connect. It may not be something that anybody else connects with, but it's like *I* get that, *I* understand that feeling. I will always fight that literal impulse to lay everything directly in front of you. I just hate it.

Some people are really good at narrative and some people are really good at action. I'm not that sort of person. So, if I'm going to do something, just let me do my thing and hope for the best. If you don't want me to do it, then don't have me do it. But if I do it, then don't make me conform. If you want it to be a James Cameron movie then get James Cameron to do it. Me directing action is a joke; I don't like guns. I hear a gunshot and I close my eyes. But again it comes down to your interpretation of action. I mean, there's plenty of action in a *Godzilla* movie, but I don't know if people would consider that action.

The Nightmare Before Christmas

After completing Vincent *in 1982, Burton had begun work on another project based on a poem he had written, this time inspired by Clement Clarke Moore's* The Night Before Christmas. *Entitled* The Nightmare Before Christmas, *it told the story of the misguided passion of Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of Hallowe'entown, who stumbles upon a door to Christmastown, and is so taken by what he sees that he returns home obsessed with bringing Christmas under his control.*

The initial impulse for doing it was the love of Dr Seuss and those holiday specials that I grew up watching, like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Those crude stop-motion animation holiday things that were on year in, year out make an impact on you early and stay with you. I had grown up with those and had a real feeling for them, and I think, without being too direct, the impulse was to do something like that.

When I first wrote the poem I had Vincent Price in mind as the narrator. He was the overall inspiration for the project because initially I was going to do it with him narrating, like a more expanded version of *Vincent*. Back then I think I would have done it as anything – a television special, a short film – whatever would have gotten it done at the time. It was a funny project because everybody was really nice about it, but it was like being in that show *The Prisoner*; everybody's really nice, but you know you're never going to get out, it's not going to happen. I took it around the networks, did storyboards and sketches and Rick Heinrichs did a little model of Jack. Everybody said they liked it, but not enough to do it at that time. I guess that was my first real taste of that kind of show-business mentality – a nice big smile and an 'Oh yeah, we're going to do this'. But, as you proceed, it becomes less and less of a reality.

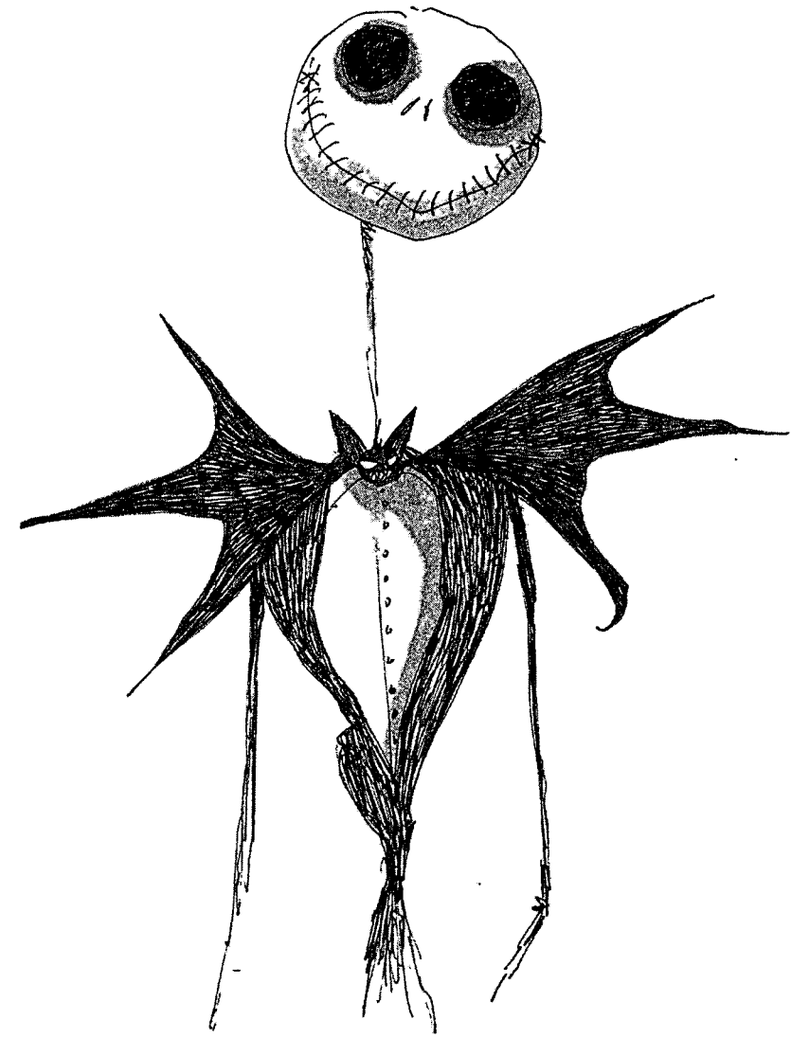
It was after *Vincent*, so I was really into stop-motion. I'd seen claymation, I'd seen stop-motion, the Harryhausen things. On *Vincent* we weren't trying to push the boundaries of great animation. What we were trying to do with it in a very simple way was be more specific with the

