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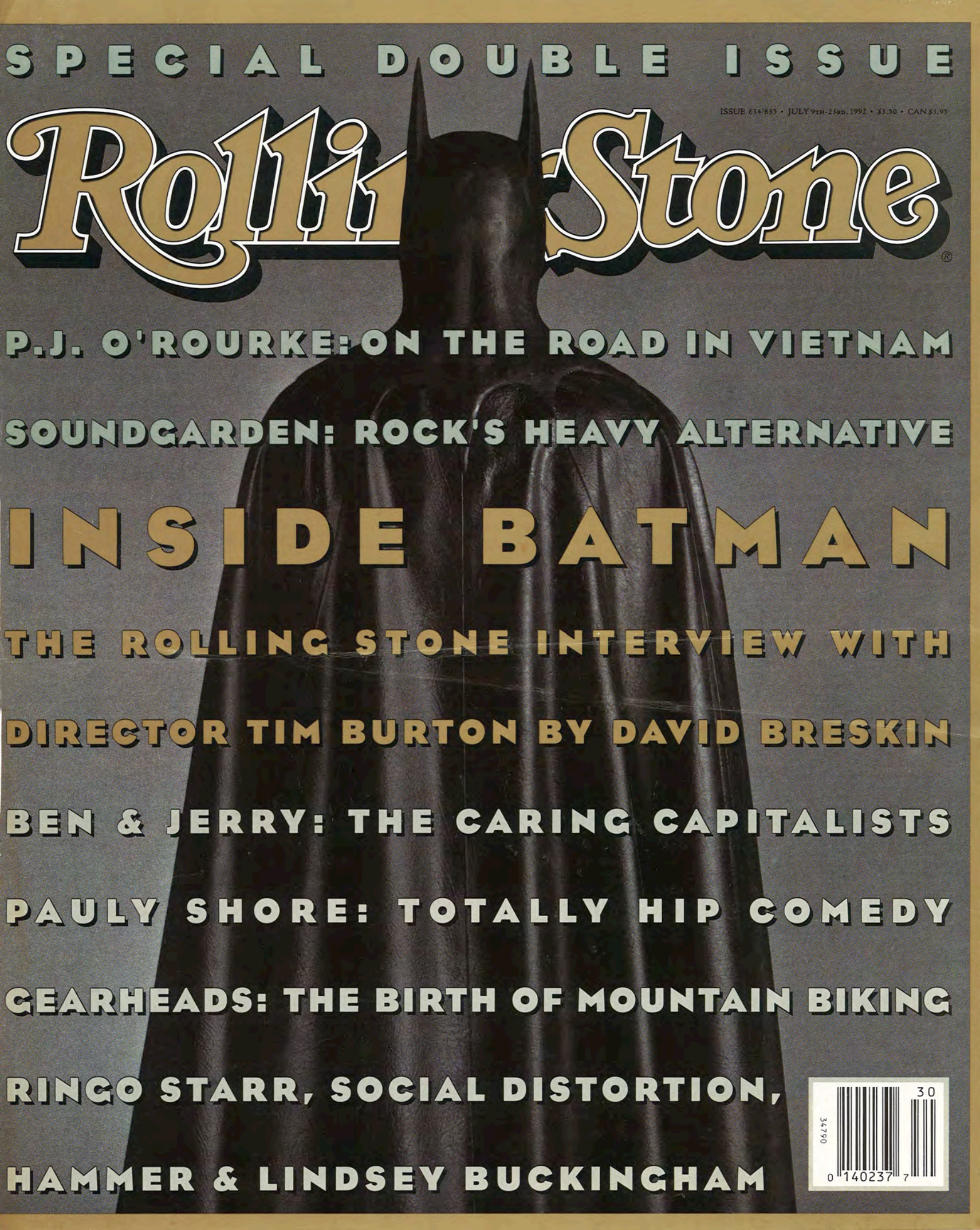

P.J. O'ROURKE: ON THE ROAD IN VIETNAM

SOUNDGARDEN: ROCK'S HEAVY ALTERNATIVE

INSIDE BATMAN

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR TIM BURTON BY DAVID BRESKIN

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GEARHEADS: THE BIRTH OF MOUNTAIN BIKING

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TIM BURTON THE DAVID BRESKIN

Tim Burton, like his work, is a wonderful mess. He's falling-apart funny and completely alienated; he's morbid and ironic; he's the serious artist as goofball flake. A self-described "happy-go-lucky manic-depressive," he's like a bright flashlight in a very dark place: the grim factory of Hollywood. Burton is a true visionary. Our culture usually doesn't use that word for people whose visions look like cartoons and go down like dessert, but Burton is spitting in the eye of our culture while

INTERVIEW

BY

TIM BURTON

ROLLING STONE

simultaneously celebrating it. That's the fabulous, odd thing about his work: He's angrily spitting something sweet. ¶ Burton was born in Burbank, California, in 1958 and has lived near Hollywood all his life. He has a brother and two parents from whom he's always felt distant. Growing up, he did feel close to Edgar Allan Poe and Vincent Price and many monsters from many bad movies. He also took sanctuary in the confines of his own imagination; for him, drawing was a

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALBERT WATSON

GROOMING BY ENZO LAERA FOR ALDO COPPOLA

MY IMPULSE IS TO HIDE IN A CAVE; IT'S BATMAN."

refuge. Burton's first vehicle of public acceptance was a garbage truck – in ninth grade, he won first prize in a contest to design an anti-littering poster, and his work graced the refuse trucks of Burbank for a year. Wanting a career for which he wouldn't need too much schooling, he studied animation at the California Institute of the Arts. Upon graduation, he went to work for Disney.

