

# TIM BURTON

*With 'Edward Scissorhands,' the young director of 'Beetlejuice' and 'Batman' realizes his most personal vision yet — and establishes himself as Hollywood's brilliant dreamer*

BY MIKAL GILMORE



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE DOUGLAS BROTHERS

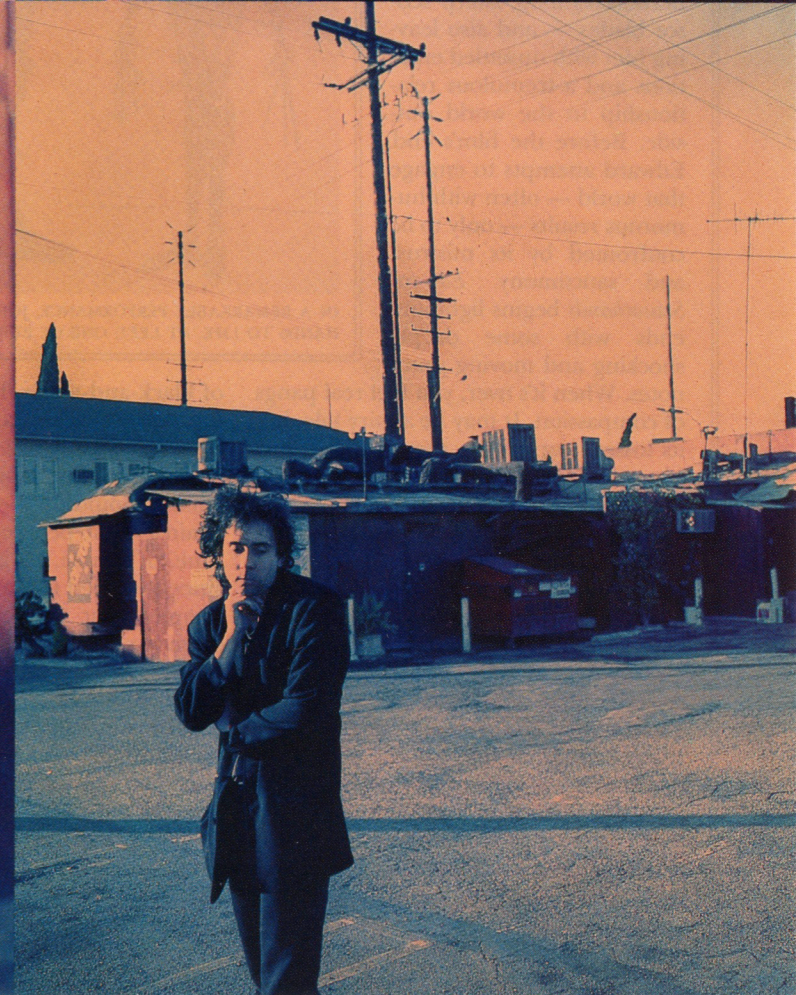
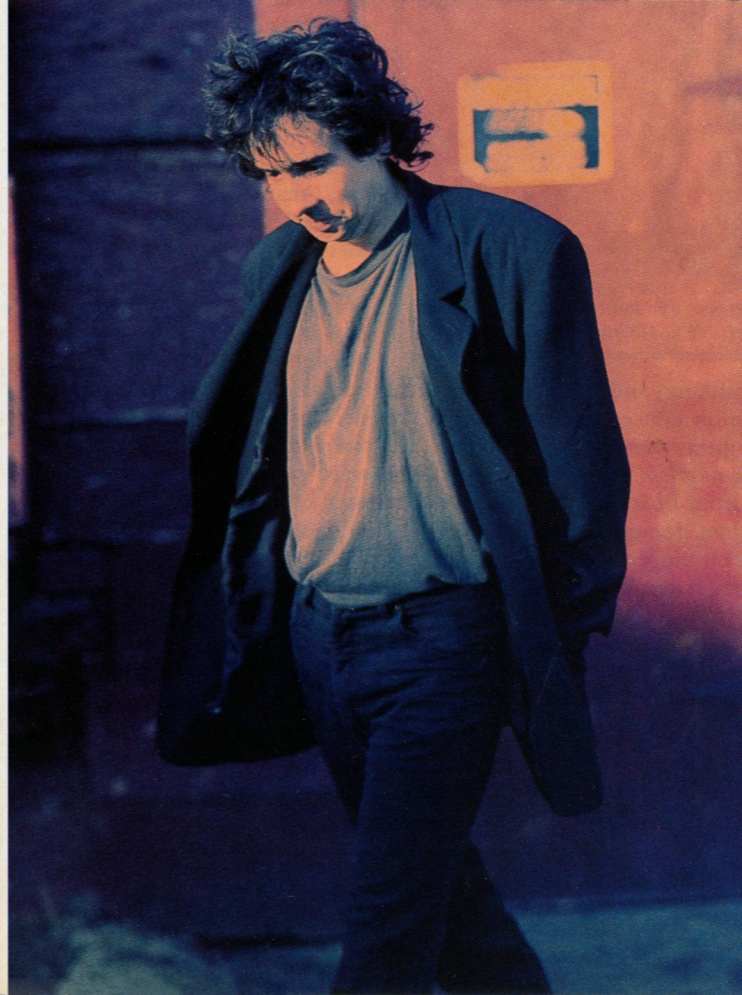
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PON MEETING HIM, YOU'LL FIND little in Tim Burton's manner that would tell you that this sweet goof is actually one of the most sought-after and influential directors in Hollywood. Sitting on a sofa in his sparsely furnished writer's office, located on the back lot at Warner Bros.' Burbank studios, Burton seems partly embarrassed and partly flighty when it comes to the task of discussing the meanings and promises of his startling recent success. He toys distractedly with his mazy brown hair, turning it into a ring-nest within minutes. He also giggles a lot — in fact, sometimes cackles loudly — as he talks.