design. To me, in claymation the design elements get lost. So what we wanted to do was what you do in a drawing, but just spring it to the third dimension. I always thought that *Nightmare* should be done better than *Vincent*, but at the time I was just thinking of that simple, emotional, trying to make it a well-designed type of animation. I think it's harder to do emotional stuff in three dimensions. In so many ways drawn animation is easier because you can truly do anything, you can draw *anything*. Three-dimensional animation has limitations because you're moving puppets around. But I think when it works it is more effective because it is three-dimensional, and it feels like it's *there*.

The characters that were designed for *Nightmare* had the added burden of not having any eyeballs. The first rule of animation is: Eyes for Expression. But a lot of the characters either don't have any eyes, or their eyes are sewn shut. I thought if we could give life to these characters that have no eyes, it would be great. So, after drawing all those foxes with their wet drippy eyes at Disney, there was a little subversion in having these characters with no eyes. It was funny to think of a character that had these big black holes and to try and make that work.

The idea behind *Nightmare* also came from a combination of feelings to do with love for those *Rudolph* things. Thematically that's something that I like, still respond to, and have responded to in other films about that type of character, somebody, like a Grinch, who is perceived as scary but isn't. Again, that goes back to the monster movies I liked as a kid. They were perceived as frightening and bad, but they're weren't. It's also true in society; people get perceived that way all the time. I felt that way and I never liked it, therefore I always liked characters who were passionate and felt certain ways, but weren't what they were perceived to be. Jack is like a lot of characters in classic literature that are passionate and have a desire to do something in a way that isn't really acknowledged, just like that Don Quixote story, in which some character is on a quest for some sort of feeling, not even knowing what that is. It's a very primal thing to me, that kind of searching for something and not even knowing what it is, but being passionate about it. There are just aspects to the character of Jack that I like and identify with. It means something to me.

When I developed it originally, it was during the period when Disney was actually changing over, and when I didn't know if I was still an employee or not. I was just hanging around. I always felt that it was one project that I would like to make, I felt so secure about it. There was talk of doing it as a kind of TV special, or doing it drawn. But I just didn't want to do any of that. So, I decided to bury it, but always with that feel-



Jack Skellington: big black holes for eyes

ing that I would do it some time. It was weird, some projects you feel more like, 'Oh, I'd better do this now or never', but I never felt that way about *Nightmare*.

Over the years Burton's thoughts regularly returned to the project and in

1990 he had his agent check to see whether Disney still owned the rights to Nightmare *with a view to resurrecting it.*

I didn't even know if they owned it. So we tried to quietly say, 'Can we look around your basement?' And they did own it, because they own everything. There's this thing you sign when you work there, which states that any thoughts you have during your employment are owned by the thought police. Obviously, there's no real way of doing it quietly. We tried, but they were soon right there and they were fine – which is against their nature – so I'm very respectful and feel honoured that they let it happen. This was after *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman*, and the reason it got made is because I've been lucky enough to be successful. That's really the only reason it got made. It certainly wasn't a case of the time being right. But I will say this about Disney, they at least understood our trying to push the envelope a little bit as far as the animation was concerned, they were responsive to that.

