

NIRVANA JALALVAND

words by SANDY AZIZ

Meet Nirvana Jalalvand – British-Persian hair and make-up artist from Leeds. “*We’re live,*” I exclaim, eager to speak to the Emmy-award winning artist and good friend when I’ve finally located the record button on Google Meet. She’s speaking to us from her temporary flat in Ireland, where she’s been staying while filming the second season of the highly anticipated Netflix hit show *Wednesday*, directed by the renowned Tim Burton. For seventy-eight sublime minutes, Nirvana enchants us with tales of her highs, lows, and everything in between from her eight-year journey in the industry.

“I was always super, super interested in art [and] knew I wanted to work in film.” And with that, we dive into unpacking her journey. Nirvana first attended Leeds College of Art for an art foundation programme. *“Weirdly, I felt really lost there because I didn’t know where I wanted to go, and they push you to think outside the box.”* However, it was through this outside-the-box thinking that she discovered what she truly enjoyed: sculpting and *“making casts of limbs, bodies, and things.”* We laugh at the niche nature of it all.

Sure, Nirvana is naturally gifted, but what’s even more cardinal is her relentless work ethic. From earning full-marks on all her art exams in school to successfully securing a spot in the University of Arts London’s most oversubscribed make-up and prosthetics course, she has relentlessly shaped her future. By the way, Nirvana shares how she stumbled upon that make-up and prosthetics course in the catalogue: *“It felt like a light bulb moment.”*

Unbiased opinion, but Nirvana exudes confidence while also displaying a delightful sense of humour. On gaining work experience for Hansel and Gretel at the Opera North in Leeds, Nirvana recalls her failed attempts at emailing a family friend’s contact to secure the spot. Not getting replies didn’t stop her, though. Nirvana reveals, *“I made a card that looked like Gretel’s hair, [which] folded out into her, and I wrote what I had been writing in emails. I posted it to the opera house with the family friend’s contact name in hopes it would land in her pigeonhole.”* And it did. After working with the aforementioned family friend’s contact and gaining as much experience as possible during school breaks and throughout university, she was offered a position with her as a wig assistant. This led to a three-month tour around Europe – and then Nirvana’s true love: film.

“I was in a [crowded] room and had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I was probably a waste of space, but I was an hour and half early,” she laughs, candidly continuing, *“Good lord, I was terrified.”* Nirvana paints the scene of her first day on set – Greenwich, for the film *Holmes & Watson*. Before they called *“action,”* the day ended, leaving her disappointed that it wrapped up without her actually stepping onto the set. However, all in all, those combined experiences helped her land her first extended film job: the action sci-fi thriller *Men in Black: International*.

“Wait, what is ‘days in crowd’?” I ask, giggling at my lack of film jargon, before Nirvana kindly explains that it’s the phrase used for those working as background extras on set. She specifically remembers that the experience *“felt like the pressure was on”* but that *“it was so good for learning.”* And most importantly, Nirvana confesses, *“it solidified [for] me that I want to be working in film. When I was on set, I thought, ‘this is where I want to be.’”*

Having the honour of being the first to speak with Nirvana about her career journey, I sigh with relief when she claims, *“This is fun.”* And it truly is, because there’s more to film make-up than meets the eye. *“I don’t know how I do these things,”* giggles Nirvana, *“but I think because I was making things out of things that weren’t made for those purposes helps.”* Undoubtedly, this is what sets her apart from other artists in the space.

The past two years have been a *“whirlwind”* for Nirvana, and she’s probably referring to working on season one of the incredibly popular Tim Burton-directed Netflix series *Wednesday*, and then winning an Emmy for hair and make-up for the show. It all started when Nirvana received a call from make-up artist Tara McDonald, with whom she had previously worked, asking her to come to Romania for a job related to *The Addams Family*, which Tim Burton was directing. *“That was enough to sell me on it because I loved both, so I said yes, packed my life up in a week, and moved to Romania for eight months,”* Nirvana recalls casually. *“I did hair and make-up within the team but specifically for the lead character, Wednesday, who is played by Jenna Ortega,”* she highlights. Of course, there are many follow-up questions. *“Wednesday Addams is such a perfect character - everything is just so,”* says Nirvana. *“I couldn’t have landed a better job. This one really allows me to be creative.”*

Now, Nirvana is working on season two of *Wednesday*, filming in Ireland. *“There is way more to create for this second [season],”* she acknowledges. Her incredible contributions also paid off off-screen when the entire make-up team won an Emmy in 2023 for Outstanding Contemporary Makeup (Non-Prosthetic). *“You’re going to die,”* Nirvana squeals as she dishes us the details. *“I was walking through Marks & Spencers in Watford, shopping for my grandma, [when] Tara called me and was like, ‘Oh, my God, we did it! We got an Emmy nomination!’”* She explains the feeling of standing there with a basket of groceries: *“And then we won, which was crazy. I’ve never had an adrenaline rush like that in my entire life.”*

We felt that rush too, and it’s clear that Nirvana has an energy that draws you in, yet she humbly deflects any praise. She’s a master at redirecting the spotlight, insisting on praising those around her instead. *“I’m continuing to work with Jenna, and she is so supportive and encouraging.”* As for working with Tim Burton? *“I’m so blessed to work with [him]. He is an aesthetics-based director who really cares about your work and the details,”* Nirvana says. We detour to a story from the set when she asked Tim’s thoughts on something. He told her to *“have fun.”* The mere gravity of a comment like that, coming from such a legendary director, left an impression Nirvana follows it up with a fitting career remark: *“I cannot imagine doing anything else.”*

Of course, even in the perfect environment, there are always a few challenges. Let’s be frank – the film industry is inherently hard work. Nirvana mentions the usual obstacles that occur behind the scenes including, long or strange working hours, terrible weather conditions, and more. Despite that, she adds, *“Sometimes a little moan is needed, then you feel better!”* She isn’t wrong.

The tone shifts to something more serious and vulnerable when Nirvana reveals she has Hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and Fibromyalgia – disorders that cause joint hypermobility, instability, pain, and more. *“It’s super tricky in my line of work because people just aren’t as forgiving with certain disabilities. I’m trying to be better at being vocal about it – I’m working on it,”* she shares honestly before returning to her default state of gratitude. *“It could be a lot worse. I am actually really blessed.”*

Her accolades and journey over the last eight years speak volumes and are evidence of her perseverance. She corroborates this by saying, *“This is not something that holds me back, but something I have to manage. Most importantly, it reminds me that you can still do what you want.”* Simply put, we are left inspired – here she is, doing it all despite the challenges, and there’s undoubtedly more blessings to come.

*On the right images, Nirvana attending Emmy-award in 2023.
On the bottom image, Nirvana transforming Jenna Ortega into her acclaimed character, Wednesday.*

