

## DAY 29

# Unveiling Unforgettable Projects and Memorable Moments: Interview with Theron Skees, Former Walt Disney Imagineer

*He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.*

Exodus 35:35



Welcome to this captivating interview where we have the privilege of speaking with Theron Skees, a former Walt Disney Imagineer, about the intriguing topic of creating powerful experiences in both the realm of theme parks and within the context of churches. In this conversation, we'll delve into Theron's unique perspective and gain insights on how churches can enhance their narrative, design, and cohesion to elicit deep emotional connections and make a profound impact on their congregations. Get ready to uncover the secrets behind creating unforgettable experiences as we explore the intersection of faith and imagination.

**Justyn:** *Hey there, folks! Today, I have the incredible opportunity to dive into the world of Walt Disney Imagineering with Theron, a former Imagineer who played a pivotal role in bringing Disney's immersive experiences to life. Theron's journey from film to theme parks is a captivating one, filled with passion, artistic talent, and a calling that led him to his*

*dream job. So, let's buckle up and join me as we explore the enchanting realm of Imagineering and discover what it truly means to create magic. Theron, thank you for joining us today.*

**Theron:** *My pleasure, Justyn. I'm excited to share my experiences and shed some light on the amazing world of Imagineering.*

**Justyn:** *Excellent! Now, let's start at the beginning. Theron, I noticed your diverse background in film and art. Could you tell us about your role at Disney and how you embarked on this enchanting journey?*

**Theron:** *Certainly, Justyn. My story began with a childhood dream inspired by the first Star Wars movie. From that moment, I knew I wanted to be part of the film industry. I pursued that dream, working on various projects and realizing the challenges and limitations it presented. Deep down, I felt a calling to something different, and that's when I transitioned to theme parks. I joined a division of Imagineering called Artificial Rock Work and Facades, creating majestic mountains and crafting immersive building facades. My journey truly began in 1991, working on Pirates of the Caribbean at Euro Disneyland Imagineering. From there, I found my way into the company, taking on different roles, absorbing knowledge, and always striving to learn and grow.*

**Justyn:** *That's an amazing leap from the world of film to Imagineering. Your passion and adaptability are truly inspiring. Now, we've all heard about the legendary Walt Disney Imagineering, and there's an undeniable sense of magic associated with it. But does it live up to the hype?*

**Theron:** *Ah, the magic of Imagineering. Well, I can say that the Imagineering of the past definitely did live up to the hype. The company has evolved over the years, and there have been changes in its culture and dynamics. But during my time there, it was a dream factory filled with talented individuals who shared a love for their craft. Imagineering*

*allowed us to work for one client, the Walt Disney Company, which dedicated itself to developing immersive experiences like no other. The commitment and investment Disney made in creating these extraordinary experiences were unparalleled. The collaborative nature, the innovation, and the goal of delivering emotionally connected stories were the heart and soul of Imagineering. And even though it wasn't a Christian environment, being a light in that space was a true blessing for me.*

**Justyn:** *So, Theron, narrowing it down to a single favorite project can be challenging when you've worked on so many incredible ventures. How would you categorize your favorite projects, and what comes to mind when reflecting on them?*

**Theron:** *Absolutely, Justyn. Choosing a single favorite project is like trying to pick a favorite star from the sky—it's a tough task. For me, the favorite projects go beyond the end result and encompass what they meant to me personally. Disney Springs and the Disney Cruise Line Triton Class Ships stand out for me. Disney Springs was an immensely complex project that pushed the boundaries and introduced a genre-changing experience. Being part of a team that delivered such a monumental achievement is something I'm incredibly proud of. Similarly, the three new ships for the Disney Cruise line presented numerous industry firsts and transformative changes. These projects truly left a mark, both for Disney and the cruise line industry. Of course, I hold a special place in my heart for iconic attractions like Tower of Terror and Pirates, along with the incredible experiences at Hong Kong Disneyland.*

**Justyn:** *It's remarkable to hear about the scale and impact of these projects. Your dedication and the innovative spirit of Imagineering are truly inspiring. Now, let's shift gears and explore some of your favorite memories. What moments stand out to you as the most memorable in your Imagineering*

journey?