Recognizing the treasure locked in their vaults, Disney immediately leapt at the chance to work with Burton, and saw in his desire to produce a full-length stop-motion animated feature a way of further enhancing their reputation in animation. Though stop-motion had first been seen in 1907 in J. Stuart Blackton's The Haunted Hotel, *it was Willis O'Brien who pioneered stop-motion as an effects technique in 1925 in* The Lost World *and then, most memorably, in creating* King Kong *in 1933. He passed his mantle to Ray Harryhausen, who in turn created a coterie of fantastical creatures for films such as* Jason and the Argonauts *and the* Sinbad *series. The introduction of go-motion – a variation on stop-motion in which objects are blurred in the frame to produce a more realistic effect – in 1983 by Industrial Light and Magic for* Return of the Jedi, *and the advancement in computer-generated imagery, meant effects that would have previously been the domain of stop-motion could now be created by computer. This contributed to stop-motion's cinematic decline, though animators such as Nick Park in England, creator of the Oscar-winning* Creature Comforts, *and Henry Selick in the United States, with his commercials, idents for MTV and short films, kept the art very much alive and kicking.*

It's a funky old art form stop-motion, and even though new technology was used at times in *Nightmare*, basically it's artists doing it and painting

sets and making things. There's something very gratifying about that, something I love and never want to forget. It's the handmade aspect of things, part of an energy that you can't explain. You can sense it when you see the concentration of the animators as they move the figures, there's an energy that's captured. It's like when you look at a Van Gogh painting. I remember the first time I saw one in reality. You've seen them in books, but the energy that's captured on the canvas is incredible, and I think that's something that nobody talks about because it's not something literal.

It's the same with this kind of animation, and I think that's the power of Ray Harryhausen. When it's done beautifully, you feel somebody's energy. It's something that computers will never be able to replace, because they're missing that one element. For as good as computers are and as incredible as it will get and is right now, it goes back to painters and their canvases. This project and these characters and these visuals, the only way that it could have been done was with stop-motion. Therefore, it's very specialized. I remember getting shots and each time I would see a shot I would get this little rush of energy; it was so beautiful. It's like a drug. And I realized if you did it in live-action it wouldn't be as good; if you did it in drawing it wouldn't be as good. There is something about stop-motion that gives it an energy that you don't get in any other form.

Despite Nightmare's *proximity to his heart, Burton passed on directing the project because of his commitment to* Batman Returns *and the painstakingly slow production period necessary to complete a project of this kind. Instead, he chose Henry Selick, whom he had first met at Disney in the late seventies and to whom he had shown his original* Nightmare *sketches in 1982. Since the early eighties, Selick had been living and working in San Francisco, an area that had become the centre for stop-motion animators. It was here that Disney's adult-orientated arm Touchstone Pictures and Burton set up Skellington Productions, and began work on* Nightmare *in July 1991.*

Henry is a real artist. He's truly the best. He had done a lot of great stuff for MTV and was doing a lot of great stuff for stop-motion animation. There was a whole group of really talented artists up there in San Francisco. It's just that, even more than with drawn animation, it's hard to find people who are really talented at it, because it's a much more rarified form, and such an intense process. So, they let us do it up in San Francisco.

When I wasn't shooting I would go up there because I loved it, but

most of the time Henry would just send me stuff – there'd be a few shots during the week – and so over the period of a couple of years it all came together. I'm trying to think when it started, but I am the worst person when it comes dates. Have you noticed that? I just have the worst mind when it comes to that. Everything is true, it's just that the time frame is a little off-kilter. Anyway, I would get a reel and I had an editing room and I would edit some shots when I was working on the second *Batman* movie. At that stage, there's something about it taking so long that means you can just sit there and enjoy it, and look at the texture.

