

## 7 Things You Didn't Know About Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas

By Dave Bossert



(Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* live concert at the Hollywood Bowl.)

The seminal stop-motion animated film *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* originally started as a poem written by Tim Burton while he worked at the Walt Disney Studios. He had always intended that the poem to be turned into a film like his stop-motion short *Vincent*. But instead, the poem and Burton's drawings for it were relegated to the Animation Research Library (ARL). Ten years later, after Burton's successes with *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Batman Returns* (1992), he still had a deep longing to do something with *Nightmare*.

Burton's agent reached out to Disney to see if they still owned the *Nightmare* project. Of course, the studio did, and as Burton points out because his agent was inquiring about it, "all of a sudden, Disney wanted to do it, after ten years of not wanting to do it." In essence, the studio wanted to make the film because they wanted to be in business with Tim Burton. *Nightmare* was resurrected from the ARL to let Burton make the film and to reestablish the studio's

relationship with him. It was also an opportunity to expand the studio's animation boundaries and explore other styles and techniques.

I have done much research and writing on *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and there was plenty of fascinating behind the scenes information that came to light. Here are seven things that you probably didn't know about *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*:

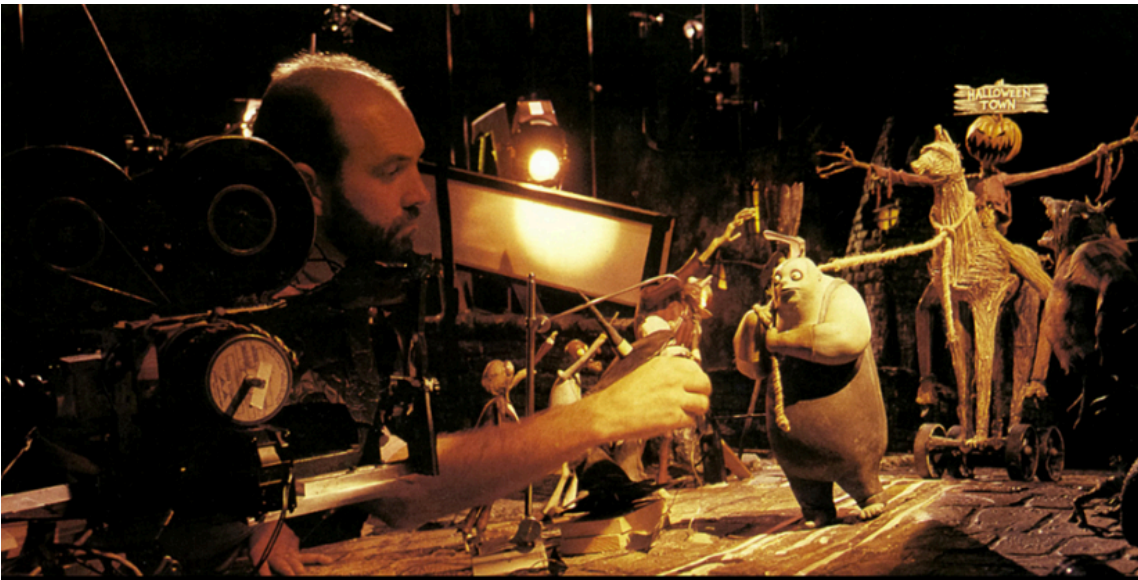


(A still frame from *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) with Ray Harryhausen's groundbreaking stop motion skeletons.)

1. *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) was one of the first cinematic experiences Tim Burton remembers from his childhood. It is a film that resonated and has stayed with him since he first watched it. This memory is one of the reasons why Burton gravitates back to crafting stop-motion animated films and why *Nightmare* got made in the first place.
2. The Walt Disney Studios initially considered setting up a new division called Touchstone Animation to make *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Instead, the film was made and released under the Touchstone banner because it was thought to be too scary for the typical Disney animation audience.
3. The first test animation was done in office space rented at Tippet Studio, owned by stop-motion animation legend Phil Tippett. They had recently scaled back production after losing out on the dinosaur animation for *Jurassic Park* (1993) to nearby ILM's newly blossoming computer-generated animation department.



4. Zero, Jack's little ghost dog, was going to be animated in traditional hand-drawn 2-D animation, with the plan of adding the characters on top of the stop-motion footage at a percent to effect a transparent look. Ultimately, that idea was abandoned in favor of Zero being animated in stop-motion and added in at a percentage to each scene to give it the ghostly look.



(A Mitchell camera in the left foreground, which was purchased from Art Clokey of *Gumby and Pokey* fame, was used for filming the stop motion on *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Animator Stephen "Buck" Buckley is adjusting one of the puppets for the next film exposure of a scene.)

5. The Mitchell cameras were the preferred choice for filming stop-motion animation and needed to be purchased for the production. The main element for a good stop-motion camera was the ability to do “pin registration.” This term simply means that each film frame that was exposed was in the same position as the previous frame using placement pins in the camera. This registration assured that the image from frame to frame was in perfect alignment and eliminated the weaving and bobbing up and down that could occur when films were projected.
6. All ten songs composed by Danny Elfman were written first before there was a finished script. Typically, the script is completed first, and then music is written for the film, but Elfman and Tim Burton collaborated on the songs as if it was an operetta. Only then did Caroline Thompson come on board to write the screenplay.



(Oogie Boogie with a captive Santa during the climax of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.)

7. The character Oogie Boogie was not in Burton’s original poem but was added as the villain for the film. Oogie Boogie, an imposing character, is one of the largest stop-motion puppets ever created. Due to his size, the fabricators could not cast solid foam latex around the armature. Instead, a latex exterior “skin” was cast and then slipped down around the metal armature, which provided an open empty area around the armature. That open space was then packed with light fiber filled cloth balls that provided the illusion of substance to the body of this puppets. Then the exterior was painted and prepped for animation. An iridescent green version of the Oogie Boogie puppet was made for the ultraviolet song sequence, and a one-off gruesome bug-infested version was created for the unraveling of Oogie in the film’s finale.

*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a perennial holiday classic that the entire family can enjoy. It had now made a generational leap with children who watched it when it was first released now grown and sharing the film with their children. At the time it was made, it was a groundbreaking achievement in stop-motion animation. It now carries the Walt Disney Pictures logo and is released every year for special theater screenings.



(Danny Elfman on stage at the Hollywood Bowl performing the singing voice of Jack Skellington during a live concert and screening of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.)

It is a film that has stood the test of time—becoming even more popular year after year. After more than twenty-five years, *Nightmare* has become a fan favorite with regularly released merchandise and the annual overlay at Disneyland's Haunted Mansion. The film has been converted into 3D—4D if you count the practical effects during screenings at the El Capitan Theater in Hollywood—and there have been live concerts of the film at the Hollywood Bowl. *Nightmare* is a film that will live on in perpetuity, much like *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, and countless other Disney animated classics.

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