**Theron:** *Ah, memories—some of the most cherished aspects of this incredible journey. Two moments, in particular, come to mind. One memory takes me back to a business trip in Disneyland. We were rushing from one backstage area to another, and we found ourselves walking across Town Square at evening time. As we approached the flag area, the entire atmosphere changed—the “kiss goodnight” began, with fireworks, snow, and enchanting music. In that moment, we all paused, captivated by the magic unfolding before us. It was truly awe-inspiring and a reminder of the extraordinary experiences we create.*

*The other memory holds a personal touch. After completing the Tower of Terror project in Paris, we had the Imagineering opening where families and contractors were invited to experience our creations. My oldest daughter, despite her fear of falling, chose to ride the attraction to celebrate my hard work. The photo captured her sheer terror, and yet, her willingness to honor and support me made it an unforgettable moment of love and appreciation.*

**Justyn:** *Wow, Theron, those memories are incredible! From being mesmerized by the magic of Disneyland’s kiss goodnight to the heartwarming gesture of your daughter facing her fears to honor your work—it truly showcases the emotional impact of Imagineering. Thank you for sharing these extraordinary moments that make your journey even more remarkable.*

*Now, Theron, you mentioned the impact of “The Kiss Goodnight” and how it resonated with you on a profound level. With your faith perspective, I’m curious about your thoughts on how churches can evoke that same emotion and create a lasting impression. We understand that it’s not solely about emotions, but the eternal significance that lies within. So, what do you believe churches should do to elicit that “wow” feeling, to make people stop in their tracks and experience a powerful*

*connection with God as they enter or leave the church?*

**Theron:** *It's a great question, and when I think about faith-based creations that have truly touched people, one example that comes to mind is "The Chosen" series by Dallas Jenkins and the team at Angel Studios. Every episode has the ability to move you emotionally. It's authentic, relatable, and unapologetically truthful. And that's the key—churches need to embrace the absolute truth, not just a version of it. The truth can be powerful, sometimes sharp like a two-edged sword, cutting through to our core. But it's in the way Jesus delivers that truth—with love, care, and consistency—that we are drawn closer. The strength of the church lies in being different from the shifting sands of the world and representing truth as Christ intended it to be: loving, caring, kind, and consistent.*

*Now, bringing that to life can be done in various ways. Just like in the world of Imagineering, where we solve problems by creating experiences driven by a narrative, churches can apply a similar approach. Start with a clear understanding of the brand, the truth we stand upon, and the purpose of our existence. Then, consider all the different avenues through which we can bring that to life—whether it's the physical space of the building, the use of media, music, messaging, or the powerful impact of individual connections. The key is to shift away from pride and arrogance, refocusing on the people and their needs. That, I believe, is where the true power of the church lies and can make a profound difference in a world where people are increasingly losing faith.*

**Justyn:** *Theron, thank you for sharing your thoughts on this matter. Your insights highlight the importance of embracing the truth, delivering it with love and consistency, and creating experiences that connect with people's hearts. By focusing on the needs of individuals and embracing the power of genuine connections, churches can inspire and uplift, making a lasting impact on those who encounter them. As we*

*continue our exploration, we hope to uncover more ways to bring the transformative power of faith to life and create an environment that truly stops people in their tracks.*

*Churches, with their incredible story of faith, seem to face challenges in effectively conveying that narrative and utilizing the resources at their disposal. From buildings to websites, ministries, and more, there's a struggle to truly capture the essence of their message. Can you share your thoughts on this matter and shed some light on the parallels and differences between the worlds of theme parks and places of worship?*

**Theron:** *You're absolutely right—telling the story of faith is no easy task. In the realm of theme parks and retail companies, the process of creating and refining experiences may seem clearer, as we have defined brands, audiences, and a tangible product. We work hard, draw creativity from within, and invest in building something that engages people. And if things don't go as planned, we adjust until we find success. However, in the spiritual realm, we're dealing with the Word of God and matters of faith that require a deeper connection. It's not a formulaic approach or a mere reliance on external factors. Instead, it demands a genuine commitment to tap into the spirit, be guided by the Holy Spirit, and ensure our creations align with divine principles. It's about going beyond surface-level associations and truly immersing ourselves in the presence of God. Let's explore how we can bridge the gap between the creative process in the secular world and the sacred endeavor of communicating the message of faith effectively.*

**Justyn:** *Your perspective emphasizes the profound effort required to create meaningful experiences in the spiritual realm. It reminds us that capturing the essence of faith goes beyond surface-level aesthetics or instant gratification. Instead, it calls for a deeper level of connection and a willingness to sacrifice personal desires in service of a higher purpose. It's remarkable how Disney's commitment to immersion and storytelling*