Unhappy on the animation assembly line, Burton eventually won some measure of freedom within the Disney kingdom, directing his first animated short, *Vincent*, in 1982. With narration by Vincent Price, this five-minute black-and-white piece of stop-frame animation, heavy on German-expressionist sensibility, chronicled the miserable life and liberating fantasies of a seemingly normal but deeply disturbed suburban boy, quite like young Tim. Then in 1984 came *Frankenweenie*, a half-hour exploration of the Frankenstein myth come to the suburbs. This lovable little mutt of a movie, which announced the outsider-in-town theme Burton would later develop in *Edward Scissorhands*, was buried by Disney until this spring, when it released a home-video version.

Burton's first full-length feature, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, was an inventive, well-modulated romp built around the singular, screechy talents of Paul Reubens. The critics paid little attention, but the picture did great business. Next, Burton enlarged his visual signature on the campy, surreal *Beetlejuice*, a black laugh of a ghost story. Starring Michael Keaton in a comic tour de force, the film was an over-the-top lob into the irrational, a cherry bomb tossed into the gray classroom of mortality. It didn't all coalesce, but when it worked, Burton's pie-in-your-face existentialism worked like magic. The critics paid little attention, but the picture did fabulous business.

Never particularly a fan of comic books or cartoons, Burton was nonetheless chosen to direct *Batman*, one of those blockbuster properties that had been in development forever, with the studio executives clustered around it in dumb wonder, like cave men around their first fire. Burton went deep into the myth and deep into the dark and produced a flawed but fascinating pop epic. The movie had a grand, rotten urban texture and a brooding tone. It was weighty but not ponderous, and it was great fun – with Jack Nicholson taking the comic turn – but the fun was somewhat submarined by awkward action, narrative glitches and inappropriate music by Prince. The critics paid all sorts of attention, and the picture did historic business. This gave Burton the freedom to direct *Edward Scissorhands*, a deeply personal project he had first conceived as a teenager. A simple fairy tale gift-boxed in a sophisticated design package, the story concerned a castle-bound boy with shears for hands who's plucked from the fortress of his solitude by an angelic Avon lady and thrust into the banal wonders of suburbia. Yearning and sentimental, the movie felt like Burton's ache.

After waffling for some time, Burton decided to do the inevitable *Batman* sequel. He tried *Batman Returns* largely for the chance to take a whack at some new characters – Catwoman and Penguin – and take the myth more in his own direction, exercising a control that the overwhelming success of the first movie brought him and that his added experience would naturally provide.

The first film also brought him his wife, Lena Gieseke, a German painter, whom he met while filming in London and married in February of 1989. In addition to directing major motion pictures, Burton draws constantly and paints occasionally. A coffee-table book of this art is in the planning stage, as are some children's picture books he plans to author. He's also shot and appeared in a documentary about Vincent Price and is developing a full-length animated feature, *Nightmare Before Christmas*.

I spoke with Burton twice in March of 1992, in his production-company office at Warner's Hollywood lot. Before our first session, he was in the midst of preparing *Batman Returns* to show to studio executives – he said he'd "rather show it to aliens" – and he was even more nervous than usual. Burton talks with his hands cutting the air, covering his face, pulling his hair. He struggles to make sense of himself, starting four or five sentences for every one he finishes and dicing his words into bits. (I've chosen clarity rather than interview *vérité* in the editing and punctuation of our conversation, in hopes that what you lose in the *way* he thinks – his Veg-O-Matic style of verbalization – you gain in actually understanding *what* he thinks.) The fact is, English seems like a foreign language for Burton: He thinks visually. Everything he says carries with it the burden of translation.

BURTON IDENTIFIES WITH THE DARK KNIGHT OF 'BATMAN RETURNS' (MICHAEL KEATON).

Let's go back to the world of your childhood. I'm curious as to whether you think your character was almost fully shaped by the time you were five years old.

No. 1, I really hate, more than almost anything – because it seems to be bubbling up – that fucking "child within" bullshit. Do you know what I mean? I don't know whether you've heard that shit. They say, "I've never lost that touch of the child." It's the remnant of some yuppie bullshit, that whole "tapping into the child within you" and that it's important to make films that do. And I find that actually a form of retardation. [*Pause*] What are you? That truly is a very interesting question. But not to the point where people perceive you as maintaining that "childish" quality.

Well, in the past you've said that you were, in the films, working out or from a lot of "childlike feelings" and that you felt you would move on from them.

Yeah, I find it very interesting, because I think it holds the key to everybody – that question of what you are. Children are not perverted in a way. It has more to do with the culture. When children are drawing, everybody draws the same. Nobody draws better than everybody else. There's a certain amount of strength, there's a certain amount of passion, there's a certain amount of clarity. And then what happens is it gets beaten out of you. You're put into a cultural framework, which gets beaten into you. To punch through that framework, you have to maintain a certain kind of strength and simplicity.