But behind this genuinely dizzy manner, Burton is a sharp, amazingly intuitional filmmaker who is rapidly making some of the most stylistically rapturous and unexpectedly subversive movies of the day — as well as some of the most popular. His breakthrough success, 1985's *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, took contemporary hip culture's most cloying overgrown child and made both him and his humor genuinely affecting. The film's surprisingly wide appeal won Burton the opportunity to make *Beetlejuice* (1988), a loopy extravaganza about demons and haunted afterlives. But as singular as these successes were, they hardly prepared the film industry — or pop culture — for what was to follow. In 1988, Warner Bros. hired Burton to be the guiding heart and mind behind *Batman* — turning a lucrative property and matchless opportunity for mythmaking over to a still largely

untested prodigy. The risk paid off splendidly. Though *Batman* was hardly an unqualified artistic triumph, the film had vision to spare. It also went on to become the fifth-highest grossing film in history. But most significantly, *Batman* made plain that, behind all the eccentric humor and extravagant style, Tim Burton was making deeply felt films about the fears and hopes of those who are left on the outside of life, love, justice and serenity. Whether they have been artists, heroes or reluctant ghosts, Tim Burton's most memorable characters are dreamers who seek to join or enrich a world that can never fully accept them or return their love; in the end, they remain on the outside looking in, enriching a confused domain that could not thrive half so well without their protection.

It's a theme that seems to have come naturally to Burton. Born 32 years ago in the suburban dreamworld that was once Burbank, California, Burton not only grew up as an outsider in his own family or age group, but, as a Burbank native, he also grew up in the shadows of the film and television industry. His most abiding youthful interests, he says, were in horror films; they not only provided a powerfully dramatic distraction from commonplace life, but were also imaginative fables about how outsiders are too often abused and banished by the noncomprehending world around them. His greatest childhood ambition, he admits, was to play Godzilla. By the time he was 20, Burton had settled for attending the California Institute of the Arts on a Disney fellowship, and later joined Walt Disney Studios as an animator, where he made two rarely seen but much respected shorts, *Vincent* (1982) — an homage to Burton's biggest childhood hero,



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Vincent Price — and *Frankenweenie* (1984). Like *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, *Beetlejuice* and *Batman*, *Vincent and Frankenweenie* were films that seemed to pay respect to the enduring memories and obsessions of childhood — which has earned Burton something of a reputation among critics as an *adult-adolescent* filmmaker. It isn't an image that Burton likes much, but it's one he'll not likely shake off in the near future.

Certainly, Burton's newest film, *Edward Scissorhands*, only deepens that image. Hilarious, heartaching and lovingly rendered, *Edward Scissorhands* is a modern fairy tale about a timid man-child (played with subtle poignancy by Johnny Depp) created by an aging inventor (played by Burton's hero, Vincent Price), who lives in a Gothic castle perched high on a hill overlooking a suburban town that looks suspiciously like Fifties-era Burbank. The inventor dies before he can complete his creation, leaving Edward with an unfinished body — in place of real hands or fingers, he brandishes long, sharp scissor blades — and also leaving him with unsettled emotions and a tremulous relationship to the world outside. Before the film's end, Edward attempts to engage that world — often with humorous results — only to be confronted by its mistrust and sanctimony. *Edward Scissorhands* begins light and ends with some deeply shocking and moving grace

notes. When it's over, you feel real pangs of compassion. It may be a fairy tale, but its losses ring true — they feel like they came from the hard experience of real life. And that can't help but make you wonder a bit more about the nervous and brilliant dreamer who made the film.