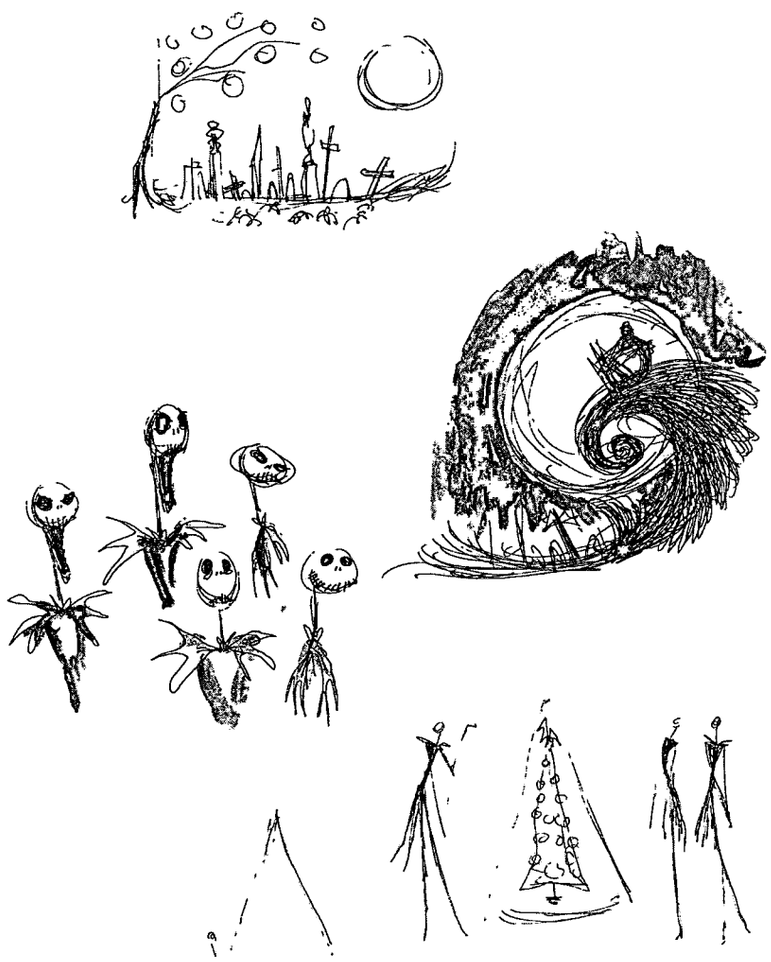
It was the hardest thing I ever worked on, in a way, because it just took so long, and there were a lot of people involved, a lot of artists. Hopefully, most people you work with are artists, but it's an intense thing, stop-motion animation, and the thing that I was looking for all the time was just the feeling of it. Everybody contributed something, everybody had ideas and stuff, but what I always tried to do was just go back to that initial feeling. And even though it expanded, I would try to keep it on a certain track. It's funny, because when a project takes that much time, and I've been in animation so I know, ideas come all the time. That's fine, but sometimes the ideas are scary because people want to change this and change that. That's just the nature of it, because the ideas are quicker than the process. So, I tried to keep a constant watch. Actually, I enjoyed working in this way because the project took three years, and even if I was working on other things I could make a sketch or comment on things. And as the shots got assembled, I just tried to run it through that original feeling.

I guess my main concern, was that Henry, being an artist in his own right, wouldn't do the things I wanted. I was worried about that kind of tension. But it wasn't like that. He was great. That's why it's important very early on for people to be in synch about a project. So those early meetings are almost the most important. It's like, if you were doing a book, you would try to be faithful to the material. I wanted to feel comfortable that Henry was into that, otherwise you'd be fighting all time, and that couldn't happen. I've known some people who like to fight, who like that kind of struggle on set. I don't really like that. I don't like working with actors who aren't into it. You want people that are one hundred per cent into a project, even if they don't completely get it. So, there was no better group of people to do that movie and I always felt it was a special time. The studio was incredible and I just loved going up there because that level of artistry and detail was magical, truly magical and I'd never really felt that before.

To adapt his original, three-page poem into a feature-length script, Burton originally called upon Beetlejuice *writer Michael McDowell. But when the collaboration didn't pan out quite the way Burton planned, he decided to attack the project from a musical standpoint and turned to his regular partner Danny Elfman. Together, Burton and Elfman, who also provides the singing voice of Jack in the movie, fleshed out a rough storyline and two-thirds of the film's songs, which Selick and his team of animators began work on even before Caroline Thompson was brought in to incorporate them into a screenplay.*

I brought Michael in at the beginning and I realized that the way I really should do it was the way Danny and I eventually did it, even though it's not the most logical way. Michael's a friend, but it just didn't work. What Danny and I had when we started was the poem that I wrote and some drawings and some storyboards, and also this story outline I did about ten years ago. I would go over to his house and we would just treat it like an operetta, not like the musicals that they did, but more like that old-fashioned kind of thing, where the songs are more engrained in the story. I would begin to tell him the story and he'd write a song; he wrote them pretty quickly, actually, at least the initial pass on them. We worked in a weird way, where there was the outline and the songs and then we worked out the script. There was a lot going on, that was what was so difficult about it. They were doing the storyboards up there, we were doing the script, all this stuff was happening at once. It's not the best way to do it, but this was a new thing we were trying to do. I had seen other stop-motion animated features, and they were either not engaging or they're just too bizarre. There was one I liked when I was a kid called *Mad Monster Party*. People thought *Nightmare* was the first stop-motion animated monster musical, but that was.

