

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH TIM BURTON

Tim Burton may be Hollywood's most childlike grown-up—or its most grown-up child. Either way, Burton's fanciful movies express both the bright and dark sides of his boundless imagination. His heroes—including Pee-wee Herman, Edward Scissorhands, and Ed Wood—are sweetly eccentric outsiders who live in their own made-up worlds. *Big Fish* brings to life the tall tales of an aging Alabama salesman played by Albert Finney. The film blends an intimate family drama with a gently surreal carnival story. Burton spoke at the Museum just before the film's release, and just over a month after the birth of his son.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Big Fish*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 19, 2003):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Tim Burton.
(Applause) Congratulations. It's a great, great movie. And we just finished a retrospective here of your career; a lot of people saw all your movies. So this applause is for an amazing body of work.

BURTON: What's the fence back there for?
(Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Some of your fans were a little worried about...

BURTON: Caged animals.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. (Laughter) So, actually, what I want to ask you about first is...

BURTON: We'll feed the back row later. (Laughter)
Don't throw any peanuts or food.

SCHWARTZ: We have your producers up there, for one thing, so...

BURTON: Where's the key? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: The film is based on a very wonderful short book (*Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*) by Daniel Wallace. And it's a book that's almost like a sketchbook in style. It's got sort of episodes, short chapters, and almost has a feeling of one of your sketchbooks. If you were doing a completely straight adaptation, you would've ended with the

big fish in the river, when the son goes to the river. Then the funeral—the sort of last section—I'm assuming, was your invention.

BURTON: Yeah. I read the script before I read the book. And I was glad I did, actually, because I think it was a case of where John [August], the writer, actually helped kind of focus the material. I think, in some ways, it's good to not have a novel that's extremely well-known—this big, thick, heavy thing everybody loves—just because I think it's easier to adapt into a film, somehow, a little less daunting. So I thought that John took what Daniel was—seemed like—trying to do, and just helped focus it, so I thought it was...

SCHWARTZ: This is John August, who wrote *Go* and *Charlie's Angels*, right? And [*Charlie's Angels*:] *Full Throttle*, I believe. (Laughter) Okay.

BURTON: That's right. (Laughter) Hard to believe, isn't it? Multitalented.

SCHWARTZ: Versatile.

BURTON: Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. But you read the script before the book.

BURTON: Yeah. And, like I said, I think that he did—there was a freedom to what he did that just seemed to be not under the heaviness of, like I said, a classic, well-known novel.

SCHWARTZ: The film sort of begs the question of your... It's such a personal film and such a deeply emotional film. I usually don't ask personal questions, but I'm sure this must have had some resonance, in terms of your relationship with your father, and you just...

BURTON: Yeah, a little bit. But it had, actually, more to do with *Son of Godzilla*. (Laughter) That was such a touching father-and-son movie that I never forgot, as a child. And... No, but yeah, I think it's a thing where everybody loses a parent, and no matter what your relationship is, it's obviously cause for reflect[ion]. And you know, I found that even though I wasn't really close to him, that I still had lots of emotions that were all over the place. And I thought that this film, when I read it, was a good way of visually—and since it's a film—exploring those sort of feelings, which are complicated and hard to actually put into words.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. Now, the film just has a mythological feeling. It has the feeling of a sort of classic story, a classic fable. And I'm just wondering if you could talk about your approach to the style and look. This film has such a great physical look to it.

BURTON: Well, I grew up loving movies. So I realized that I love the kind of mythology, folk-tale kind of—because that's basically what movies are, as well. From, like, *Jason and the Argonauts*, where you've got sort of classic, sort of mythological representations of things, which... You know, the magical town or city—all [of] these sort of images. So that... They are just sort of variations on all the kind of classic imagery that way, and symbols.

SCHWARTZ: One thing I love about the movie is the way you used the real locations. I know, with *Sleepy Hollow*, that was a case where you found you had to wind up building most of what we saw. But I think here, the landscape of Alabama, the rivers in Alabama, seemed to play key roles.

BURTON: Yeah, you know, it's nice to go to a place and just soak up the vibe of the place. I mean, you do... Just talking to people and just the light. You know, you do get a flavor of something that you can't get if you're shooting wherever, on a soundstage or in Los Angeles or... So, it was good

to go down there and soak up the vibe and the chicken fat and all the other stuff. Yeah. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And apparently, you were based in a very sort of sleepy, small town?

