Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas

Director Henry Selick on 'The Nightmare before Christmas'

The film has been marketed as Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas, *but you're the director. What do you think is distinctively yours about the film?*

It's as though he laid the egg, but I sat on it and hatched it, so it came out looking a bit like both of us. He wasn't involved in a hands-on way, but his hand is in it. It was my job in a way to make it look like a 'Tim Burton film', which is not so different from my own films. We can collaborate because we often think of the same solution to a problem. It's why we hit it off at Disney – we were not having fun drawing cute foxes and little animals. But I would wager that in *The Nightmare before Christmas* most of the lines you laugh at are mine. I did most sequences like the battle, or any action sequences – Tim always gives live action to a second-unit director. Every shot of the movie is something I looked at through a camera and composed.

I don't want to take away from·Tim, but he was not here in San Francisco when we made it. He came up five times over two years, and spent no more than eight or ten days here in total. It's more like he wrote a children's book and gave it to us and we went from there. But the bottom line was that Tim Burton's name before the title was going to bring in more people than mine would.

Nightmare *centres on three different worlds: those of Halloweentown, Christmastown and the 'real world'. You have the same contrast of worlds in one of your earlier films,* Slow Bob in the Lower Dimensions. *Is this a concern of yours?*

It's pure coincidence – in fact, the idea of different holiday worlds came from Tim. But most of my other personal work, including several short films, is about the collision of worlds. For example, a 9-minute film I made in 1981, *Seepage*, depicts stop-motion animated life-size figures by a pool who experience a collision between their world and an imaginary world they speak of.

What kind of visual influences went into the design of Nightmare before Christmas *apart from Tim Burton's original drawings? Did you draw on the gothic tradition for ways of expressing nightmarishness?*

I drew on some of my favourite films, including *The Night of the Hunter*, the only Hollywood feature Charles Laughton directed. It was a low-budget film but it had a lot of high-contrast imagery, a fairy-tale quality. Then there were illustrators who were Tim's inspirations, including Edward Gorey and Charles Addams. We tried to put a lot of Gorey-type textures on our sets.

That sort of knobbly quality...

Yes, though the set for Christmastown was more Dr Seuss inspired, much softer, rounder, a fluffy look.

Were you inspired by any earlier artists?

Rick Heinrichs was the visual consultant on the film – he has worked with Tim on every film Tim has made, he's Tim's hidden partner. He exposed us to a

Gregory Proops *(harlequin demon/devil/sax player)*
Kerry Katz *(man under stairs/vampire/corpse dad)*
Randy Crenshaw *(Mr Hyde/behemoth/vampire)*
Sherwood Ball *(mummy/vampire)*
Carmen Twillie *(undersea gal/man under stairs)*
Glenn Walters *(voice of wolfman)*
Doris Hess, Daamen Krall, Christina MacGregor,
David McCharen, Gary Raff, David Randolph,
Gary Schwartz
USA 1993©
76 mins
Digital

Russian animator, one of the earliest... Starevich. We looked at Starevich's films not so much for style but because he would use real material, real cloth, hair, insects, things that shudder and shake and pixilate and catch your attention needlessly that most animators would avoid. It loosened us up a little.

Anyone else?

There are a lot of painters I've been affected by – for instance Francis Bacon, and some of Kandinsky's·work before he went abstract. He would do these Russian fables, quite beautiful, fairytale paintings, very simple with colour on what he wants, light on what he wants, then the rest just disappears into a medium ground. Also the Polish animator and poster designer Jan Lenica crept in.

To return to nightmares and the gothic, do you think animation is especially good at expressing these?

I think animation lends itself to illustrating dreams of any sort. As a kid I was deeply impressed by the 'Night on the Bare Mountain' sequence from *Fantasia*. That felt like nightmare and dreams to me, and was very powerful. Another important influence was Lotte Reiniger. I saw a lot of her films as a kid on a local television station. All her films are primarily silhouettes. They are very dreamlike, you have to use a lot of imagination to make them work. These two influences plugged into a kind of dream imagery where you don't fill in all the blanks, just as you'll get isolated figures in limbo in dreams, moving at unnatural speeds, usually in slow motion but sometimes faster, falling, exaggeration.

How did that feed into the design of the nightmare landscape in the film?

One of our criteria was to make the Halloween characters look really scary, though they weren't bad people except for Oogie Boogie, and even with him it was just his nature to be voracious. When Tim was a lad he watched a lot of films like the original *Frankenstein* or *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Those creatures weren't inherently bad, they were just misunderstood and people were terrified of them and tried to destroy them. Tim had sympathy for them and it's something he wanted to carry through to the denizens of Halloween town.

Did you break new ground technically with Nightmare*?*

We took an old technique and did the highest-quality stop-motion that has ever been done for that many minutes. I think we moved stop-motion up to a high level of performance in timing, lighting and computer-aided camera moves. We made it a serious contender rather than things that look like toys on a table top with two glaring lights.

Interview by Leslie Felperin, *Sight and Sound*, December 1994

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit
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