

Film

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Directed by Henry Selick

Starring: the voices of
 Danny Elfman, Chris
 Sarandon, Catherine
 O'Hara, William Hickey,
 Glenn Shadix, Paul
 Reubens, Ken Page, and Ed
 Ivory

Say what you will about Tim Burton, but you have to admit that the man is original; a directorial boy wonder with a penchant for endearingly bizarre and compellingly dark subjects—ranging from *Beetlejuice* to *Batman* to *Edward Scissorhands*—Burton has embarked on his weirdest cinematic venture yet with the release of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, a musical animated fantasy done in stop-motion animation.

Burton conceived the concept and main characters of this film over a decade ago, when he was a mad film-maker trapped in a frustrated Disney animator's body. The project seemed a bit much for Disney's then extremely conservative tastes, and it was also turned down by all the major TV networks Burton tried to sell it to. Since then, Burton has made a name for himself as a successful producer and director of off-the-wall blockbusters, and more recently Disney agreed to take on Burton's Christmassy creation, producing it as a film from Disney's "adult" wing, Touchstone Pictures.

The story is fairly simple: Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King (voiced by Chris Sarandon and sung by Danny Elfman), skeletal master-of-ceremonies for the Hallowe'en revels in the otherworldly Halloweentown, is languishing in a creative rut when he stumbles after the doorway

to Christmastown, and becomes obsessed with mastering the strange new holiday rituals he sees therein. Despite the warnings of his Frankenstein-ish secret admirer, the plucky ragdoll called Sally (voiced by Catherine O'Hara), Jack embarks on a plan to supplant Santa Claus as the mastermind of the Christmas holidays. What ensues is chaos at its most bizarre as Jack and his ghoulish but good-natured followers conduct a Christmas that the Earth's terrified tiny tots won't soon forget.

The real star of this film is the animation. In its fluid motion and quirky richness of detail, the movie is a visual extravaganza from start to finish. Halloweentown and its inhabitants are a masterpiece of darkly whimsical imagination, creating an impression that can perhaps best be described as surreal-gothic. The architecture and landscape are like something out of a Salvador Dali Halloween vision, as are the inhabitants, who include such memorable bit players as the Clown with the Tear-Away Face and a singing gallows-tree whose skeletal passengers sing in chorus as backup while they hang from the branches by their necks (a real bunch of swingers).

The main characters have considerable charm. The scrawny, sepulchral Jack Skellington is surprisingly likeable and human, with enough of a flair for the dramatic to remind you, every now and again, just why he's the Pumpkin King (the opening number, for instance, is rather darkly macabre). Sally is also endearing. Other entertaining characters include Halloweentown's resident evil scientist (William Hickey), an amusingly twisted chap

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in the fine old mad doctor tradition; Halloweentown's Mayor (Glenn Shadix), a literally two-faced politician subject to radical mood (and policy) swings; Lock, Shock, and Barrel (Paul Reubens, Catherine O'Hara, and Danny Elfman), a perverse trio of trick-or-treaters who capture Santa (Ed Ivory) for Jack to get him out of the way; and Oogie Boogie (Ken Page), a bellicose bag of bugs who is the villain of the piece.

The music, all provided by Burton's frequent collaborator Danny Elfman, suits the production in its predominantly dark tone. The score is typical Elfman, but the musical numbers are unique and quite engaging in spots. Jack's singing soliloquies can often be quite moving, as well as effective devices in revealing character and advancing plot.

The show has a very unique and appealing concept, but as is often the case with Burton's work, the story plays second fiddle to the lavish production elements. However richly imaginative the film may be in its concept and execution, the story is sparse and largely predictable, and the film has a short running time. Still, it's a neat little family film with a clever premise and a few tried-and-true morals-of-the-story that aren't beaten over the viewers' heads. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is another Burton offering of style over substance, but with such weird and wonderful style as this, Burton can easily be forgiven.

SEAN MCQUAID

