



## Trash! The Wildest Films You've Ever Seen

# Ed Wood

### Ed Wood

*Directed by:* Tim Burton  
*©/Presented by:* Touchstone Pictures  
*Executive Producer:* Michael Lehmann  
*Produced by:* Denise Di Novi, Tim Burton  
*Co-producer:* Michael Flynn  
*Unit Production Manager:* Michael Polaire  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Susan P. McCarthy  
*Production Accountant:* Gary Gillingham  
*Location Managers:* Elizabeth Matthews, Diana Leigh Myers  
*1st Assistant Director:* Michael Topoozian  
*Script Supervisor:* Janna Stern  
*Casting by:* Victoria Thomas  
*Written by:* Scott Alexander, Larry Karaszewski  
*Based on the book Nightmare of Ecstasy by:* Rudolph Grey  
*Director of Photography:* Stefan Czapsky  
*Camera Operator:* Phil Carr-Forster  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Eric Tramp  
*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Howard Jensen  
*Special Effects:* J. Kevin Pike  
*Motion Control Photography/Special Visual Effects:* Boyington Film Studios  
*Octopus by:* Sota Effects  
*Film Editor:* Chris Lebenzon  
*Additional Editor:* Tom Seid  
*Assistant Editors:* Pam Di Fede, Sandra Kaufman  
*Production Designer:* Tom Duffield  
*Visual Consultant:* Richard Hoover  
*Art Director:* Okowita  
*Set Designers:* Chris Nushawg, Bruce Hill  
*Costume Designer:* Colleen Atwood  
*Costume Department Supervisor:* Nancy McArdle  
*Key Make-up Artist:* Ve Neill  
*Make-up:* Carrie Angland  
*Bela Lugosi Make-up Designed/Created by:* Rick Baker  
*Key Hairstylist:* Yolanda Toussieng  
*Hairstylists:* Lucia Mace, Bridget Cook  
*Main Title Composite by:* Cinema Research Corporation  
*Main Title Sequences Designed by:* Robert Dawson, Paul Boyington  
*Opticals:* Reel EFX  
*Music by:* Howard Shore  
*Score Performed by:* The London Philharmonia Orchestra  
*Theremin Solos Performed by:* Lidia Kavina  
*Ondes Martenot Solos Performed by:* Cynthia Millar  
*Latin Keyboards:* Andy Narell  
*Orchestrations:* Howard Shore  
*Production Sound:* Edward Tise  
*Boom Operator:* Ken Mantlo  
*Re-recording Mixers:* David Parker, Michael Semanick, Richard Schirmer  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* John Nutt  
*Dialogue Editors:* Joan E. Chapman, Patrick Dodd, Scott Levitin  
*Sound Effects Editors:* Ernie Fosselius, Sam Hinkley  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* John Branagan  
*Dialect Coaches:* Jessica Drake, Francie Brown  
*Cast:*  
Johnny Depp (*Ed Wood*)  
Martin Landau (*Bela Lugosi*)  
Sarah Jessica Parker (*Dolores Fuller*)  
Patricia Arquette (*Kathy O'Hara*)  
Jeffrey Jones (*Criswell*)  
G.D. Spradlin (*Reverend Lemon*)  
Vincent D'Onofrio (*Orson Welles*)  
Lisa Marie (*Vampira*)  
Bill Murray (*Bunny Breckinridge*)  
Mike Starr (*Georgie Weiss*)

Only in America: Tim Burton, one of the most bankable filmmakers who ever lived, expends the credit of his success in sincere, black-and-white tribute to the obscure, tawdry vision of Edward D. Wood, Jr (1924-78), the alcoholic, heterosexual transvestite and sometime pornographer known affectionately as 'the world's worst director'. As nothing in America can be truly said to exist outside the media's glare, there is no such thing as negative publicity. (The value of celebrity is absolute, as Wood well knew.) To be the World's Worst Filmmaker is to personify a particular high concept.

Playing both ends against the middlebrow, Burton's feature opened in the US, bearing the imprimatur of both Walt Disney and the New York Film Festival. There's no mistaking it for anything but an art film, yet it's sweeter than *Cinderella* (and nearly as sexless). The dank aroma of Salvation Army thrift stores that clings to the Wood oeuvre evaporates in the simulated sunlight of a Disney production with a hot young cast. Ed Wood as Johnny Depp, loved by the luscious Sarah Jessica Parker and Patricia Arquette and admired, if only platonically, by Bill Murray. Ed Wood, recovered failure, subject of a feel-good movie ... for creeps!