Do you think that as a kid, there was an attempt to beat things out of you that you wanted to hold on to?

I think the atmosphere that I grew up in, yes, there was a subtext of normalcy. I don't even know what the word means, but it's stuck in my brain. It's weird. I don't know if it's specifically American, or American in the time I grew up, but there's a very strong sense of categorization and conformity. I remember being forced to go to Sunday school for a number of years, even though my parents were not religious. No one was really religious; it was just the framework. There was no *passion* for it. No passion for anything. Just a quiet, kind of floaty, kind of semioppressive, blank palette that you're living in.

How young were you when you first felt that?

From very early on. As long as I can remember. My grandmother told me that before I could walk, I always wanted to *leave*. I would just crawl away, I would crawl out the door. And then when I was older, if anybody was going anywhere, I always wanted to go. I had that impulse. And I had the impulse for horror movies – that was a very strong thematic thing.

As a child did you want to spend time alone?

Absolutely. Absolutely. To this day I'm happiest when I'm . . . I look forward to sleeping. And I did, even then. And I love talking to people who like to sleep. There are a few things that just calm me down: when I hear about somebody making mashed potatoes and when I hear about somebody sleeping and liking to sleep. I get this sense of calm, and it's a wonderful feeling. And in Hollywood, nobody likes to sleep – they're losing out, they're not on top of it. I love to sleep.

But you don't remember your dreams?

No. I have like five dreams I remember.

Do they repeat, consistently?

I only have one dream that's recurring. A great dream. There was a little girl on my block who I was in love with, and she moved away. Every ten years I'll dream about her, at the age we are now. We lost contact, but I have this clear image of what she looks like.

What are the other four dreams you remember?

My parents went bowling, and there was this weird place that they stuck the kids. I guess it was like a day-care center, but it was all Gothic, it was all rotted wood. There were a few of us morose kids sitting there, and we saw this light – a skeleton was coming in with this candle. And the skeleton looks at me, and it opens a door, and I fall through a trapdoor, and I fall into my parents' bed. And I remember waking up in my parents' bed. Weird, huh? Whoa! [*Manic laugh*]

I remember the ones that are so strong that I just couldn't forget them, and I remember each feeling, each detail. I remember one when I got into an ax fight with somebody. I remember every chop. I remember chopping off this person's face. None of us died, but we just went through this thing, in sort of a Western setting. There was another where there was this horrible [*shudders*], this horrible seaweed, like this tough, purple, rubberish sea plant that was growing out of my mouth. And I kept tearing it away, and it kept growing and growing and growing. That's all it was, a long dream about the feeling of that, and

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CHILDHOOD WAS A SURREAL, BRIGHT DEPRESSION."

the *wacky high jinks* surrounding that.

What was the kind of taste and smell of childhood for you?

This is funny, but I think I've always felt the same. I've never felt young, like I was a kid. I've never felt like I was a teenager. I never felt like I was an adult. I just have always felt the same. I guess if there was a flavor, I guess childhood was a kind of surreal, bright depression. I was never interested in what everybody else was interested in. I was very interiorized. I always felt kind of sad.

Were you lonely?

I never felt . . . yeah. Yeah. I've always likened it to that feeling when you're a teenager, that grand feeling – which is why I liked punk or some people like heavy metal or Gothic. You've got to go through some kind of drama. I've always seen people who are well adjusted, and actually, they are not that well adjusted. Everybody is going to blow at some moment or other. In fact, the ones that come across as the most well adjusted are like human time bombs, waiting to go off. I just think that kind of dark catharsis, that kind of dark, dramatic, depressed, sad, moody thing, was kind of healthy.

I'm curious about your attraction to the horrific – monsters, ghouls and demons. One take might be that in the kind of nothingness of suburbia – the almost slyly attractive no-feeling nothingness of suburbia – which you can project anything onto, the kind of deep feeling of the monsters is compelling.

Exactly. I love it. Lookit, all monster movies are basically one story. It's *Beauty and the Beast.* Monster movies are my form of myth, of fairy tale. The purpose of folk tales for me is a kind of extreme, symbolic version of life, of what you're going through. In America, in suburbia, there is no sense of culture, no sense of passion. So those served that very specific purpose for me. And I linked those monsters and those Edgar Allan Poe things to direct feelings. I didn't read fairy tales, I *watched* them.

Did you identify with the monster?

Completely! Every kid does. They were always taking the monster and kind of prodding him and poking him, especially the ones of the Fifties. The way those movies were structured, the heroes were always these bland actors with no emotion. They were the suburbanites to me.

And you were the creature from the black split-level.

Sure! Of course. You've got to feel, you've got to go for the drama. If I didn't, I just felt I would *explode.*

You've said you grew up at the end of the nuclear-family experiment, and that it didn't work. Did you mean yours or the whole idea?

I think the whole thing. There was no sense of connection to emotions. In our culture, what you were taught about America in school is the way things should be – success and family, what they call traditional family values – and things are not that simple. So when it's not working, rather than going, "This isn't working, this is fucked," people just feel like they are failures.