BURTON: Yeah. I think I was actually staying, it seemed like, where they shot [*The Blair Witch Project*, somehow. (Laughter) I don't know. The train looked awfully similar to me. So... Yeah. But you're there working, so it's not like you're there to sightsee. You see it in a more under-the-surface way, which is always more interesting.

SCHWARTZ: How involved were you in the production design area? The house...

BURTON: I showed up a few days during the production of the film.

SCHWARTZ: The—Edward's house—the Bloom house was beautiful, and that was built; that's not something you found.

BURTON: No, that was—most of that was there.

SCHWARTZ: Really?

BURTON: We just added a little bit to it. Yeah, that was the thing. It was a film where we [had a] fairly quick schedule, so we were shooting very quickly, so we had to move sometimes three locations in a day. You know, it's like, "Ewan [McGregor], put on your baseball outfit and put on..." You'd do four sports in one day. So we were moving around a lot. And so, we didn't have an opportunity to over-build a lot of stuff. We built Spector and all, but... You know, it was important, though, to use as much live... We didn't do even a half a—we didn't even do a day of blue screen. We did everything—it just sort of needed a handmade kind of quality, because of the nature of it and the stories. We tried to keep the effects as human as possible, and doing them as live, and some in camera. We did do a little bit of stuff, but always kept it as real as we could.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. And could you talk about your work with actors? Sometimes the visual style is what's talked about most with your films, but this is—there are so many great performances in the movie.

BURTON: Well, we were very lucky to get good actors. And it was an interesting case, because we couldn't think of just—in the case of, like, Albert [Finney] and Ewan and Alison [Lohman] and Jessica [Lange], you couldn't quite think of just one person; you had to think in tandem. And so that was interesting and difficult. But we were very... Again, I just felt lucky every day, because they were really good. And we shot all out of sequence, so it was not like they—it was a real puzzle that way, so... You know, I like working with actors that don't really care how they look. (Laughter) There's an openness to them and they're kind of more, I find, adventurous and kind of open to trying things.

SCHWARTZ: Some of the characters, or a lot of the characters in your films, are much more introverted. This [Ed Bloom] is a real great extroverted character. I'm just wondering what it was sort of like working with this character of Edward Bloom.

BURTON: Well, it was fun. That's why Albert's so great, because he... You know, you can't... Someone either has that kind of thing in their personality... And so, it's just, when you're around somebody like that, you kind of get the joy of that. You also get, from the son's point of view, the sort of positive and negative of the whole thing. So it was an interesting challenge to get the sort of positive/negative between those two characters and...

SCHWARTZ: And was Albert Finney cast first? Because...

BURTON: Well, we had to kind of do it together. That's the thing. It's like, we couldn't go out and go, "Albert" and then not think of Ewan. I remember seeing a picture of Albert Finney in *Tom Jones*. And it just struck us that it was very much like Ewan. And, you know... And then, we pulled out—a couple years earlier, there was one of those *People* magazine "Separated at Birth" type of things. (Laughter) And so we said, "See? *People* magazine thinks it's a good idea, too, so..." (Laughter) Sanctioned by *Peo*—Casting. Yes, thank you, *People* magazine. That'll be the only thanks. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: The dialect—there's a real nice quality to it. It feels sort of old-fashioned. It feels like Southern dialect, but it's not clichéd.

BURTON: Yeah. Well, that's the thing. I realized after deciding to do the film, I—quietly, to myself, one weekend shortly thereafter, I said to myself, "You know, I hate Southern movies." (They laugh) I really, I don't—there's a certain thing about it that I just don't like. So, I didn't tell anybody that. (Laughter) But it was important, though, to kind of get... I remember liking *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and feeling like, Well, there is a lyrical aspect to the language. And so we tried to go for what was sort of a more poetic cadence, and a little bit less of the "Come on, tell you a story," sitting-on-the-porch-with-a-mint-julep type of thing that I always equate to it. So they were all very good at trying to capture that other type of slightly more lyrical, poetic cadence to it.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. And how did this tie in with the way you shot the film? If you could talk a bit, just about whether... There's a poetic quality, I think, to the compositions, and there's a simplicity and beauty to the way the film looks. If you could talk a bit about that.