**'Edward Scissorhands' seems to have more emotional sweep than any of your other films. Watching it, you get the feeling that it was done out of a deep love for the characters and themes that you're presenting.**

I know what you mean. I mean, I don't really know what anybody else is going to think of it, but it's probably the one thing I've done that I have the best feeling for. I think there's a sadness about it. It isn't so much the sadness of whether Edward gets

the girl in the end, or if he dies or anything like that. It's a *different* kind of sadness — more like the feeling of memory — and I like that this film conveys that.

**So many films of recent years have tended to fairly simplistic portrayals of moral or emotional reality and have become almost fixated with the idea of providing the modern audience with neat and happy resolutions.**

See, I always have trouble with that kind

**Would it be fair to say that 'Edward Scissorhands' is your most personal film?**

All the films I've done mean a lot to me, but yeah, I did have a bit more, uh, *involvement* in this one from the beginning. There are just some themes in it that mean a great deal to me. I mean, I sort of grew up in the suburban, middle-class world that the film is portraying, and that experience holds a lot of memory for me.

**You speak about 'Edward Scissorhands' as a fairy tale.**

**Were fairy tales an active influence in your childhood? Is that where your visual and storytelling sense came from?**

No. Actually, what always left strong impressions on me were films like *Invaders from Mars* or *Carnival of Souls* or *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* — movies that had a weird strength to them. Also, the Roger Corman/Vincent Price horror movies.

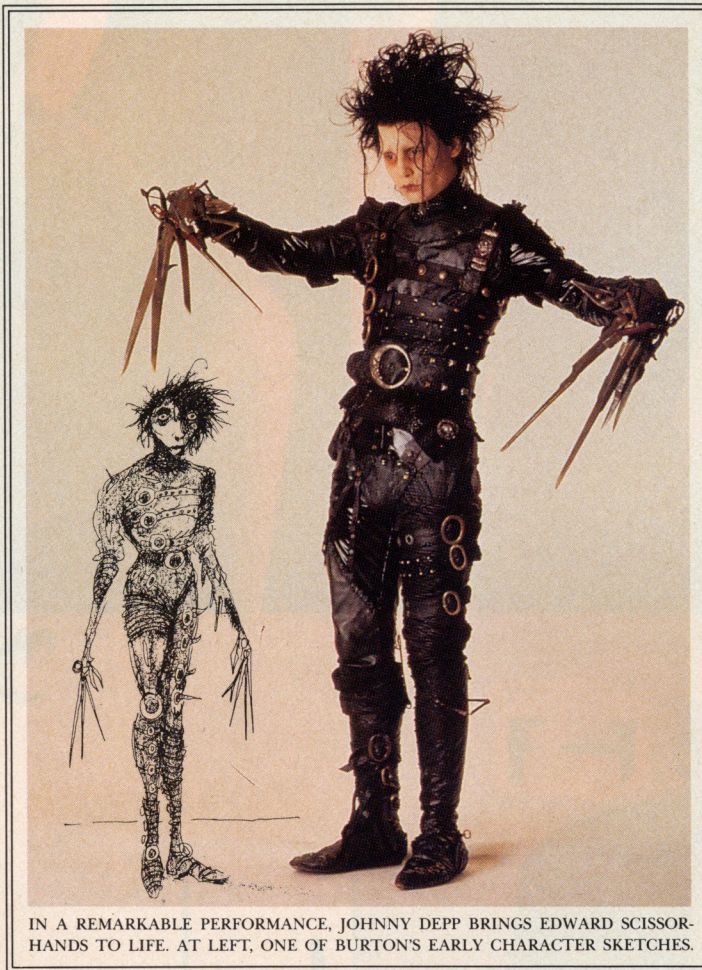
You know, it was a different time. You don't really see stuff like that now. Now there's all this talk about censorship and about how horrible things are. But when I was younger the big talk was *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* — the scene where one of this guy's arms gets ripped off by a monster, and then he's, like, rubbing his *stump* all over the wall. I mean, that was the talk of school: "Did you see that? Oh, man, it was great!" [Laughs] No, they don't make them like that any longer.