And the last twelve years in Washington, they've been shoving that "family values" idea down our throats.

And it's completely frightening, because they don't understand. The same thing about "America." It's just *bizarre* to try to maintain this feeling about America. And you see it most strongly in Los Angeles. America to me always seems like a country that's based on a movie. Here you've got presidents spouting lines from Clint Eastwood movies, and it's getting more and more that way. It's hard to find people to work with because nobody wants to be what they *are*: "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not this, because I'm really *this*." This level of success that's thrust upon you – you've got to be successful, and you've got to be a certain way – nobody is what they are, because of this dream. And it's great to have a dream, and none of that should be taken away from people, because that's all people have, but not this *materialistic* dream. That's the problem, and everybody is fucked up from it.

Do you remember when you first had the impulse to draw?

I think it started when it started for everyone. I'm just lucky that it wasn't beaten out of me. I was very lucky that I maintained a passion for it and didn't give a fuck what my third-grade teacher thought of it.

Were your drawings stuck up on the fridge by your parents?

I got the normal parent routine. It's actually quite funny. Mom's reading a book, and you show her a drawing, and she has X-ray vision through the book, where she can actually see your drawing without looking from her book. [*Manic laugh*] That's the classic routine. So my drawing was always more *private*. I feel kind of lucky, because I think if they had supported it, I probably wouldn't have done it.

MICHELLE PFEIFFER'S SEXY, LEATHER-BOUND CATWOMAN REVEALS A SOUL IN TORMENT.

A couple of years ago you said you "freaked" because you didn't even know the most basic things about your parents, like where they were born. What caused you to freak about that?

I think it was in the period I was in therapy, where I was trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. I felt a bit more depressed than usual. The fog got a little grayer. It's hard to see through it as it gets down a little bit closer to you. I was just not connecting to anybody. I was starting to feel too lonely and too isolated and too abstract and depressed. And it was around that time that it was pointed out to me that I didn't know anything about my parents. [*Manic laugh*] It was kind of shocking.

David Lynch indicated that one of the reasons he never pursued psychoanalysis or therapy was that he was afraid it would block his creative process.

That can be interesting. I went through that process a little bit, and I completely *unraveled* [*laughs*]. There's so much about yourself and other people that's interesting, but I just unraveled too quickly! I had a therapist who was very good, and they'll tell you that one of their main concerns is not to let you unravel as you're recovering.

They want to let you hold on to your defenses until you have some new things to hold on to.

Exactly! And I just dived right in and immediately went to the bottom level of antidepressants and everything. I couldn't handle it.

How did the shrinkage relate to your work?

[*With Brooklyn accent, as old-time director*] Well, luckily I was in between pic-chahs! [*Laughs*] I was just a ball of yarn there. There are times in your life when you feel stuck. And I was wanting to burst through something, what it was I didn't know. Depression. Throughout my life, there is some form and level of depression that has always hung over me. And I don't think it's bad necessarily, but sometimes when it gets bad – and there have been a few points – it keeps you kind of stuck.

How long did you stick with it before it became intolerable?

A couple of years. I had a couple of shrinks. I had one guy, he didn't talk to me the whole time. [*Manic laugh*] It was hilarious. *That* was my problem: I never spoke to anybody. So I found the perfect therapist, who just sat there for an hour and didn't speak. It was like being in any other relationship – I didn't say a word. He checked his watch every now and then. Weird. We didn't say anything to each other. Maybe we were speaking Vulcan-style.

In the past, you've brought up making films as therapy a number of times, both as a metaphor and almost literally in the case of 'Vincent' – that it was therapy for you to make that film.

People don't realize, because of the surface way the films look and the cartoonish nature of them, that the only thing that keeps me going through a movie is that these characters mean something to me. My process is such that I look at all these characters and get a *feeling* out of them that I find very meaningful. And thematic. That's the only way for me to approach it. I could never approach it like it's just a funny movie or it's a weird-looking movie.

How do you feel your background in animation shaped you as a director?

What I feel really good about, really happy about, is that I did *not* go to film school. I went to CalArts and went through animation, where I got a very solid education. You learn design, you draw your own characters, your own backgrounds, your own scenes. You cut it, you shoot it. You learn the storyboarding process. It's everything, without the bullshit of film school: the competition, the feeling like you're already in the industry – you don't get a chance to *create.*

But being attached to the animator's desk was traumatic.

I couldn't handle it. At Disney, I almost went insane. I really did. I don't ever want to get that close to that certain kind of feeling that I had. Who knows what a nervous breakdown is? Or who knows what going off the edge is? I don't want to get that close again.

Was the monotony your biggest enemy?

No. 1 is, I was just not Disney material. I could just not draw cute foxes for the life of me. I couldn't do it. I tried. I tried, tried. The unholy alliance of animation is you are called upon to be an artist, but on the other hand, you are called upon to be a zombie factory worker. And for me, I could not integrate the two.

Also, at the time they were making kind of shitty movies. And it took them five or six years to make a movie. There's that cold, hard fact: Do you want to spend six years of your life working on *The Fox and the Hound*? There's a soul-searching moment when the answer is pretty clear.