BURTON: Yeah, just... I don't storyboard it any, as much... I mean, we do storyboard, but I don't pay attention quite as much, just because it's—as you work with actors, you realize it's just, that's the fun. And so, you get enough of an idea, and then you kind of... Especially when you're fighting with the weather and locations a lot, since we were outside a lot. So, you try to keep open to things. But that's the fun part of it, is the shooting of it. It's the hardest part, but it's the most interesting. And just trying to find a balance from the stories to the reality—and again, that—so it didn't really turn on and off like a faucet, but it was a bit more stream-of-conscious[ness]. So, you know, we were always trying to be aware of that throughout.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. And what kind of production was it, in terms of difficulty? It has... There's sort of a, again, a sort of intimacy and simplicity to the story, but you have lots of animals, and lots of sets, and what...

BURTON: Lots of animals. (Laughter) That's always... Yeah, yeah. Well, and we also [were] in, like, a tornado zone. And so, the scene where we were shooting Danny naked in the forest—the next day [it] was three feet underwater, and we had a whole circus that was—we shot. So, we were quite

lucky. But the tent almost blew away in a tornado, and... (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. Is there any film that you've made that you would've done differently?

BURTON: You mean, like, not-do-it kind of a thing? (Laughter) Sure. I don't look at things that way. I think that I treat them all... Because you put a lot into it, even whether it's good or a piece of crap—I still put as much into it, anyway, so... You know, I think somebody once said, they [a director's films] are kind of like your children. They may have flaws, but you still kind of are close to them. Yeah. I always look at them more like little time capsules and things. If it's got rough edges and all, which they do, that's okay to me. You know?

SCHWARTZ: And what was the decision process like to make this? I mean, you'd done two very huge productions [*Sleepy Hollow*, *Planet of the Apes*] before this, and...

BURTON: Well, this was nice because, again, it had a script before there was a release date, which was nice. (Laughter) So that was—chalk up one for that. (Laughter) And it was a script that everybody liked, which—again, whoa. (Laughter) When does that—I can't remember that one happening. So it was, it was a very... It's amazing, all the other stuff you go through when you don't have those very—what should be number-one elements, right off the bat. So, it was good for that reason, too; it was...

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) (They laugh) Oh, will *Batman* come to Broadway?

BURTON: I think it's going to go straight to an ice show. (Laughter) No. I don't know what they... I hung up my tap shoes many years ago. I don't know. You know. I have no—no plans for that one.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Will *Batman* be released on DVD [Inaudible]?

BURTON: Yeah, well, I... That's sort of a Warner Bros. thing. Yeah. But I would imagine, now that they finally realize that, well, DVDs are kind of here for a while. Yeah, so I think they might. I think they were kind of holding out for a while to see how that

was all going to go, but yeah. I'd like to do that sometime.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. Karl the Giant. Could you tell us about him?

BURTON: I believe he [actor Matthew McGrory] was a bouncer in a Philadelphia nightclub, who—I think he trained as a lawyer. He's a really—he's an amazing guy. When I met him, I just—something about him and his voice, and just what he goes through all day. You know, he understood the part, so... (Laughter) But he just had a quality to him that I thought was really nice, and... He's afraid of heights, which is kind of ironic. (Laughter) No, you know, but really, he's an amazing, good guy.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. If you can talk about Danny Elfman's score for this film.

BURTON: Yeah, I'll tell you, with Danny, it's like, try to be a character. And it was... It is like a character. So it's somebody that needs to—when you're dealing with a tone [that's] all over the place—finding the right, integrating moments. You know, it's... I always enjoy working with him, because it's always... This was, I felt, something slightly different and new for him. And so, I thought he did a beautiful, beautiful job on it. You know?

SCHWARTZ: Is there some sense...? The film ends with this beautiful passage about stories living on forever, and, obviously, that's what filmmakers do, and hope to make movies that will last. And was there a sense when you were making this that this was going to be a movie that...?

BURTON: No, you never think... No. You just... No, when you're making it, there's the joy of making it and there are so many other things. Like I said—what I was saying earlier about a release date before a film is out, before there's a script. It's like, all that does—it cuts out the process of doing, which is, I think... You know, when you're there on a set, and you're—the weather and the actors; it's an immediate moment, which is so, I think, beautiful and important. And you never want that to get lost by thinking about what's going to happen or where it's going to go or that—you know. It's just the joy of doing it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. What will be on the DVD for this?