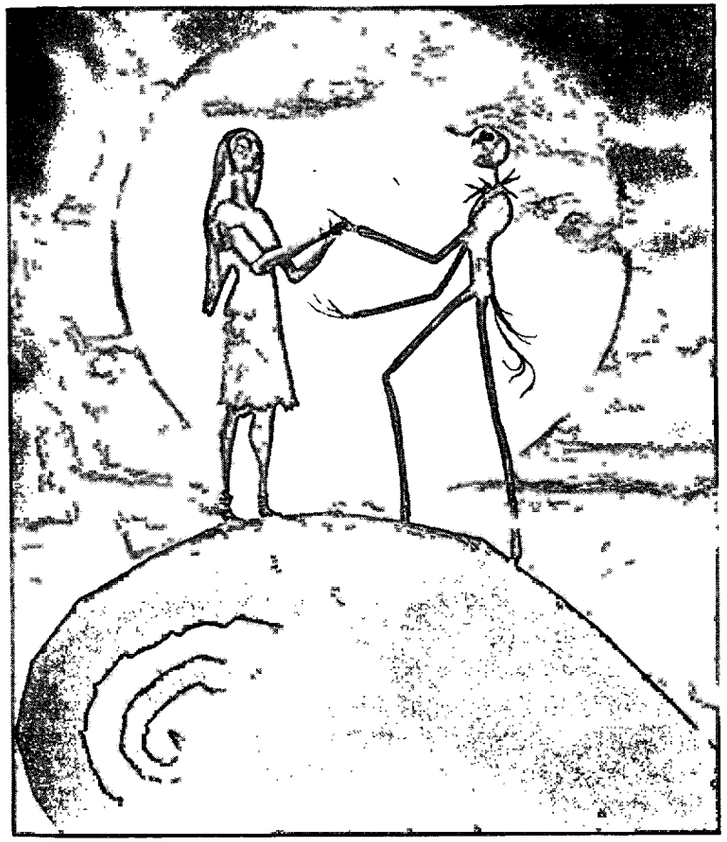
So, Danny and I would go through my little outline and I'd say Jack does this and then he does that and then he falls into Christmastown. We'd worked together so much that it didn't matter that we didn't know what we were doing; at least we knew each other. So we just took at stab at it. And again, since we had worked together before, he worked very quickly, which was good because we needed the songs so we could do the script. He wrote them fairly quickly, within a couple of months; he would play me stuff the next week, sometimes the next day. Then I brought in Caroline and she knew Danny. It was a gradual, evolving process: there's Henry, there's me, there's Danny, there's Caroline, and that's a lot to deal with. And then you add in the other incredible artists.



The Nightmare Before Christmas: sketches

While Burton and Elfman had no specific style in mind for the film's musical numbers, preferring to see where the story took them, the one sung by Oogie Boogie Man was patterned after a character found in Max Fleischer's Betty Boop cartoons, which was voiced by Cab Calloway.

I remember drawing Jack and really getting into these black holes for eyes and thinking that to be expressive, but not have any eyes, would be really incredible. Sally was a relatively new character; I was into stitching from



The Nightmare Before Christmas: Sally and Jack

the Catwoman thing, I was into that whole psychological thing of being pieced together. Again, these are all symbols for the way that you feel. The feeling of not being together and of being loosely stitched together and constantly trying to pull yourself together, so to speak, is just a strong feeling to me. So those kind of visual symbols have less to do with being based on *Frankenstein*, than with the feeling of pulling yourself together.