Your connection to animation was really only because it was linked to drawing, which was something you did, and

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"THE AUDIENCE ALWAYS LOOKS VERY ANGRY TO ME."

still do, obsessively and incessantly.

Well, sure. That's why the one thing I had to learn about live action, which is still a struggle for me, is to *speak*. In animation, you would communicate through drawings, and I was perfectly happy to communicate that way. So what you're saying is true: There was a direct link. You're able to maintain that privacy much more in that relationship, because there's nothing else happening, really.

You've admitted that your movies are "flawed" and that they could be shot full of holes.

I think it stems from *story*. It makes me a little sad sometimes. People peg you. The feeling is that "Tim can't tell a story out of a paper bag." And every time, when you're developing a script and you're talking to the studio and you have these stupid script meetings with them, I can say that if there is a problem with the movie, it is *nothing* that you discussed. So when you're fighting that, it does make you a little sad. And *Beetlejuice* was kind of the one movie for me that gave me, again, that feeling of humanity, that "Fuck everybody!" That made me feel very good, that the audience didn't need a certain kind of thing. Movies can be different things! Wouldn't it be great if the world allowed David Cronenberg to do his thing and people could tell the difference!

But studios have the expectation that each film will be like one of those cookies coming off the cookie assembly line in 'Scissorhands' and that there are only a few different shapes of cookies allowed.

Well, they're wrong! It's like with Warner Bros., because that's where my history has mainly been. I'm always amazed – movies that they fight tooth and nail and are always the weirdest, those are the ones that end up making them all the money. All they have to do is look at their fucking slate of movies! The proof is there. So why not, if something is going to be flawed, why not have it be interestingly flawed, as opposed to boringly flawed?

Forgetting the "they" for a while, I'm interested in what you feel the flaws of your films are.

It's funny – there's two levels to that. On an emotional level, I never feel bad about it. I don't have children, but to me it's like giving your child plastic surgery. I accept them, and on a very weird level I love them for their flaws. Now, there's a technical side of me that sees I could have cut this, or that could have been shorter; that's the boring technical side. But on the emotional side, you accept them. What if you had a five-year-old with a whatever – would you give him plastic surgery? I wouldn't do that, because part of the joy in life is in the flaws. I feel a very strong emotional connection to them as a part of myself. The only movie I feel colder about is the first *Batman*.

In that movie, Vicki Vale [Kim Basinger] asks Bruce Wayne [Michael Keaton] about his mansion, because she thinks it doesn't seem like him, and he says, "Some of it is very much me, and some of it isn't." And I felt that was Tim Burton talking there, about his movie.

[*Laughs*] Sure! Sure. That's why I decided to do another one. Because I love the themes of it. I have to have those little links with it, because that's the only thing that really keeps me going; otherwise I couldn't do it.

I'd like to go through each of your five features, beginning with 'Pee-wee's Big Adventure.' Although that was perceived as a children's picture, there was a lot of very adult stuff in it.

Well, I don't think of kids or adults. What's child? What's adult? Everybody is everything. It has more to do with a feeling. You don't get rid of who you are or where you come from, but the point is, everybody is trying to get back to a certain kind of purity anyway. Why are people looking for escape in movies or drugs or drinking or amusement parks? Or anything? Why does anybody read? Because it's a form of escape, or a form of recapturing – not a "childish" impulse, but a way of looking at the world as if it were fresh and interesting. It has less to do with being a child than it has to do with keeping an open, wonderful, twisted view of the world.

Did it occur to you during the process of making that movie how phallic the story is?

[*Laughing*] I mean the whole thing . . . you strip down any story or any fairy tale, and you pretty much come down to the same thing, don't you?

DANNY DEVITO'S PENGUIN IS ANOTHER OF BURTON'S MUTATED CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT.

I grew up with a fascination for people that were dangerous. Why a fascination with clowns? Why do I like clowns so much? Why are they so powerful to children? Probably because they are *dangerous*. That kind of danger is really what it's all about. It's that kind of stuff that I think gets you through life. Those are the only things worth expressing, in some ways: danger and presenting subversive subject matter in a fun way. I link this stuff to the power of fairy tales. All roads lead to them, for me, because of what I think their purpose is.

What's the purpose and the function of fairy tales?

I think it does have to do with whatever that young impulse is – Who are we? How are we created? What else is out there? What happens when you die? All that stuff is unknown. Life is unknown. Everything is under the umbrella of life and death and the unknown, and a mixture of good and bad, and funny and sad, and everything at once. It's weirdly complicated. And I find that fairy tales acknowledge that. They acknowledge the absurdity, they acknowledge the reality; but in a way that is beyond real. Therefore, I find *that* more real.

Does there need to be a moral or something edifying to make a fairy tale work?

Well, we're talking about the movie industry. There are things to be dealt with. I don't think it's necessary, personally. As a culture, and as an industry, people are looking for that, for sure. Especially the whole "happy ending" routine. They always like a happy ending.

Why do people seem to need that? You don't.

I don't need a happy ending. I feel much happier coming out of a movie like *Sid and Nancy* than I do . . . *Ghost* or something. I feel like yes, I understand, and I love it and I get it, and because it acknowledges a certain way that I feel about life, I actually feel *better*. I see something like that, and it makes me happy.