BURTON: Yeah, I'm not a really big fan, so much. The only time I think I've ever—the only time I'm doing it [adding bonus scenes on the DVD] when I'm not putting them in the movie is for the *Ed Wood* DVD, where I'm going to put in some separate scenes, just because I thought they were interesting on their own, not integrated into the film. But I don't know. You also like a little bit of time. I think, [when] you just finish something, you like a little bit of distance to take it all in and soak it in. So, hopefully, there'll be a little bit of time to assess and analyze what was taken out. Not a whole lot, because I don't... You shoot... Try to edit as we go, because, it's like, schedules are so quick, it's... The idea of shooting something and having a three-and-a-half-hour film, looking at it, like, the week after you finish it, [and then you] have to cut an hour out—it's just too painful of an idea, to have it that quick. So, try to do it as you go along, and not shoot too much extra stuff.

Well, I got the—the script was sent to me by the producers and the studio, and so it was, like I said, it was nice to get something that people liked and they wanted to do, and not have to go through... Usually, you expect six months, a year, going through something to either get the script or get them to want to do it and all that, so... Pretty clean that way.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Rumors about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, in terms of...

BURTON: Well, we've got a tie-in with McDonald's, so I guess it's real. That's all we need. (Laughter) The mark of reality. No, again, we'll try to get a script, and... I try now... I've done enough where I've said yes to things where—because I get all into the drama of: Will we get a script? Will we—[we] won't before it comes out? I don't know. Let's... (Laughter) Okay. So, I just feel like I got caught up in that. But it's a little... So, I'm trying to watch that one in the future. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Your films are very imaginative and sort of fearless. And just—how did this evolve? Because from the very

beginning, your films really do seem to spring some [Inaudible]

BURTON: Well, I guess I feel lucky to... Working at Disney, where it was probably the worst time in the company's history, which allowed me the opportunity to do a couple of short films [*Vincent*, *Frankenweenie*], which, if I had been there at the time when they were successful, I probably wouldn't have gotten the opportunity... So, it's always been a weird dynamic, where I've been able—they kind of let me do whatever, so I've had the luck of being able to do what I wanted to do. And so, once you get that, you don't want to go back. (Laughs) You know? But I don't think about it any other way, really.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of... You've talked about your childhood, growing up in Burbank, as being sort of, in a funny way, almost similar to this—Edward—like, growing up in a small town and wanting to get out of it. Do you relate to—your childhood to this film?

BURTON: Well, yeah. Really, everything. I mean, I think you have to relate everything to what you do, just because that's your only reference of how to get something done and achieve something, so... Yeah, you know, you try to—I actually identify with every character on some level, even if it's a dog or a woman or any kind of character. Or a bird or an ape or... You know, whatever. It's like, you try to just relate to it.

I guess, especially growing up in the Hollywood sort of system, you get labeled. And I've always resi—I don't like to think too much about myself, really. I like to think about the material and think about what you're trying to do, but I don't try to think about myself so much, because it's like, I've been spending my whole life trying *not* to think about myself, so... (Laughs) The point is to just keep fresh and not make yourself into a thing, you know? It's like, you just remain a human being and try to do the things that interest you and see what happens and all.

SCHWARTZ: This is a sort of jump, but you became a father a little over a month ago. So, how has that changed you?

BURTON: It's... You know, people—you grew up and people call you weird or other people weird, and it's actually the weirdest thing that you could ever do, this thing. (Laughter) And we're all a result of it, you know? So... It's amazing. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. Do you have a desire to make a straight-up horror movie?

BURTON: I don't know if I could be really, ultimately, really scary in that way, because it's a real thing, to do that. And I think I have such a love of them, and they actually made me so happy that I never treated them as horror. I treated them as—I guess they're like my *Rocky* kind of movies? The life-affirming... (Laughter) You know (hums the *Rocky* theme): *Da-da-da-da-da-da*. Frankenstein up on the steps, blaring music... (Laughter) But, I mean, I do think that... I maybe come at it from a different way. So, I don't know if I... I mean, I do love it, so I would always think about it or entertain it, but... I would like to try it some time. I just don't know if I could be quite scary enough.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. Do you like working with actors that you've worked with before or new people?

BURTON: Well, both. What's fun about working with somebody like—who—like Johnny [Depp], I've worked with three [times]... It's fun because you get to see them do different things each time. And that's a real energy that's unique to that specific kind of thing. When you work with people that like playing characters and doing it, it's just—it's a lot of fun to see them change. Then it's fun to mix it up, because you meet somebody new, and you get a whole new energy with that. And so, they both can be... I've felt, for the most part, just very lucky. Because you do... It's—being around creative people; it sounds stupid, but it's like that energy rubs off on everybody, and it's just a lot of fun.