Thanks to Burton, the Ed Wood story makes the leap from cult to religion. By celebrating the career of so sodden a loser, Ed Wood may seem to be a travesty of the classic Hollywood biopic – a form which, disproportionately concerned with showbusiness personalities, peaked (numerically, if not aesthetically) during the same 50s that brought *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and now functions, in American popular culture, as an eternal theme park of national innocence. In fact, *Ed Wood* is as blatantly inspirational as any paean to Alexander Graham Bell or Al Jolson – a success story preaching the importance of self-belief and the power of positive thinking, demonstrating by its very existence the payoff for doing one's thing.

There's a moment in the film where an incredulous Hollywood producer, amazed by a private screening of *Glen or Glenda*, anachronistically proclaims that this grotesque melodrama has got to be a 'put-on'. That's exactly what they said of Van Gogh, schmuck. We always knew he was great – didn't we?

Burton is a Wood fan. (Like Joe Dante, who celebrated William Castle in his 1993 *Matinee*, he belongs to the Famous Monsters of Filmdom school of adolescent fetishes.) Written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski from *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, *Ed Wood* is nothing if not knowing. The movie opens with an extravagant pastiche of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* – tombstone credits illuminated by lightning, a crescendo of thunder yielding to mad bongo drums – and thereafter, there's scarcely an Ed Wood joke that isn't made. 'Gosh, where's my pink sweater?' is his girlfriend's first line. 'Why, if I had the chance, I could make half a movie out of this stock footage,' the aspiring filmmaker tells a friend.

Just as *Mystery Theater 3000*, a regular feature on American cable television's Comedy Central, inscribes an animated pair of wise-cracking humanoid spectators over the old drive-in movies presented, so Wood's contemporary incarnation is rigorously overdetermined. Depp plays the director as a wide-eyed, wired enthusiast, suave but disjointed, lips accentuated by pencilline moustache, teeth bared in a ventriloquist dummy's idiot grin, every word illuminated by faith in his own dream.

Depp aside, the movie's *typage* is remarkable: Jeffrey Jones's Criswell, Lisa Marie's Vampira, George 'The Animal' Steele's Tor Johnson, Vincent D'Onofrio's Orson Welles are all impressively hyperreal, and Martin Landau's Lugosi is a good deal more. ('No one gives two fucks for Bela,' Lugosi says sadly upon meeting avid fan Eddie Wood.) Thanks to Landau's performance, a mixture of wounded pride and agonised gratitude, *Ed Wood* is as much footnote to the Lugosi canon as it is celebration of Wood's. Condemned to self-parody, resurrected by the camera,

Max Casella (*Paul Marco*)  
 Brent Hinkley (*Conrad Brooks*)  
 Juliet Landau (*Loretta King*)  
 George 'The Animal' Steele (*Tor Johnson*)  
 Clive Rosengren (*Ed Reynolds*)  
 Norman Alden (*Cameraman Bill*)  
 Leonard Termo (*make-up man Harry*)  
 Ned Bellamy (*Dr Tom Mason*)  
 Danny Dayton (*soundman*)  
 John Ross (*camera assistant*)  
 Bill Cusack (*Tony McCoy*)  
 Aaron Nelms (*teenage kid*)  
 Biff Yeager (*rude boss*)  
 Joseph R. Gannascoli (*security guard*)  
 Carmen Filpi (*old crusty man*)  
 Lisa Malkiewicz (*secretary 1*)  
 Melora Walters (*secretary 2*)  
 Conrad Brooks (*bartender*)  
 Don Amendolia (*salesman*)  
 Tommy Bertelsen (*tough boy*)  
 Red Cruickshanks (*stage guard*)  
 Stanley Desantis (*Mr Feldman*)  
 Lionel Decker (*executive 1*)  
 Edmund L. Shaff (*executive 2*)  
 Gene Lebell (*ring announcer*)  
 Jesse Hernandez (*wrestling opponent*)  
 Bobby Slayton (*TV show host*)  
 Gretchen Becker (*TV host's assistant*)  
 John Rice (*conservative man*)  
 Catherine Butterfield (*conservative wife*)  
 Mary Portser (*backer's wife*)  
 King Cotton (*hick backer*)  
 Don Hood (*Southern backer*)  
 Frank Echols (*doorman*)  
 Matthew Barry (*valet*)  
 Ralph Monaco (*waiter*)  
 Anthony Russell (*busboy*)  
 Tommy Bush (*stage manager*)  
 Gregory Walcott (*potential backer*)  
 Charles C. Stevenson Jr (*another backer*)  
 Rance Howard (*Old Man McCoy*)  
 Vasek C. Simek (*Professor Strowski*)  
 Alan Martin (*Vampira's assistant*)  
 Salwa Ali (*Vampira's girlfriend*)  
 Rodney Kizziah (*Vampira's friend*)  
 Korla Pandit (*Indian musician*)  
 Hannah Eckstein (*Greta Johnson*)  
 Luc De Schepper (*Karl Johnson*)  
 Vinny Argiro (*TV horror show director*)  
 Patti Tippo (*nurse*)  
 Ray Baker (*doctor*)  
 Louis Lombardi (*rental house manager*)  
 James Reid Boyce (*theatre manager*)  
 Ben Ryan Ganger (*angry kid*)  
 Ryan Holihan (*frantic usher*)  
 Marc Revivo (*high school punk*)  
 Charlie Holliday (*tourist*)  
 Adam Drescher (*photographer 1*)  
 Ric Mancini (*photographer 2*)  
 Daniel Riordan (*pilot/strapping young man*)  
 Mickey Cottrell (*hammy alien*)  
 USA 1994©  
 127 mins  
 Digital