Because tragedy is what makes sense to you.

It does make sense. I think life ultimately is tragic but in ultimately a very positive way. We all *die*. It is tragic. You go through many tragic things in your life, but that's not necessarily bad. That's what I love about playing with tragedy in a fun way [*laughs*]. That's what I loved about *Pee-wee*. He was *into* something in a passionate way, and it didn't matter what it was about. He was into it.

Pee-wee says to the girl who desires him, brushing her off: "There's lots of things about me you wouldn't understand, you couldn't understand, you shouldn't understand."

[*Manic laugh*] So I didn't ask! Because I understood.

We could say the same thing about all of your protagonists: Beetlejuice, Bruce Wayne, Edward Scissorhands – they're all misunderstood.

Definitely. Who can pretend to know about themselves? It's too complicated, there are too many crossed signals, split sides and dynamics. Does anybody know who they are, really? Does anybody feel integrated? I mean, I don't know anybody who does. I certainly don't pretend to know myself. So for me, I find this dynamic to be realistic. And I enjoy it. It's often fun not to know things about people.

What about the kind of sexual threat from women that hangs over the Pee-wee character during the whole Odyssey he's on?

I guess the Pee-wee character is immature. It does go back to childish impulses, in a way. My take on what he's doing is that it's a perversion, there's no question about it. That's what's *great* about it. This weird, alternative character who's protecting – who's fighting off things in the world – and has mutated into something that's *separate*. I just see him as an outside character dealing with the world, in a heightened way. It had less to do with his bike than it did the idea of *passion* about something that nobody else cares about. I kind of feel that way about . . . *the movies!* [*Laughs*] I make these things that are very hard to make – that are not pictures with a message by most people's standards – so I identify with a character that is passionate about something that nobody else really cares about.

Edward Scissorhands is also "an outside character dealing with the world." But you brought more baggage to him, since you'd had the idea in high school and had lived with it, and there were clear correspondences between Tim Burton and Edward Scissorhands.

Yeah, well, it was a different thing for me, and I tried very hard not to be too self-involved. See, I saw that character more thematically than [*Cont. on 115*]

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Tim Burton

[*Cont. from 42*] personally. Again, I saw it as much more fucked up. I tried to make it . . . you know.

Yes, you said you tried not to make it too personal, because you wanted it to be universal. But the more personal you make something – whether it be a poem or a song or whatever, if it's true and pure – the more universal it is. So why the fear that the tighter the bond between you and Edward, the less universal the picture?

I guess because I don't know enough about myself. I'm not integrated enough yet. I don't know if that will ever happen. It just shows you how unintegrated I am, because the kind of characters that I enjoy are the kind of characters that aren't integrated [*laughs*]. So that's about as personal as it could get. Let's put it this way: I'm interested in the personal, because I take everything personally. I take Pee-wee and Beetlejuice and Edward and Batman – I feel very close to those characters. I really do. I feel like they are mutated children.

It's where you find meaning in the movies.

Exactly. But there again, these characters are all fucked up. They are impurely pure. If Batman got therapy, he probably wouldn't be doing this, he wouldn't be putting on this bat suit, and we wouldn't have this weird guy running around in a cape. So there is a form of things not being integrated that is quite appealing. So I don't know if I'm *stuck* or if I *enjoy* being stuck. Know what I mean? There is a charm about characters that know not what they do but do it purely. Even Beetlejuice is that way. There's a charm in that that I enjoy.

Let me play Satan's helper here. Edward Scissorhands is a pathetic, beautiful, ridiculous but funny character whose heart is always breaking – it's Tim Burton saying how sensitive he is, that he's the oversensitive artist, who as a child could not touch, could not communicate, without hurting. That's obvious. That's an obvious reading of the film.

[*Laughs*] Sure. Right.

How does that make you feel when you get that reading?

Well, I guess it makes me feel that I wasn't one-hundred percent successful. When you do a fairy tale, you are a little bit at odds with yourself. Because a fairy tale is a romantic version of certain things. Taking something real and heightening it. So what you have is an inherent balancing problem between the real and the unreal. I think that's where I run into trouble a lot of the time, because of the unwieldy nature of it. And then you've got Johnny Depp [who played Edward], who brings a certain thing to it himself. Actually, it turned into more my perception of him, in a way, what I saw in him, what he goes through, how he's perceived, than it did even myself. It's unwieldy, it's unbalanced, and there's a constant desire on my part to find the right balance. And you know what? I'll take the hit and miss with it, because it's the only thing that really makes it fun. So that thing probably does make me uncomfortable, but I did it.

Since these characters are the repositories of meaning for you, I'd like to talk about each of them. We've talked about Pee-wee already. What does Edward mean to you?

I loved the idea – and this did go with an impulse that I felt and still feel, and I think a lot of people feel – of feeling misperceived, the feeling of being sensitive and overly sensitive and wanting things you can't get. I remember going through a very strong feeling, a very teenage feeling, of not being able to touch or communicate. I had that, very strongly. I've never been a very physical person. I didn't grow up in a way that was very physical. And I always resisted that. So there are simplistic things like that – which I would call the melodramatic teenage impulses. And then the subtext of presenting yourself in such a way that is not the way you are meaning. For me, I saw that character as all of that. He is a way that you feel: What you say is not coming across, what you want is misperceived. And just on a humorous level, I love a character that is open and sensitive to everything. There is something very funny and tragic about that. I've known people like that, that are overly sensitive, and you know what? It's sad. I've known five people in my life that are overly sensitive, and the pain and torture they go through – it's almost funny.