The Cab Calloway thing was a more specific reference, however; when Danny and I were talking about it, it had more to do with this feeling of remembering, because I remember seeing these Betty Boop cartoons, where this weird character would come out. I didn't know who it was, but it would do this weird musical number in the middle of nowhere, and it was like: 'What the hell is that?' Again, it had to do with a feeling of

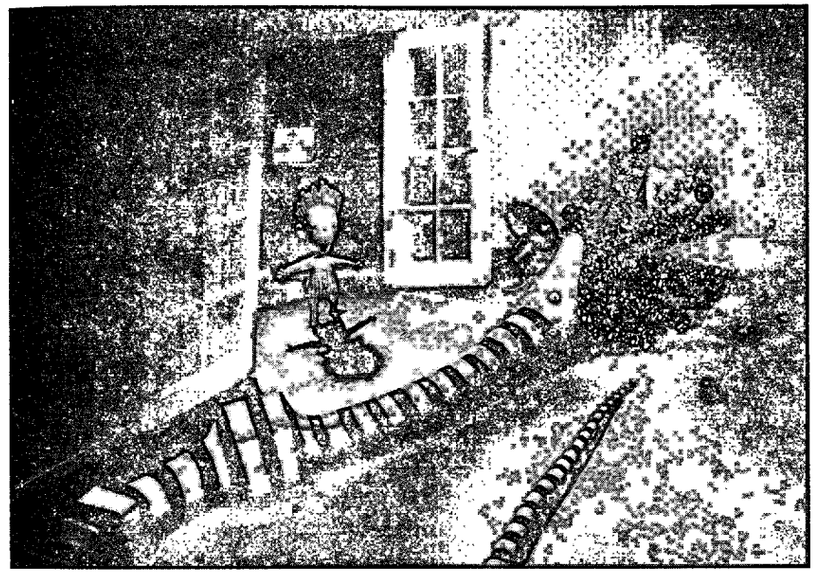
remembering that from when I was a child. A lot of those images come more from feelings than they do from anything specific.

It's funny, because of the movies I've done, a lot of people think that they're very much about the way they look. People don't realize that everything I've ever done has to mean something; even if it's not clear-cut to anybody else, I have to find some connection, and actually the more absurd the element, the more I have to feel that I understand something behind it. That's why we're all fascinated by the movies. They tap into your dreams and your subconscious. I guess it is different from generation to generation, but movies are truly a form of therapy and work on your subconscious in the way fairy tales were meant to. The Dog Woman and Lizard Man in those Indian tales, they're not meant to be taken literally. That's what movies do as well. I was never a scholar in any of that stuff, but I always appreciated it. It's something I've found is not ingrained in American culture, that sense of myth or folklore. The best America could do is Johnny Appleseed – kind of soft, mutated.

The Nightmare Before Christmas *marked Burton's third movie in a row to be set at Christmas.*

I think I'm off that for a while. I've exorcized my Christmas demons. Growing up in Burbank, I responded to the holidays, especially Hallowe'en and Christmas, because they were the most visual and fun in some respects. The best I can decipher from the whole thing is that when you grow up in a blank environment, any form of ritual, like a holiday, gives you a sense of place. Most other countries are rich with ritual, but I guess America is a relatively new country and a fairly Puritan one. Growing up in a suburban environment where it's pushed even further in that direction, makes you feel very floaty. So holidays, especially those two, were very much a grounding or a way to experience seasons, because in California you don't get any. So at least you could walk in the supermarket aisles and see the Hallowe'en display and the fall leaves, because you certainly couldn't experience it in the weather and the environment.

To me, Hallowe'en has always been the most fun night of the year. It's where rules are dropped and you can be anything at all. Fantasy rules. It's only scary in a funny way. Nobody's out to really scare anybody else to death. They're out to delight people with their scariness, which is what Hallowe'en is all about and what *Nightmare* is all about.

