

new audio/visual shop – just select one of the 150 prerecorded top tunes, sing and act along with the songs and you can take home a memento of your day’.)

The tram ride is a voyage around one’s picture-going yesterdays and television-watching todays. Its all just a little bit confusing because the streets and buildings have been adapted so many times. It takes only minor set-dressing to convert the New York Street into Los Angeles for ‘Earthquake’, San Francisco for ‘Dirty Harry’ or Chicago for ‘The Sting’; while Anytown USA provides a more homely location for Doris Day or the Munsters. Six Points is a western town with six converging streets. It dates from the silent days when six films could be shot here at the same time, but every subsequent cowboy from John Wayne to Clint Eastwood has walked tall along the streets of this set where you can change towns by just going around the corner.

Then there is Little Europe, condensing the common market into a few blocks of quaint historical adaptability. King Kong lives nearby, yet not far from the Doomed Glacier Ice Tunnel. On a darkened sound stage, the tour sensation becomes one of riding an elevated train in New York. Through apartment windows can be seen TV newscasts of King Kong’s approach. A transformer explodes, sirens scream and a helicopter crashes in flames. But not to worry: although Kong devastates Brooklyn Bridge with a gentle swipe, his twenty nine computerised movements miss us.

There is a lot of water at Universal. The Red Sea parts (forty thousand gallons draining in three minutes) to allow the tram to negotiate a collapsing bridge for an encounter with Jaws. And beware the sleepy Mexican village which has a dramatic flash flood (twelve thousand gallons of the stuff) just as you happen to pass by.

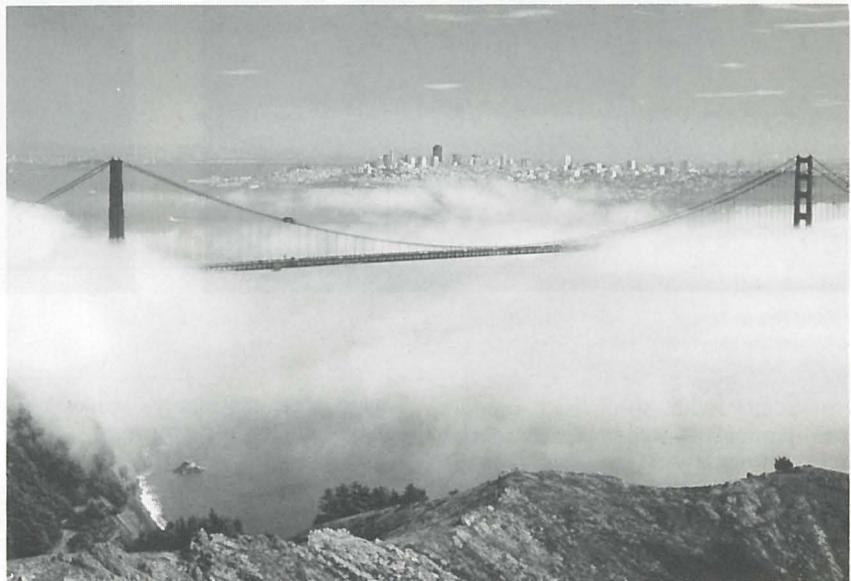
But these sets are not only a museum of Hollywood past: on any given day, the tour is likely to include a diversion to avoid some location where a shoot is in progress. And the tour includes a special effects stage where a sequence of working exhibits demonstrate (with the aid of selected tourists as actors) such activities as 2010 space-walking and Fred Astaire’s dancing on the ceiling.

Back in the Entertainment Center there are presentations where visitors can observe the craft of the stuntman, study upstaging by animal experts or participate (passively) in custard pie missile technology.

However the technology highlight for the theatrepersons is the **Conan Spectacular** which mounts, five times per day, the type of spectacle that is easier to compose for film than stage. It is difficult in a live setting to reproduce effects which are usually added optically after the take. But a 4.5 million dollar budget eases the problem. The dragon’s flame belching mouth and laser generating eyes are truly wagnerian, and the



Las Vegas Airport



Dry Ice at the Golden Gate

thrust stage has a magnificent water curtain which, after a bleed through, draws back by cutting the flow from the centre outwards.

Again sincerity and professionalism are the keynote, with the presentation on a scale that equates with my generation’s expectation of a Hollywood production.

On to **LAS VEGAS** which has to be included in any listing of nominations for the ultimate in theme parks. The Vegas fantasy is Hollywood Movie at its purest. One is aware of a hard reality lurking everywhere. But can it be disentangled? Certainly not by me. Not even in daylight. Not that there is much daylight. Shine from the sun is discouraged indoors lest the gambling cycle gets interrupted, while the truly indigenous outdoor light is the nightly coloured full-up reflected from flash, flicker and chase. Every lamp vibrates except those of Caesar’s Palace which sits almost in repose. Caesar’s is the one building on The Strip with neither flicker nor chase. A pity perhaps that the toning is so green and so

pea. But then that emperor guy, J. Caesar, despite his undoubted global success, does seem to have included more than a touch of decadence in his personal relationships.

One has to use the word decadence in describing Las Vegas: any resort, specially developed in the middle of a desert and devoted to gambling and related pursuits, just has to invite thoughts of Brecht’s Mahogany. But this is sanitised and packaged decadence. And once sanitised and packaged it just isn’t really decadent any more.

But it is still fun, still fantasy. It has been called a Disneyland for adults. The airport lounges filled with batteries of one armed bandits. The hotels alive with the clink-clank-clunk of coin – the route from bed to breakfast snakes through a forest of tables and machines so thickly planted that they do not need to be amplified by mirrors. But they are. Just what is the ratio of slot machines to beds?