

The Smile on the Face of the Tiger

RICHARD PILBROW

The rock of Gibraltar looked down upon some strange goings on in early March. This symbol of a one-time far flung empire is used to presiding over the presently somewhat subdued activities of R.A.F. Gibraltar. But now, to break the monotony of life in an isolated out-post — half Spain and half Portsmouth — a strange invasion occurred. Not a chemical attack from eastern barbarians (although this eventuality is apparently rehearsed) but a more unexpected charabanc of surprises: Leyland Bus, Commercial Presentations, the industrial show's producers, under Steve Batiste, Bob Scott and line producer Robin Pritchard, with Theatre Projects to encompass the whole with light, sound, film and audio visual.

Venue: an empty hangar on the airfield.

Event: the launch of Leyland's new chassis for coaches, 'B43' now to be christened 'Tiger'.

Time: March 17 and 19 1981. Audience: 240 coach operators flown out from U.K. for the spectacle.

The hangar, a huge barn, had to be converted into three spaces — a reception 'foyer' and two theatres placed back to back. The audience having received a necessary cup of coffee — it was the beginning of a long day — filed into the first auditorium, where in a dark black and blue space, two blocks of steeply raked seating faced an elongated rear projection screen and lectern. Broad strips of Rosco spectral break up material framed the small presentation stage in rainbow colours.

Several speakers introduced Leyland bus and coach history, recent achievements, organization, research and development and service and parts back-up. Each was accompanied by a fast-flowing sequence of multiscreen slide and sound displays.

A key feature of this new chassis — the writer should explain that Leyland build the chassis and others custom-build the

superstructure, coach seats etc. — is that the suspension is pneumatic. The coach is suspended on air. To demonstrate the efficacy of this quite revolutionary development, the sales director (rather bravely) stepped forward to the front of the two seating units and said 'Gentlemen' (there were 120 at each performance) 'you are now suspended on air'. They were, as the air compressor hummed and the units rose on air bearings and then slowly began to



As the audience seating turned on airpowered hover units the 40ft chassis, also on 'Aero castors', came hissing towards them.

revolve, guided by two men each. To add to the audiences surprise and disorientation, music thundered, coloured lights flashed and pulsed until Valhalla must be around the corner.

As the light and sound reached its climax, the seats had revolved 180° and now faced a new stage and mystery. Nothing was to be seen but mist and darkness. Slowly a huge Union Jack loomed projected through the

clouds and then below, in the distance a ghostly-like white shape appeared and glided down toward the audience. Was it? It was . . . B43.

The new chassis, 40 feet long, weighing six tons, floating sideways on air pallettes toward us. Arriving downstage it blazed with light, a massive gleaming feat of engineering. Suitable applause . . .

Next, Leyland's technical director demonstrated the many unique features of the new chassis. In a subdued, blue modelling light, each item was picked out in white pin spots, while also being illustrated in close up on the huge screen above. Then for its new name. At the motor show, a series of 'candid camera' recordings had been made with dealers discussing the alternatives. 'Of course, you must call it *Tiger*', prompted a rapid light change to cover the white chassis in orange yellow tiger stripes!

Into a film that showed the finished coach in action, up hill and down dale of the Lake District, hurtling round test curves, a road sickening test that demonstrated eloquently the vehicle's remarkable stability. Faster and faster, around we went on film, as the chassis below became alive with light, changing colour and form, yellow, orange, blue, green, red, purple, gearbox, engine, suspension, wheels, radiator, fuel tank, a kaleidoscope of engineering and effect.

Afterwards, cocktails and the excited buzz of conversation. 'Gentlemen, luncheon is served.' It was — 10 minutes away by plane in Tangier!

As our now friendly delegates gamely climbed their aircraft steps — accompanied by the Leyland Brass Band striking up — in search of lunch, we, the creative team and crew retired to our refreshment. A pint at the NAFFI.

Ruminating upon it all, the concept of the launch by Commercial Presentations was a brilliant mixture of showmanship, sober information exchange and some notable 'coups-de-theatre-industrielle'.

Technically an empty hangar is all too like a black box theatre — it takes a lot of scenery and skill to fill it. The roof could bear no significant weight, so virtually all equipment had to stand on the floor. Two eighty foot long trusses supported much of



Audio Visual and Sound controls