

BEHIND THE BAT

Tim Burton and his films have taken Hollywood by storm.



BIG BAT . . .
Batman
was Burton's
first unqualified
blockbuster.

The 1980's saw the sudden rise of many young directors—such as Sam Raimi (*Evil Dead*), Alex Cox (*Repo Man*), and David Lynch (*Dune*)—but only one frizzy-haired visionary can claim the throne as king of the fantasy film. Tim Burton rose up from total obscurity in the early 1980's to reign over such mega-successful productions as *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and, of course, the 1989 champion *Batman*, which took in well over \$250 million in the United States alone.

BY: MARK COHEN

Burton, 33, born and raised in Burbank, California, was a loner who spent most of his time watching films and cartoons on television. His greatest influence came from director Roger Corman's film adaptations of classic Edgar Allen Poe stories and especially the star of these horrifying pieces, Vincent Price. The hidden dangers, confinement, and madmen in

MOVIE MAN . . .
Tim Burton is one of
Hollywood's biggest
hit-makers.

Price's films were nothing strange to Burton.

In fact, the twisted film world was normal in comparison to the strange suburban environment he grew up in, where neighbors stayed locked up unless there was a car accident. The 12-year-old Burton used this skewed world view to create his own

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FIRST FLICK . . . *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* scored at the box-office, thanks in large part to Burton's off-beat direction.

saurus, fish swimming by a bedroom window, a trucker ghost with bulging eyes and flapping skin, and a bar where Pee Wee dances to "Tequila" with a biker gang called Satan's Helpers.

Warner Brothers was so impressed with the \$40 million return on their \$7 million investment that they signed Burton to a two-year exclusive contract. The first project up was a strange tale of the after life, whose title referred to a star in the Orion constellation and which translated as "the armpit of the giant." *Beetlejuice* (1988), though, proved to be anything but a stinker and its \$13 million budget, though small, was twice what Burton had previously received.

The film's story centers around Barbara and Adam Maitland (Geena Davis and Alec Baldwin), a ghostly young couple killed in an automobile accident, who attempt to clear their house of tacky new tenants, the Deetzes. Only young Lydia Deetz (Wynona Ryder) is able to see the ephemeral couple and help save their home from the burping, lecherous Beetlejuice (Michael Keaton), a self-proclaimed "bio-

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Bmm horror films in which innocent Christmas trees turned into horrible monsters.

Burton took these ideas and combined them with the monster sketches he had doodled since grade school to win a Disney fellowship to study animation at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Soon after he was hired by the Walt Disney Studios to work as an apprentice animator on such films as *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and *The Black Cauldron* (1985). Burton, though, was not content to draw happy little puppies and forest creatures and was able to convince the studio to let him create his own, darker tale.

Vincent (1982) was the six-minute black and white animated film that he delivered. Using the voice of his hero, Vincent Price, Burton told the tale of a bushy-haired seven-year-old living in an imaginary world of bat-filled corridors who reads Poe and wants to be like Price. Here Burton's later style began to emerge: dark backgrounds, tilted horizons, converging walls, and infinitely upward curving staircases. These were all traits of German Expressionist films of the 1930's, which had influenced such dark American classics as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*.

Buoyed by Vincent Price's praise for *Vincent*, Burton's all-Asian live-action version of *Hansel and Gretel*, and his work on the *Aladdin* episode of cable's *Faerie Tale Theatre*, Disney allowed Burton to film his own 29 minute *Frankenstein* tale, *Frankenweenie*, in 1984. This live-action film,

like *Vincent*, centered around a small boy growing up in suburbia, but this time he reanimates his dog after it is run over by a car.

The neighbors in the film rise up against the boy and his putrid pooch just like the original *Frankenstein*. Disney policies at the time prevented them from releasing films that received other than a G-rating, so *Frankenweenie's* PG-rating kept it out of wide release. (Note: Disney recently released this film on home video.)