You wouldn't include yourself in that group?

Again, I don't analyze myself. [*Pause*] I have that tendency, yes.

Where's the meaning for you in the Beetlejuice character?

He's a classic character, a true fantasy. The good side of being labeled and misperceived and put in a box is that even though that is being done to you, you also have, in some ways, a complete freedom.

You're not responsible to anybody's idea of you.

Yes. You can dress how you want. You can act however you want. You can be however you want. "Well, that's just Tim." The freedom that comes with that is a sad kind of freedom – there's a freakish quality to all of that – but it's got its benefits. And I think Beetlejuice shows the complete positive side of being misperceived and being categorized as something different. He can do whatever he wants! He's horrible and everybody knows it, so he's a complete fantasy of all of that. That's part of the lure of movies, in a simplistic way – just the freedom. People respond to it. And then you put him up against the [*Cont. on 116*]

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Tim Burton

[*Cont. from 115*] other characters, which are really about repression.

About the tyranny of their desires.

Yeah, they've got their house, they've got their world. I just love the dynamic between them. It's just very much like life.

Let's turn to 'Batman,' the first one. Now there were, Tim, some rough narrative spots. There were periods on that shoot where the script was being changed every day and you didn't have time to reflect upon the changes –

Yeah, it was bad.

– and you were, in your own words, near death.

I was probably as sick as I've ever been, on a movie, all the time. I was out of it. I was sick. See, the problem is, it was my first big movie. There's all these people around. There's a different energy. There's no way to prepare. No way to prepare. More money. More tension. More fear. Everything: more, more, more. More. And I just let something happen, which I'll try to never let happen again, which is to let the script unravel.

See, lookit, people in Hollywood, it's like territorialism, it's like animals peeing on little patches of ground. Unless they can do that, they don't think they're being creative. Hollywood is not *real*, it's not founded on reality, so there's a lot of subconscious paranoia. There's a lot of deep-down fear, people thinking: "What's my worth? Am I necessary to this process?" It's filled with that. And what happened on *Batman*, and I let it happen, is that the script unraveled. Here we started out with a script that everybody said – again, it's classic Hollywood – everybody goes, "Oh, it's a great script, it's a great script." But at the end of the day, they basically *shred* it. So it went from being the greatest script in the world to completely unraveling. And once it unravels, it unravels. You're there, you do it. I remember Jack Nicholson going, "Why am I going up the stairs?" I was like "I don't *know*, Jack, I'll tell you when you get up there." [*Laughs*] And a lot of it had to do with dealing with the energies of the studio and the producers and everybody just being there and doing it – there was no one thing; it was a big animal.

Well, a lot of those problems don't show up in the movie, or they show up, but we don't care about them, because we're swept forward by other things. But the one thing that everybody did care about is that the tension leading up to Vicki Vale's finding out that Bruce Wayne is Batman is completely unresolved. She just walks into the Batcave and –

And obviously, that was one thing I got killed for. It was rough. I'll tell you exactly what the impulse was. The initial impulse for me, and again, this is where I can go . . . 'cause I . . . I . . . my problem is, I can be a little belligerent. I can respond to things, like maybe when you read about those little kings in England or Egypt, who go, when they're really young, [*as petulant, spoiled child*] "I don't care!" My impulse was, I said to myself, "Fuck this bullshit!" This is comic-book material. I thought, you know, who really cares? But it was a mistake. It went too far.

We expect, at least, Bruce Wayne to play off of the fact that he's discovered there, by her, for the first time. But he doesn't. So the audience is left wondering, "Did he already know that she knew who he was? Did we miss something?" And we don't know. So we're sort of thrust out of the narrative.

This is the trouble I have. This is where sometimes there will be big gaps in something that I do. I try very hard to create my own environment. And so far it's worked out. But sometimes there will be a leap that people don't buy, they don't buy, they don't buy. They go, "Whoa!" and it takes them out of it. I don't want to take people out of something. I spend a large time trying to not have that happen.

The other thing in the first one that felt horribly intrusive was the Prince music. We're in this Tim Burton world, and all of a sudden, like him or not, in rides Prince.

Yeah, it's true. It's the unholy alliance of me and . . .

Warner Bros. marketing, pure and simple?

This is what happened. You learn something new every day. Now, here is a guy, Prince, who was one of my favorites. I had just gone to see two of his concerts in London, and I felt they were like the best concerts I'd ever seen. Okay. So. They're saying to me, these record guys, it needs this and that, and they give you this whole thing about it's an expensive movie so you need it. And what happens is, you get engaged in this world, and then there's no way out. There's too much money. There's this guy you respect and is good and has got this thing going. It got to a point where there was no turning back. And I don't want to get into that situation again.

It had to be painful for you to put that music into that movie.