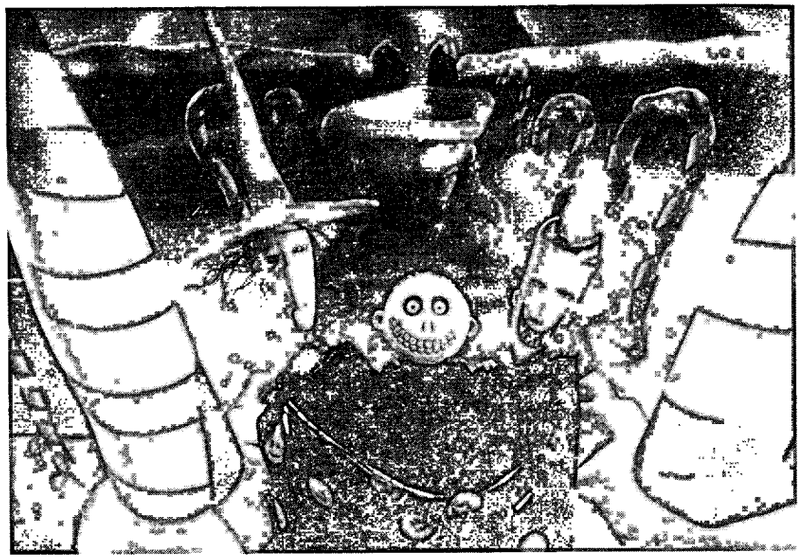


'I've exorized my Christmas demons'

The budget for Nightmare *was less than $18 million, a fraction of the cost of producing a drawn animated movie. The film was released on Hallowe'en 1993 in the US and made $51 million at the box office. Rather ironically, it was (mis)perceived as being too scary for kids.*

Which was great, which was interesting, because it's what the story is about. Here you have this story where there are no really bad characters, not even Oogie Boogie; he's not *really* bad, he's just the weird neighbour in this weird city. And you have this character, Jack, who just wants to do good; he's passionate about something, and basically he ends up being misperceived and scaring everybody. It's funny, it took on the life of what it was about in real life. It was like, 'Wait a minute. This is *exactly* what the movie is about. People are freaking out because they think it's scary, but it's not. There really isn't anything in it.' Kids are incredible. If you show it to a bunch of kids without their parents it's great, but as soon as you get the parents involved, you get: 'This is too scary.' I've seen this happen before and it's a very disturbing phenomenon. If something was too scary for me, I wouldn't watch it, I was never forced to, but when you get a parent giving you this weird vibe, it puts you on edge.

It was released as *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*



'Hallowe'en has always been the most fun night of the year'

because they felt it would help. But it turned into more of a brand-name thing, it turned into something else, which I'm not quite sure about. Initially, they had talked to me about what that would achieve; smaller print above the title would give it a certain kind of context which they felt would help the movie, and I went along with it. I wouldn't do that with everything. There are only a few projects that you feel so personally involved with. I felt that way about *Vincent*, and I felt that way about this. But you don't really have any control over what happens outside. I learned that on the first *Batman*, where what you read about and what actually happened were two different things.

Sometimes I'll see people wearing the *Nightmare* Burger King watch in the weirdest places. I just saw somebody wearing it who worked at Carnegie Hall, and it's incredible. People will come up and they'll have a little picture of Jack with them. It's funny because sometimes when things connect with people, maybe not a large group, but with some, it's really wonderful to me. A lot of people and critics don't get that there is an emotion underneath these weird, stupid-looking things. Some people do, and that probably means the most to me: that people get the emotional quality underneath the stupid façade.

Because of the sheer scale and length of the project, which encompassed the period he was directing Batman Returns, The Nightmare Before Christmas *represented the first time that Burton had worked on more than one film at a time.*

That was the first time where there was a lot of energy put into a couple of different things, *Batman Returns* and *Nightmare*. It was kind of heavy. I can only work on one thing at a time, unless I find the right people. A lot of it has to do with finding kindred spirits, so to speak; it really does do a lot for you, you work on a higher level that way. I find if somebody isn't going with the flow, it's not the best working relationship anyway, so it's nice to work with people who are on the same wavelength. Then they surprise you and there's less stress and it's more creative. It's better.

I have to give credit to the people in charge at Disney now because they have certainly made the place more successful; they have more of an idea about what's going on. When I was there, there was a group of people who could have done *The Little Mermaid,* and things like that, back then. They had that pool of talent, even stronger, ten, fifteen years ago; they could have ushered in that renaissance back then had they been given the opportunity. At the time most people were out of Cal Arts, or college. Disney was just opening up, hiring young people, and everybody was completely eager to go for it and make a great movie, everybody was a Disneyphile. It's not like they were wanting to bring Disney animation into the R-rated world. So there was that talent, and finally the regime that's there now recognized that talent and have obviously been very successful in bringing the studio around, and that's good for animation as a whole.