

PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE

Directed by Tim Burton
Produced by Richard Gilbert Abramson and Robert Shapiro
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1985

It's hard to take some movies seriously.
And isn't that a good thing?

Pee-Wee's Big Adventure is one of those special few movies that is off-the-wall wacky and original, demanding nothing from the audience except its attention. The plot is the simple Quest motif. But the characters, production design, music, animation, acting, and humor are an absurdist thrill. It's a cartoony epic.

This was Tim Burton's first feature-length film and his first of many collaborations with composer Danny Elfman. The original concept was to be a refashioning of *Pollyanna*.

Actor Paul Reubens developed the lead character as his alter ego with the assistance of John Paragon and Phil Hartman while working in a Los Angeles improv troupe known as the Groundlings back in the late '70s. After being rejected for a spot on 'Saturday Night Live,' Reubens then took 'The Pee-Wee Herman Show' across America as a stage production, gaining innumerable fans through his appearances on 'Late Night With David Letterman' every two months.

An offer from Warner Brothers soon followed.

A cinematic sequel, *Big Top Pee-Wee*, and Saturday morning TV show, 'Pee-Wee's Playhouse,' brought Pee-Wee to the height of fame until Paul Reubens's 1991 mis-adventures at a Florida adult movie theater suddenly rendered the character anything but kid-friendly.

Reubens and the bizarre man-child Pee-Wee were inseparable. It is 'Pee-Wee Herman' who has a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, not Reubens. And Reubens even attended the Academy Awards in his Pee-Wee guise. In a 2005 interview, Reubens reflected on his motivation for such a close marriage of actor and character:

I was in art school in the '70s [...] Performance art was [...] a big thing then, [as well as] conceptual art. And I always thought of Pee-Wee as conceptual and as performance art, but only [meant] for me [...] I spent so much time for so many years trying to go out of my way to make people think Pee-Wee Herman was a real person by never being photographed as myself, never doing an interview as myself [so people would not think Pee-Wee was played by an actor, but was simply] a freak, or [...]whatever your take was on that character. [I wanted people to think he] was a real person.

The movie is eminently quotable but, as time goes by, increasingly unfamiliar to casual audiences. ("I know you are, but what am I?" barely registers compared to "Here's looking at you, kid.") Still, the film's devoted but idiosyncratic fan base probably revels in its exclusively cult-fringe appeal.