It was . . . it was . . . it completely lost me. And it tainted something that I don't want to taint. Which is how you feel about an artist. And actually, I liked his album. I wish I could listen to it without the feel of what had happened.

What's 'Batman' about to you? Bruce Wayne's depression?

It's about depression, and it's about lack of integration. It's about a character . . . unfortunately I always see it being about those things, not about some kind of hero who is saving the city from blah-blah-blah. If you asked me the plot of *Batman*, I couldn't tell you. It's about duality, it's about flip sides, it's about a person who's completely fucked and doesn't know what he's doing. He's got good impulses, but he's not integrated. And it's about depression. It's about going through life, thinking you're doing something, trying very hard. And the Joker represented somebody who got to act however he wants.

He's playing the Beetlejuice character.

Yeah. There are two kinds of people, even with double personalities. The ones that are fucked, and they're still trying to muddle through life, and then the ones that are fucked and get to be completely free and scary. And they're basically two fantasies. There are two sides.

Which one are you closer to?

Well, I'm probably closer to the Bruce Wayne character, but I much prefer the fantasy of the other. That's much more the liberating side of it.

It's curious that Bruce Wayne-Batman is actually the only character in the movie who's not a cartoon character but is a human being.

I get the most gravity out of him. That's why I like Michael Keaton in it. He's got that . . . all you got to do is look at him, and he looks fucked up. So for me, the context is immediately there. He's an unintegrated, kind of goofy, sad, passionate, strong, misguided, in some ways quite clear and in some ways completely out-to-lunch-type character.

Why didn't you explore that more?

Because I found that the deeper you went, the more of an intrusion it was. Maybe there's a way to do it I haven't figured out yet. I always felt trying to figure him out more would be too intrusive.

You don't want to demystify?

Yeah, there's something about not knowing, which I like. That was always the impulse.

I assume there was a challenge for you in directing the sequel. Because you said a number of times that sequels don't interest you, unless there is a challenge – something for you to discover, which you know nothing about.

New characters. New characters. New characters. New characters. I like them very much. Catwoman, Penguin and the Christopher Walken character, I like him, too. It's a smaller cast. It's much more . . . uh . . .

Interpersonal?

Yeah! I don't know what it is, but there's a different energy about it. It has to do with an energy and finding another field. And I feel good about that. I don't know what it means. It could be bad for the movie; I don't know. But I was much more interested in it. And I find these other characters very compelling.

Do you go out to the movies?

I think because of living here – this sounds like a stupid cop-out, but I don't have any other explanation, to tell you the truth – it just feels redundant. It's such a one-industry town. I grew up here, I live here, you go out, and it's all movies. It just feels redundant.

So how do you see work you want to see? Go to screenings? Rent cassettes?

I guess, right now, I'm feeling kind of bad about it. For the past few years, I just didn't go out and see movies very much. I rent things on videos, but not new stuff. I haven't seen much new stuff. Somehow, when I'm in a video store, I go to the lowest common denominator. When I walk into a video store, I'm not going for the latest Martin Scorsese, I'm looking for the latest *Chainsaw Massacre Babe-a-Rama* fest. I can't help it! There's something about video where you seek the level of the medium.

Is there anybody's work out there that you feel connected to or are interested in?

Well, I don't have a good answer. My answer is bullshit in a way. I mean, I know who I'm for. I do like David Cronenberg. He's great. Basically, you got to like anybody who's doing their thing, don't you?

Why bother making another movie, Tim? You hate putting them out.

It's like some sort of drug or virus that takes over your body. The desire to do it is there.

What terrifies you so much about putting them out?

It's funny, I question it. It's a split. Obviously, I do this stuff. I'm talking to you. I'm not holing up in my castle in Switzerland, away from anybody, but I have a strong fear of letting this stuff out for some reason.

What do you think you're afraid of?

I think because I don't know who I am. I think I haven't figured myself out. It's personal. The movie is my baby, and I'm putting it out there into the cruel world. It's scary, that's all. Really scary.

What's the worst thing that could happen?

See, the worst thing that could happen would be something you could understand. I wish they would tear down the screen if they didn't like it. That would be the worst "good" thing that could happen. The worst "bad" thing would be . . . I don't know. It's fear of the unknown. Is anybody going to like this? It's judgment. Being categorized and judged. I have a very strong aversion to that. I don't know where that comes from, but there it is. I'm in my little world, trying to do this film, then boom, it's out there. The film may have its unreality, but the people that watch it are 100-percent real people. And they always look angry. Every time I go to these fucking screenings, the audience always looks very angry to me. They look very scary. It's just fear.

You're not afraid of failing, are you?

It's funny – in some ways I'm not, and in some ways I guess I am. I will not base my decisions on what to do based on the thought of "success." So in some ways, I'm not afraid of that – I'll do what I want to do and hope for the best. The fear just has to do with that aspect of showing it to people. I don't know if that's failure or just the fear of coming out into the open.

You really kind of want to be in a cave, hanging upside down, with your drawing.

Yeah, but again, I've been through that. At Disney, I was in my own little cave, and I was not getting out, and that's no good. Definitely, you want to get out, and you want feedback. I think I am just afraid of it. I think that my impulse is to hide in a cave. Again, it's the split, it's Batman. It's classic, really, it's classic. ■