

Alumni Spotlight: Derek Frey '95



Please provide your biographical information.

Home Town: **Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania**

Current Town: **London, UK**

Major: **Communication Studies**

Minor: **Journalism**

Bio: Filmmaker Derek Frey has a long and successful working relationship with director Tim Burton, running Tim Burton Productions since 2001. Most recently Derek co-produced *Frankenweenie*, which received an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Picture in 2012. That same year he produced the music video *Here With Me* for The Killers. Derek is currently serving as Executive Producer on *Big Eyes*, starring Christoph Waltz and Amy Adams, slated for release this Christmas. Up next he'll Executive Produce *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* starring Eva Green and Asa Butterfield.

Derek has worked on over 15 feature films, including as Associate Producer on *Alice in Wonderland*, *Dark Shadows*, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, *Corpse Bride*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. His credits also include producer on the documentary *A Conversation with Danny Elfman and Tim Burton*; writer of the *Frankenweenie*-based short film *Captain Sparky vs. the Flying Saucers*; and editor of the comprehensive and award-winning publication *The Art of Tim Burton*. Derek worked closely with curators from the Museum of Modern Art for the creation of the Tim Burton touring exhibit, which has made record-breaking stops in New York City, Toronto, Melbourne, Paris, Los Angeles, Seoul, Prague and Tokyo.

Derek has directed his own films and music videos, including *The Ballad of Sandeep*, which has appeared in over 35 film festivals and brought home 16 awards, including Best Director at the Independent Film Quarterly Festival and Best Featurette at the Las Vegas International Cinefest. In 2013 he directed the comedic short *Sky Blue Collar*, which was awarded Best Director of a Short Film at the 2013 Chicago Comedy Film Festival and Best Picture at the International Film Festival of Comedy, Romance, Musical. He recently completed work on *Motel Providence*, filmed in Media, Pennsylvania and is currently in post-production on the featurette horror *Green Lake*, shot on the Big Island of Hawaii.

What made you decide to attend WCU?

I was interested in studying Communications and WCU has a solid reputation in that area. Music was also very important to me, and WCU was very open to having students involved in the music programs but not actually studying within the music school. That was perfect for me, as I could be play Saxophone in Marching Band and Jazz Band but remain focused on other areas of study.

What is your official title and what are your responsibilities in your current position?

I work as a film producer for director Tim Burton and run his production company. The majority of my responsibilities involve all phases of a film production with a focus placed on helping Tim carry out his vision to its fullest extent. I also direct and produce my own films and music videos.

What is a typical day like at work?

There is no such thing as a typical day, which is something I enjoy and thrive on. The film industry is all about adapting. Each project brings new challenges and it's really about working through those challenges to bring a vision to life on screen.

What have been the biggest challenges at work?

The pace and intensity of the work is a constant but welcome challenge. Tim is extremely prolific so there are always multiple projects underway.

What do you enjoy most about your current position?

I'm extremely privileged to work with a number of people who are not only highly talented but who are also very kind and down to earth. That can be a rarity in this industry. I also enjoy traveling, which is a big element of my work.

What skills, talents, and other traits are useful and necessary to do your job?

Communication is the key skill in carrying out my duties. Multitasking, and doing it well, is also vital. When working with Tim, creativity is also a plus.

Do you have a favorite or funny story about work?

There are so many stories over the years. Introducing President Obama to actor Deep Roy, who was dressed as his Oompa Loompa character, at a White House Halloween event was about as surreal as it gets.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

Unfortunately free time isn't something very common in my line of work. When I'm not working on one of Tim's project I'm usually working on one of my own.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

It would be great to be able to spend more time back in Pennsylvania. It's still home for me. Ideally I would like to find balance between continuing to produce Tim's films abroad and make my own features in and around Philadelphia.

What advice would you give to a current student who aspires to follow in your footsteps and pursue a similar career path?

Don't be afraid to work hard and make your own path. Don't pass up opportunities just because they're not the most idyllic because you never know where one may lead. Don't discount prospects that may come your way. Things can happen overnight but usually it takes quite a bit of time and effort to get to that night.

How has your WCU education contributed to your success?

The Communication Studies program at WCU really helped equip me with the appropriate skills to work in the film industry. I believe the extracurricular activities I was part of (WCUR, WCUTV, The Quad) provided hands on experience and training. Through WCU I had a summer internship at WPVI-Action News, which gave me a dose of fast-paced, real world experience. During my senior year at WCU, Dr. Thomas Reed, a media professor, helped me gain access to what at the time was strictly a faculty utilized video editing system. Having access to proper filmmaking tools was a real game changer for me. It was at that point I changed my career path from journalism to filmmaking.

What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments (both personally and professionally)?

My wife and I are expecting our first child in November so that has to be the top personal accomplishment. Professionally, I'm proud of all of the projects I've worked on with Tim Burton. *Frankenweenie* was a long endeavor, and I believe the result is something that audiences will enjoy for a long time. I'm very excited about the release of *Big Eyes* this Christmas. I'm also proud of the films I've directed and produced with The Minor Prophets - Philadelphia's premiere comedy troupe. It's great to have a creative tie to Pennsylvania and I look forward to future projects with them.

What's your favorite memory from when you were a student at WCU?

There are so many fond memories from my time at WCU. Most of those revolve around the making of my first films around campus and in the dorms as a three year resident of Goshen Hall and one year resident of a South Campus apartment. I would have to say the premiere of my senior year film *Verge of Darkness* on May 9, 1995 is still a highlight. I was surprised to find a packed Schmucker Auditorium and the film received a standing ovation at the end. I still haven't figured out what was being pumped into the air system to cause a reaction like that. It's hard to believe that will be twenty years ago next Spring!