**Looking back, do you have a pretty good sense now of what it was about horror movies that appealed to you?**

I think one of the things I was always fascinated by in horror movies was that the monsters all had real heart and warmth. I mean, these were guys under, like, three inches of latex rubber, and yet you still felt something for them. Like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. I mean, you *always* felt for him and never anybody else. He was the one you were really rooting for. Later — I guess around the time of *Halloween* — they introduced the idea of the monster as a soulless, unstoppable killer.

**Some of those Sixties horror films could seem pretty creepy. At the time there was some concern that these films were too death-obsessed for a young audience.**

I think America doesn't integrate death into its culture very well. In other cultures



IN A REMARKABLE PERFORMANCE, JOHNNY DEPP BRINGS EDWARD SCISSORHANDS TO LIFE. AT LEFT, ONE OF BURTON'S EARLY CHARACTER SKETCHES.

of black-and-white thinking, and in this film that sense of ambivalence is even more accentuated. I guess that's my dilemma about making movies: weighing what I should do — what I *like* to do — against what people get. [Laughs] This time, of course, it's a bit more extreme, since I've tried to frame it as a fairy tale. Despite that framework, I inevitably seem to run into the literal-minded people — the people who ask things like, "Well, where *does* Edward get all the ice that he carves into the sculpture towards the end?" When I hear that stuff, I feel like just turning the projector off [laughs] and saying: "What *else* is playing at the Cineplex? I mean, isn't there something else you could go see?"

death is treated as much more a part of life, whereas here it's always, you know, swept under the carpet. So when you're in a culture that doesn't look at death that way or doesn't know how to celebrate it or accept it, then things like the Roger Corman and Vincent Price movies sort of fill the place of that — or at least they did for me. You know, you'd sit there through some tragic horror epic that would end in death by flame, with the house caving in on Roderick Usher, and it was cathartic. I think it gets some of that fear out of your system. In the end, it makes you less afraid if you can integrate the idea of death into life.

*Is that, in part, where the idea of Edward Scissorhands comes from? At the beginning of the film, he seems almost half dead — and certainly his appearance is disturbing to some of the people he encounters in suburbia.*

The image of the character came to me when I was in my late teens or early 20s — you know, at a time when life just seemed much more [laughs] melodramatic. As I say, I liked the idea of a modern fairy tale, and I thought the image of a character with scissor hands was fairly classic. It seemed symbolic of a feeling — the sense of somebody being both creative and destructive. I was drawn to this idea of somebody caught in a dilemma — somebody who can't touch others but feels the need to anyway. I mean, I always have felt very split myself, and I think it can be a fairly universal feeling. Some people go through it more than others, but I certainly have always felt the dilemma of feeling divided over wanting to communicate but not being able to. You want to touch, but you can't, for some reason. Maybe you're just not involved enough, or maybe you're just at odds with yourself. To me, Edward is just an externalization of that idea and a visual representation of those kinds of themes.

*I think Johnny Depp's performance as Edward is remarkable. And it wasn't until days after I'd seen the film that I realized he had barely spoken any words.*

Yeah, he's great in it. I really admire his performance very much. He just risked being . . . simple, you know? I think part of

the reason Johnny responded to Edward so much is that he really felt . . . I mean, he is that character probably more than I am in the sense that he's a guy who has got this image and carries around all this baggage, and he is nothing like that image. I think it's a very mature and risky performance.

*I agree, although I can see how some people may read it as a nonperformance.*

You know what? All you have to do is look

a certain kind of mental freedom.

Anyway, it's *not* about remaining a child, because I never thought I was a child when I *was* a child, you know? I mean, I *hated* movies with children in them, and I *still* will not go see any film with babies in it. I can't stand that stuff. But there is a certain thing which I do, a perspective I'm interested in, and it's that idea of staying in touch with freedom, of

allowing yourself to view the world nonrigidly. But I'm not childlike. I *enjoy* being an adult. I enjoy all the things that come with it, like having sex and all those other things that are wonderful to enjoy as an adult. When people say it's about remaining a child, it sounds like some form of mental retardation, which is to me the exact opposite of keeping that kind of freedom.

*Do you think of your films as being aimed toward children?*

Not at all. I mean, how would you even do that? First of all, there are too many horrible images in my films for them to be made simply for children. Also, kids have their *own* sensibility. Adults can go on all they like about what's right and wrong for children, but kids can blow everybody out of the water in terms of what they like. You simply can't *predict* what they want to see. These adults who go on about stuff being too offensive for children . . . That sort of attitude, designed to keep kids away from everything, ends up creating a race of ax murderers or something.