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Lugosi functions as the pure essence of negative stardom – he's a successful failure, Ed Wood's Ed Wood. Landau's Oscar proves it.

While skirting the sleaze and pathos of its subject's life, *Ed Wood* is heavily dependent on Wood's films. Burton in a sense naturalises the video doc *Look Back in Angora*, which used clips from the Wood oeuvre as the basis for a biography, while puzzling over the miracle of how these sacred texts came to be created. The most thematically apposite sequence has Ed and his cast submitting to mass baptism (true story!) to secure the Baptist Church of Beverly Hills's backing for *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

In the gospel according to Burton, Wood is so solicitous of his actors that he shoots every scene in one take; like Warhol, his mantra is 'That was perfect.' *Ed Wood*, of course, is absolutely flawless – as fastidiously crafted as any previous Burton production. (Columbia reportedly put it in turnaround because Burton refused to trade 'first look' for the right to shoot in black and white.) The painstaking replication of Wood's haphazard compositions suggests another Hollywood landmark, the Buena Park Palace of Living Art where the Mona Lisa or Whistler's Mother are reproduced as garish wax dioramas and the Venus De Milo is improved upon: not only is she colorised, but her lost limbs are restored. *Ed Wood* is the Palace of Living Art in reverse. Art is not reproduced as kitsch; living kitsch is embalmed as art.

No less than its subject, albeit in a different way, *Ed Wood* is deeply solipsistic. For however ostensibly mediated by film or television, the entire world is subsumed to the director's vision: everything is stippled with noir lighting and awash in studio rain, a lavish version of a cheap horror movie. The most elaborate gag involves the mechanism of an amusement-park spook house; the most powerful moment has Lugosi reprise his tormented speech from *Bride of the Monster* ('Home? I have no home!') on a Hollywood street corner; the most inspirational sequence allows Ed to meet his idol Orson Welles in a cheap bar and thus draw strength to finish his 'masterpiece', *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

Opening as it does in a movie movie-graveyard, *Ed Wood* evokes Hollywood as a mansion populated by unquiet ghosts, but it's a Hollywood haunted house just the same. Unlike *Look Back in Angora*, which includes footage documenting Wood's bloated descent into porn, Burton ends the story on a positive note. According to *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, *Plan 9* never enjoyed a Los Angeles theatrical release; in *Ed Wood*, it is accorded a gala premiere at the packed Pantages Theater. Recognised in the movies as he never was in life, the genius of *Plan 9* is feted by an ecstatically appreciative audience: us!

The circuit of self-congratulation is complete. 'This is the one they'll remember me for!' Burton's prescient hero gushes at *Plan 9*'s imaginary premiere. If it seems inconceivable that Hollywood directors D. W. Griffith, Josef von Sternberg or even Orson Welles (to name only three) would ever be so canonised, it may be that their very presence would reproach the audience. But then *Ed Wood* is really a form of alternative film history. It's the aesthetic equivalent of those contemporary releases – *Forrest Gump*, *Nell*, *I.Q.*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *The Brady Bunch*, the upcoming *The Stupids* – in which simple minds are synonymous with appealing innocence and virtue is a factor of low intelligence.

Deliberately or not, Ed Wood served to deconstruct all manner of Hollywood pretence. *Ed Wood* builds it all back up, shiny and new. In the great American tradition, Ed Wood is born again, born to win. (The panic over *The Bell Curve* notwithstanding, dumbing down is democratic.) Let the lowest common denominator rule. Although the closing credits note that Tor Johnson achieved his 'greatest fame as a bestselling Halloween mask', the movie's greatest irony is the liquidation of irony itself.

J. Hoberman, *Sight and Sound*, May 1995