Luckily for Burton, though, folks such as Stephen King began showing *Vincent* around to different people in Hollywood. Mark Canton at Warner Brothers saw *Frankenweenie* and knew that Burton would be the perfect choice to direct a new movie he was having trouble with. As soon as he showed Burton's film to the film's lead, Paul Reubens, a.k.a. Pee Wee Herman, the star decided that only Burton would be right for the picture.

With less than a \$7 million budget Burton created *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985). This hilarious tale of a man-child in search of his customized bicycle was reviewed favorably by critics, one of whom even compared its dark undertones to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.

The story was simple enough—it was based on an Italian movie classic from the 1940's, *The Bicycle Thief*—and Pee Wee as a character was enough to attract the audience, but what really grabbed them was Burton's visuals. He created a visual tour of America, strewn with plastic dino-



exorcist."

The script was originally all effects—over three hundred effects shots in all—but the Geffen company called for a smaller budget after its unexpectedly-expensive *Little Shop of Horrors*. For example, each time the Maitlands left the boundaries of their home they were supposed to encounter a threatening new world, such as a place dominated solely by huge rolling gears. This concept, although partially shot, was abandoned in favor of one desert planet inhabited by menacing sandworms straight out of *Dune*.

The make-up and prosthetics effects, in particular, were outstanding and won the film an Academy Award for make-up. Burton wanted the character of Beetlejuice to be both funny and frightening and look as though he had just crawled out of the earth. Keaton's ordinarily schoolboy demeanor was thus transformed into a moldy, festering death's mask. In keeping with the low-budget approach, startling effects such as Alec Baldwin smashing his elongated nose into his face were achieved with latex facial appliances rather than

GHOST STORY . . . *Beetlejuice* proved a huge hit, despite studio worries that the title was off-putting to moviegoers.

post-production special effects. If one looks carefully in the scene where Davis holds Baldwin's severed head, you might spot the slotted board behind him complete with a severed neck piece.

Keaton's flair for black humor meshed well with Burton's concept of suburban horror to produce \$73 million in gross receipts for Warner Brothers. This was a surprise for the company that originally wanted to call the film *House Ghosts*, supposing *Beetlejuice* was too vague. Burton then sarcastically suggested *Scared Sheetless*, which the studio honchos considered until he threatened to jump out a window.

Burton began work on what would become his first personal big-budget project, *Edward Scissorhands*. He got the green light from 20th Century Fox production chief Scott Rudin to write the script and maintain complete creative control for a film which they originally saw as only having an \$8 to 9 million budget.

First up though was the movie that proved to be not only Burton's biggest film to date, but one of the hugest money-makers of all time. The idea for *Batman* had been floating around for years. Producers Peter Gubers and Jon Peters had considered such directors as Ivan Reitman, Joe Dante,

and Steven Spielberg. The concepts for the film had ranged from an art-deco period piece to a big-budget comedy starring the likes of Bill Murray.

Burton, though, envisioned the movie as a dark operatic epic: a decayed urban center teeming with oozing masses wherein a battle would be played out between two equally demented individuals, Batman and the Joker. The director knew that the title character would need to have a complex personality behind his ebony mask, and thus chose Michael Keaton as the hard/vicious yet charming/sexy lead. Burton received much criticism from die-hard Batman fans for his casting, but claimed that Keaton's eyes held something in them.

He was proven correct when *Batman* hit theaters in the summer of '89. Burton, according to screenwriter Sam Hamm, "was really aware of Keaton's range of energy. . . . He didn't want a stiff as Bruce Wayne, because Nicholson would eat him alive." In fact the entire film had a sinister energy seething beneath it, much of which came from the late Oscar-winning production designer Anton Furst, who had worked on *Full Metal Jacket*. The result was what Hamm called a "retrofuturistic" look—what New York City would look like "if history had diverged 50 years ago." Gotham City became a shadowy battlezone of sludge-slicked streets and looming skyscrapers. Furst remarked that Burton was able to take American pop-culture and filter it through his art-school training in order to make a brooding and quirky success.