Adults forget what fairy tales are *really* about. Why don't they just pick up a couple of fairy tales and read them and see how "wonderful" and "light-hearted" they are? Some of them are *horrifyingly horrible* [laughs]. They're bizarre and extreme. Some of them are also corny on the surface. But underneath, on the subconscious level where they really operate, these stories are incredibly horrific. More horrific than most horror movies. At the same time, they're also a form of emotional release, and that's why people like these stories. Look, the world has a lot of horror in it, and we all have ways of dealing with that horror. Take something as extreme and cartoonish as a "batman." That's what that image is: It's a symbol for that kind of stuff, it's a way of dealing with



MICHAEL KEATON, TORN BETWEEN TWO LOVERS (ABOVE) IN 'BEETLEJUICE,' ALSO STEERED THE BATMOBILE THROUGH BURTON'S HAUNTED 'BATMAN' CITYSCAPE.

at Edward and if you don't get a feeling from him, well then you shouldn't, you're not gonna . . . "F--- you!," basically. "Go see *Three Men and a Little Lady!*" [Laughs] *Like some of the other characters in your films, Edward seems almost childlike. In fact, some critics have come to regard you as a director who is haunted by the unfinished business of childhood. Is that what your films are about? Are they an attempt to revivify childhood's sensibility?*

[Angrily] You know, I hate all that bulls--- — all that stuff about being "childlike." I mean, I don't have children, I don't hang out with them, and I'm *not* obsessed with childhood. I think it has more to do with trying to stay in touch with certain things that get drummed out of us in our culture,

those realities. But it's not real life; it's a folktale. It's a myth of our life.

**Is that the appeal the character held for you? Is that what got you involved in 'Batman'?**

In part, because I always had real passion for the image of that character. But Warner Brothers had the project around for a long time, you know — like 10 years. I had a deal with them, and they liked me and the work I was doing. In a way, it was just as simple as me having a background in animation, and the studio having a cartoon character to develop for film.

**Part of what brought the film so much attention was the controversy created in the comic-book world when you cast Michael Keaton as Batman. Did you anticipate such a fierce reaction from those quarters?**

No. Well, yeah, I had seen inklings of it before. When I was still a student, I remember going to a comic-book convention and they were doing a slide presentation before the Superman movie came out. And I remember somebody got up and screamed in this ballroom, "Superman would *not* change on the ledge of a building, and I, for one, am going to *boycott* this movie," and he went on screaming and yelling and he got this hard-core round of applause. And I just thought, "Whoa, this is a world not to be

tampered with." [Laughs] So, yeah, I certainly knew the potential. But ultimately I felt confident, because I knew that no matter what, whether the movie worked or not, we weren't going to do what their fear was, which was to make it campy.

**Do you need to identify with a character in order to bring him alive onscreen?**

Yeah, I do. I identify strongly with the characters. Not just one, but all of them.

**In what ways did you identify with Bruce Wayne/Batman?**

I think I have that same split feeling of wanting to be in hiding and *not* be in hiding. Also, I identify with that nonverbal sadness that the Batman has. I just think things are kind of sad a lot of the time, though not in a sad way. I guess that sounds kind of stupid, doesn't it? It's just that there's something about things that is ultimately kind of sad. But I actually think it's kind of funny. And when I look at Bruce Wayne, I find him endearing and sad, and I like it. Sadness gives life a little bit of weight and texture.

**And what did you identify with in the Joker?**

He's like, you know, freedom. He's somebody who's been turned into a clown and is able to do whatever he wants. There's a wonderful freedom to that — not having to worry about what anybody thinks of you. It's complete freedom. It's wonderful.

**With 'Batman,' you made one of the highest-grossing films in history. 'Edward Scissorhands' indicates that, despite that success, you're still willing to take some risks with the mood and theme of your films. Was it 'Batman' that secured you that freedom?**

Obviously, that kind of success helps. But you know, it's all kind of a bizarre perception, because in some ways *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* brought me the *most* freedom. I mean, the movie didn't cost a lot, there wasn't a lot of pressure on me, and there wasn't a lot of focus on the film.

But I have a very internal thing, which is that I will only make something that I want to make. I mean, I would never be a director who, if I had a string of flops, would do a movie just because I needed the job. I just wouldn't do it. I couldn't fake it that well. But you know, the bottom line is always, "How does the film do at the box office?" You can't change that. You can't. People may say, "Oh, look at all this freedom you've won. Now you can do something different." But if the next movie or two *doesn't* make money, well . . . In the end, I have only one goal, and that's to do what I want. *Whatever* form that might take. ■

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