*creates a unique atmosphere within Imagineering.*

*Before we wrap up, I wanted to touch upon the legacy of Marty Sklar, a true icon in the industry. Theron, Marty Sklar introduced the famous Mickey's 10 Commandments, a set of guiding principles for Imagineers. I'm curious if any of those commandments resonated with you, and if so, could you share your favorite one?*

**Theron:** *Absolutely, Justyn. Marty was not only an incredible mentor to me, but he also played a significant role in my journey. I had the privilege of contributing to a couple of books with him and spending quality time together during his visits to Hong Kong. When it comes to Mickey's 10 Commandments, there is one that stands out to me—"walk in your guest's shoes." This principle holds immense value because, in the end, everything we create as Imagineers is for the people, the guests. Regardless of cultural differences, whether building a park in China or the US, understanding our audience is vital for our stories to resonate and create a memorable experience. It reminds me to consider the audience before the inception of any idea, design, or creation. It's about empathy, grace, and connecting with others, and I find both practical and spiritual significance in that commandment.*

**Justyn:** *That's truly profound, Theron. "Walking in your guest's shoes" is a powerful reminder of the importance of understanding and empathizing with those for whom we create these incredible experiences. It goes beyond mere design and speaks to the human connection at the heart of Imagineering. Thank you for sharing the depth of meaning behind this commandment and how it influences your approach as an Imagineer.*

**Theron:** *It's my pleasure, Justyn. The concept of "walking in your guest's shoes" has shaped my perspective and reinforced the significance of considering both the frontline employees and the guests. By prioritizing the experience of the frontline*

*employees, we ensure that they can effectively bring the brand alive and deliver exceptional interactions. Ultimately, it's the guests who pay to immerse themselves in the experiences we design, and their lasting memories are a testament to the impact of our work. It's a multi-layered approach to experience design, where every element plays a vital role, with the frontline employee being the first touchpoint in creating a magical journey for our guests.*

**Justyn:** *Absolutely, Theron. Your insights provide invaluable wisdom for aspiring Imagineers and remind us all of the intricate web of connections that make these experiences truly extraordinary. Thank you for joining us and sharing your remarkable journey as a Walt Disney Imagineer.*

**Theron:** *It's been my pleasure, Justyn. I hope our conversation sheds some light on the incredible world of Imagineering and inspires others to pursue their dreams, no matter where they may lead.*

**Justyn:** *Your journey and insights offer a glimpse into the magic behind the scenes. Thank you, Theron, for sharing your experiences and taking us on this enchanting adventure through Imagineering.*

## **Questions for Reflection and Evaluation**

How does Theron Skees' journey from film to Imagineering provide insights into the power of following one's passion and embracing adaptability?

*Consider how his transition shaped his perspectives and contributions. Reflect on how Theron's initial dream of working in the film industry shifted to a fulfilling career in Imagineering. Consider how his diverse background enriched his role and allowed him to approach challenges from different angles.*



In what ways does Theron emphasize the importance of authenticity and embracing the truth in both creative endeavors and faith-based expressions? How can churches apply these principles to create impactful experiences?

*Examine Theron's comments about "The Chosen" series and its ability to emotionally connect with viewers due to its authentic and truthful storytelling. Consider how churches can authentically communicate their message of faith, staying true to their core beliefs while fostering a loving and caring environment.*

Theron discusses the significance of "walking in your guest's shoes" as a guiding principle for Imagineers. How can this concept be applied to churches in their efforts to create meaningful and impactful experiences for congregants?

*Think about how churches can better understand and empathize with their congregants' needs and perspectives. Consider ways to improve the overall experience for attendees, from physical spaces to interactions and communication.*

Theron shares memorable moments, such as the "kiss goodnight" experience at Disneyland and his daughter's ride on the Tower of Terror. How do these moments exemplify the emotional impact of immersive experiences and the value of personal connections?

*Reflect on how emotional moments can create lasting memories and connections. Consider how churches can create similar emotionally resonant experiences that leave a profound impact on attendees.*

Theron's reflections on legacy, particularly his relationship with Marty Sklar and the "Mickey's 10 Commandments," highlight the importance of mentorship and guiding principles. How can individuals and organizations benefit from embracing

mentorship and a set of guiding principles in their pursuits?

*Explore the role of mentorship in personal and professional growth, as well as the benefits of having guiding principles to shape decision-making and actions. Consider how churches can establish guiding principles to enhance their mission and impact.*



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