Despite his earlier success, *Batman* was the film that truly legitimized Burton's work. Burton and the film became the focus of intense media attention, yet the director remained aloof. He claimed that fame and fortune in Hollywood were always secondary to his primary goal—to be true to his filmic sense. . . .

CONTEST!

Fantazone has 5 copies of the movie that started it all—*Frankenweenie*! This Disney short is a stylish retelling of the classic tale inspired by the Universal shockers of the '30s. To be eligible, send this coupon, or a reasonable facsimile to: **Burton Fantazone Contest**, c/o Sterling Magazines, PO Box 827, Lynbrook, NY 11563. Winners will be chosen at random.

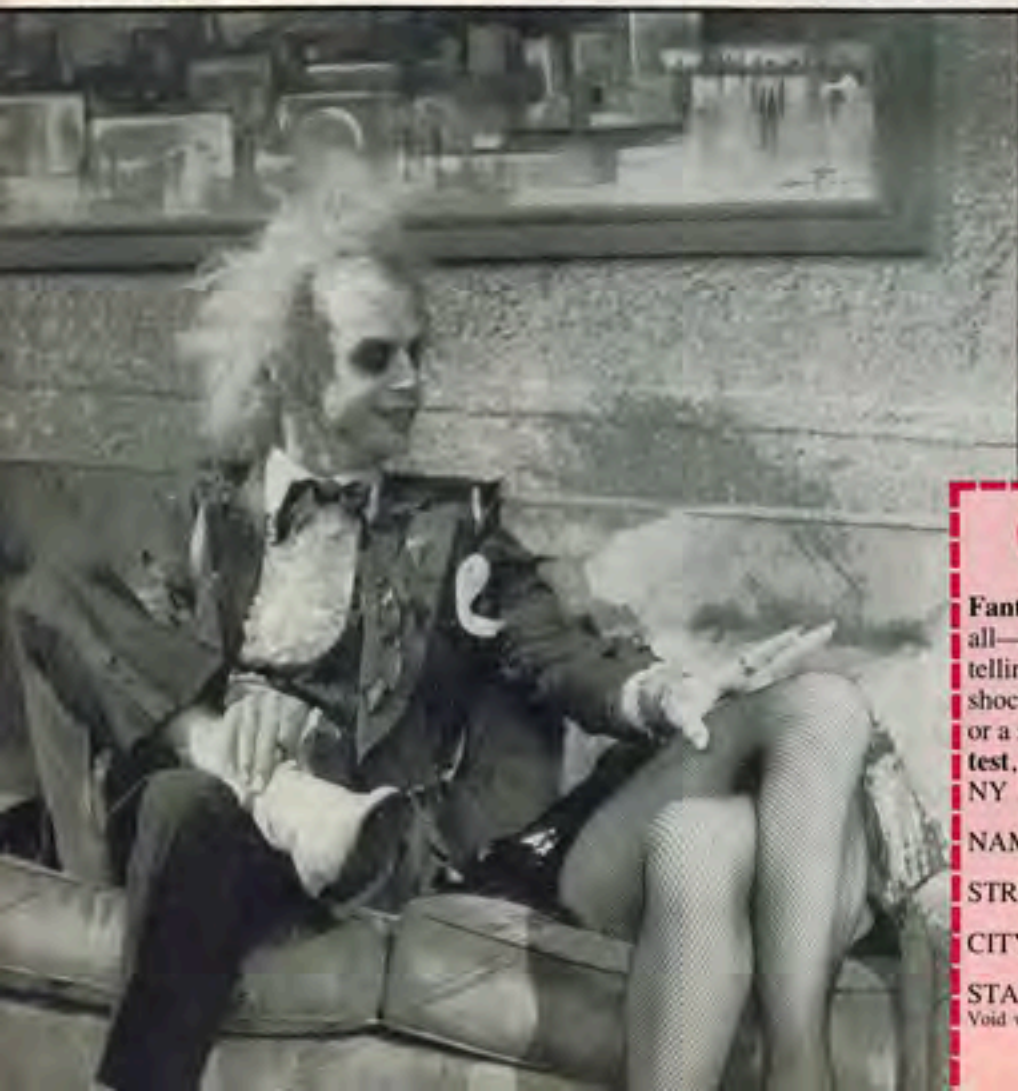
NAME _____ AGE _____

STREET _____

CITY _____

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Void where prohibited. Entries must be received by August 1, 1992.



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In 1990 Burton took this newly-earned respect and completed *Edward Scissorhands*, his personal fairy tale of a Frankenstein creature tormented by modern suburbia. Screenwriter Caroline Thompson claimed the title character was based on her dog, but the story of a lost boy in the suburbs comes straight out of Burton's childhood. Even the choice of teen idol Johnny Depp as the lead with his Burton-esque sullen looks and raven locks of hair reflects the director's influence on the character.

Burton had enjoyed the original Universal Pictures' *Frankenstein* as a child and claimed that the monster was the sane one in a land of hostile villagers. The director, too, had always rooted for the outsiders and the underdogs in his films, such as the boys in *Vincent* and *Frankenweenie* and Lydia in *Beetlejuice*. Therefore, for this, his first truly personal project, he created a character with the ultimate block against human contact—razor-sharp scissors for hands.

In fact, *Edward Scissorhands* came to embody Burton's three main themes seen throughout his films:

Allienation of the outsider: his films concentrate on people living on the outskirts of society—the characters

DOG DAYS ... Burton's short film, *Frankenweenie*, proved too dark for the folks at Disney. It's finally available on video.



