Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas

Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas
Director: Henry Selick
©: Touchstone Pictures
Production Company: Burton/DiNovi
Presented by: Touchstone Pictures
Producers: Tim Burton, Denise Di Novi
Co-producer: Kathleen Gavin
Associate Producers: Danny Elfman,
Philip Lofaro, Jill Jacobs, Diane Minter
Production Manager: Philip Lofaro
Production Accountant: Kevin Reher
Casting: Mary Gail Artz, Barbara Cohen
Screenplay: Caroline Thompson
Adaptation: Michael McDowell
Based on a story and characters by:
Tim Burton
Director of Photography: Pete Kozachik
Camera Operators: Jo Carson,
Pat Sweeney, Jim Aupperle, Ray Gilberti,
Richard E. Lehmann, Eric Swenson,
Dave Hanks, Selwyn Eddy III
Visual Effects Supervisor: Pete Kozachik
Digital Effects Provided by:
Walt Disney Feature Animation
Model Shop Supervisor:
Mitch Romanauski
Animation Supervisor: Eric Leighton
Mold Maker Supervisor: John A. Reed III
Character Fabricator Supervisor:
Bonita De Carlo
Additional Character Design: David Cutler,
Barry Jackson, Jorgen Klubein
Editor: Stan Webb
Associate Editor: Edie Ichioka
Visual Consultant: Rick Heinrichs
Artistic Co-ordinator: Allison Abbate
Art Director: Deane Taylor
Set Designer/Dressing Supervisor:
Gregg Olsson
Storyboard Supervisor: Joe Ranft
Set Construction Supervisor:
Lee Bo Henry
Titles: Buena Vista Optical
Additional Optical Effects: Harry Walton,
Image FX, Michael Hinton, Interformat
Colour Timer: Dale E. Grahn
Music/Lyrics/Original Score: Danny Elfman
Song Conductor: Chris Boardman
Score Conductor: J.A.C. Redford
Original Dialogue Recording:
Samuel Lehmer
Re-recording Mixers: Terry Porter,
Shawn Murphy, Greg P. Russell
Dubbing Recordists: Tim Webb,
Tony Araki
Supervising Sound Editors:
Richard L. Anderson, John Pospisil
Sound Editing: Weddington Productions
Dialogue Editors: Mary Andrews, Joe Dorn
Sound Effects Editors: Michael Chock,
James Christopher
Voice Cast:
Danny Elfman *(Jack Skellington singing)*
Chris Sarandon
(Jack Skellington speaking)
Catherine O'Hara *(Sally)*
William Hickey *(Evil Scientist)*
Glenn Shadix *(mayor)*
Paul Reubens *(Lock)*

Director Henry Selick on 'Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas'

Disney is marketing its latest feature as *Tim Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas*. But though the film is based on a poem and treatment Burton wrote while employed at Disney in the early '80s (and therefore is still under the studio's copyright control), it was shaped as much by the interpretation of its director, Henry Selick. It was Selick who put flesh on Burton's original, literally, skeletal concept.

Skinnier than Kate Moss, the hero of *The Nightmare before Christmas*, Jack Skellington, is the king of Halloweentown, populated by a freakish cast that could have made Tod Browning shudder. Stumbling across Christmastown by accident, Jack decides to try his hand at a different kind of holiday. Halloweentown swings into action, making teddy bears with teeth and other ghoulish Christmas presents, and arranges for Kris Kringle to be Santa-napped. All goes predictably wrong as the presents produce tears instead of joy and Santa falls into the hands of malevolent gambling-man Oogie Boogie. Assisted by his fetching rag-doll girlfriend Sally and his ghost dog Zero (a gem-nosed scene-stealer), Jack tries to set things right.

After establishing a studio in San Francisco, Selick was given the difficult brief of trying to remain true to Burton's original murky concept while keeping the film anodyne enough for the 'suits' at co-financers Disney.

Modest and professionally circumspect, Selick is pragmatic about being eclipsed by his star producer. After all, they have been friends since they served their apprenticeship together at Disney in the early '80s. Like Burton, Selick started his animation career at CaiArts in Jules Engel's experimental animation programme. His early films – for instance – *Phases* (1978) and *Seepage* (1981), with their mix of techniques and tendency towards abstraction, bear witness to this training.

After leaving Disney in disgust at having had to draw one too many 'cute foxes', Selick moonlighted doing short animated films for MTV and *Sesame Street* together with some second-unit directing and storyboarding for live-action films. In 1989 he made *Slow Bob in the Lower Dimensions*, a powerful mixture of pixilation and animation for MTV, as technically flawless as it is narratively obscure, which returned him to a full-time career in animation. Selick has a remarkable eye for imagery, and is gifted with an impressive command of the medium coupled with a perfectionist streak.

Are you pleased with The Nightmare before Christmas?

The flaws are still painful, but what's good about it is excellent. I had an amazing group of people to work with including some fine British animators – Paul Berry, whose *The Sandman* was nominated for an Academy award, and Loyd Price, among others.

It was very gratifying not to have the typical Disney structure. Instead, there was Tim Burton an 800-pound gorilla with creative control – who basically passed that creative control to me for most of the project while he was off malting *Batman Returns* and *Ed Wood*. Tim is that lone filmmaker who does very unusual films, every one of which has been successful. Even with their story flaws and rhythm flaws, what's good in his films is so brilliant that the audience always responds.

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 *A 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

Catherine O'Hara *(Shock)*
Danny Elfman
(Barrel/Clown with the Tear Away Face)
Ken Page *(Oogie Boogie)*
Ed Ivory *(Santa)*
Susan McBride *(Big Witch, W.W.D.)*
Debi Durst
(corpse kid/corpse mom/small witch)
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 *(wolfman)*
Mia Brown, L. Peter Callender, Ann Fraser,
Jennifer Levey, Jesse McClurg,
John Morris, Robert Olague, Bobbi Page,
Elena Praskin, Trampas Warman,
Judy Durand, Doris Hess, Daamen Krall,
Christina MacGregor, David McCharen,
Gary Raff, David Randolph, Gary Schwartz
(additional voices)
USA 1993©
76 mins
Digital 4K

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line was that Tim Burton's name before the title was going to bring in more people than mine
would.

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.

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 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
Kandirisky'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 kid 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.

*One thing that has caused controversy is that Oogie Boogie, the only malevolent character, has
an 'obviously' black voice attached to him. How do you respond to this criticism?*

We did consider this. In some parts of the world, like in Alabama where my mother is from, a
'boogie man' is a monstrous black person, so it had racial connotations. It really came from
Betty Boop cartoons though, which would have Cab Calloway, the jazz band leader and a
great singer, serve as the basis of what they would call 'specialty numbers'. He would dance
his inimitable jazz dance and sing 'Minnie the Moocher' or 'Old Man of the Mountain', and they
would rotoscope, trace him, turn him into a cartoon character, often transforming him into an
animal, like a walrus. I think those are some of the most inventive moments in cartoon history,
in no way racist, even though he was sometimes a villain.

It's not completely resolved in myself – it's controversial and I've got a slight twinge of guilt. But
in the end we went with Ken Page, who is a black singer, because he was the best guy to sing
the song. He had no problem with it.

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.

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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