SCHWARTZ: Talk a bit about working with Ewan McGregor, because that's such a bold performance. And it has to be perfect to work, right?

BURTON: Yeah, no, he—I think everybody had a particularly tricky job. And his was to play a sort of romanticized version of a character; so to do that,

while still keeping it a human being, was really, really good. And every... It was kind of a bad joke. It's like, Okay, wrestle with the wolf today. You know? (Laughter) There's a whole chasing of a pig [scene], which is cut out. There were more animals for the—yeah. Yeah, that's a good DVD, yeah. (Laughter) All right. More animals will be... (Laughter) No, but, I mean, he's just got such an openness. And to do that kind of open-hearted stuff that he does in the film—which is very difficult, I would find. To be that sort of open-hearted and to get the idealistic thing—to get the comedy, but also to keep it a human being. I mean, yeah. Very, very good. Really good.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. How do you choose the cinematographer [Philippe Rousselot] and convey your vision to the cinematographer?

BURTON: Well... Last couple times, I go with people that don't speak English very well. (Laughter) So that suits me just fine, because I don't... They'll say the same of me. So... It was good.. That's a very... It's like, there are a few people that you have to like, because they're around you all the time, and it's part of your whole thing. So, it's nice to like the DP and the art director, and all. But no, you go with somebody that—you look a little bit at other people's work, but not too much. It's a little bit about how you relate to them, and... Philippe was good, because he would like to work quick, and we needed to. And it keeps an energy going. He got the feeling of trying to sort of stream-of-conscious[ness] up, so it doesn't look... Like I said earlier, about the stories and the reality stuff. So, you know, it's just... It's like making up a relationship quickly. It's like that. [It's] got to be kind of that deep.

SCHWARTZ: Now, we have an exhibition of your artwork upstairs, and it's been said that you use your sketches and your drawings to convey ideas to your cinematographers.

BURTON: Yeah. It's good that way, because it's like... I also like to [work with] people that will look at something like that and not be literal about it, because they're obviously not literal sketches that can be translated literally. So, somebody who gets it on that sort of emotional level, that's the kind of person that I like that way.

SCHWARTZ: I was wondering—this is another jump. But *The Wizard of Oz*... I just kept feeling like there was a—like this film echoed *The Wizard of Oz* to me, and I wonder if that was conscious at all, or not.

BURTON: No, I don't—no, it wasn't conscious. I mean, it's such... You know, those kind of movies... But you would also say any movie has an impact. That's one that has an impact, of course. All these movies. But no, we never, like, consciously said anything about that.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Somebody was going to ask this. This is going to be your third Edward film [*Edward Scissorhands*, *Ed Wood*].

BURTON: Yeah, I don't... You know, I didn't plan this. The other two, I planned. This one was the name, and so I...

Yeah, no, I know. (Laughter) No, I know. It is true. I will think enough about myself to go ask that question. Like, what's it... Because I don't really like the name Ed, actually. (Laughter) It's like [how] I always have circus images, but I always hated the circus. (Laughter) You know? It's like, you kind of... I don't know. So it's like... The Ed one, I don't get. I'll let you know in a couple of years, after some more therapy. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) How long did it take to shoot?

BURTON: About 65, 60 days, something like that. Sixty... Something like that. Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) [Inaudible] Did these pairs of actors work together to...?

BURTON: But you know what? It was interesting, because I thought that... They spent a little bit of time with each other. But it was interesting, because the challenge on it was... Ewan wasn't playing exactly... He was playing it, but he was also playing it as a sort of romanticized version. So again, like I said, we had this weird schedule, where Albert shot and Ewan didn't. [They] only shot a couple of days [together] in there. So, it was more of a case of them spending a little bit of time. But it was not like this overkill of them going, "Well, let's both do this or that." Because—and I felt they're both also kind of intuitive actors. And I think they like to approach things, I sense, on a certain level. So, there was some time spent, a little bit of that connection. Then I sort of let them go, because it felt... And I understand it. It's like a certain type of... You get enough rehearsal in, but not too much, because it's the joy of being there on the set and doing it—was where they really want to go.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Well, again, I want to invite everybody to go upstairs and see the exhibition of Tim Burton drawings. And congratulations again, and thanks for being here.

BURTON: Thanks for coming. Thank you. (Applause)

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