mentioned above; Bruce Wayne/Batman as a vigilante living on the fringe of justice; and innocent Edward, whose kindly creator died and left him to an hostile, uncomprehending world.

Love and the search for it: all of these characters try to solve their loneliness through love—a boy's love for his dog in *Frankenweenie*; Lydia adopting the Maitlands as her new parents in *Beetlejuice*; Bruce Wayne using Vicky Vale to replace the lost love of his murdered parents; and Edward, who connects with Kim (Wynona Ryder), who is lonely even though she's part of the in-crowd.

Suburbia/small-town life: Pee Wee, a man/child who travels through the small places in America in search of his bike; the Maitlands and Lydia who just want a peaceful family home life; Batman's small-town Gotham corrupted by murder and crime; and Edward's new home, where pastel houses and polyester clothes hide the petty fear that is turned on him, the outsider.

Edward Scissorhands also exploited Burton's cinematic look of extreme camera angles and wild colors. As early as *Pee Wee*, he had depended on distorted viewpoints in his camerawork, such as the sequence where bicycles fly by Pee Wee's anguished face. In *Edward* this showed up in sequences such as the one where Kim's boyfriend (Anthony Michael Hall) towers over a terrified Edward. The wild camera moves and distorted angles of *Beetlejuice* and the German Expressionist look of Furst's "retrofuturistic" Gotham City are just as indicative of Burton's style as the pastel clothes and homes of *Edward Scissorhands*.

Burton's next plans are somewhat unclear. He lives with his wife Lena Gieseke, a German artist he met during the filming of *Batman*, and is working on ideas for *Beetlejuice 2* and a live-action version of the Japanese comic, *Mai*, the psychic girl. In addition to that, there's the *Family Dog* animated series he had created with Spielberg, which has yet to surface on prime-time television, and his highly successful Saturday morning *Beetlejuice* cartoon.

One thing is certain, though—racing into the 1990's, Tim Burton leads the pack of young directors. And although he may feel their teeth nipping at his heels, his track record proves he has more than enough bones in his bag of tricks to keep the competition at bay and the audience clamoring for more.

HANDY MAN ... *Edward Scissorhands* was Burton's most personal work to date.

