

GIGER'S ALIEN: THE

Filming the motion simulator ride based on

By Les Paul Robley

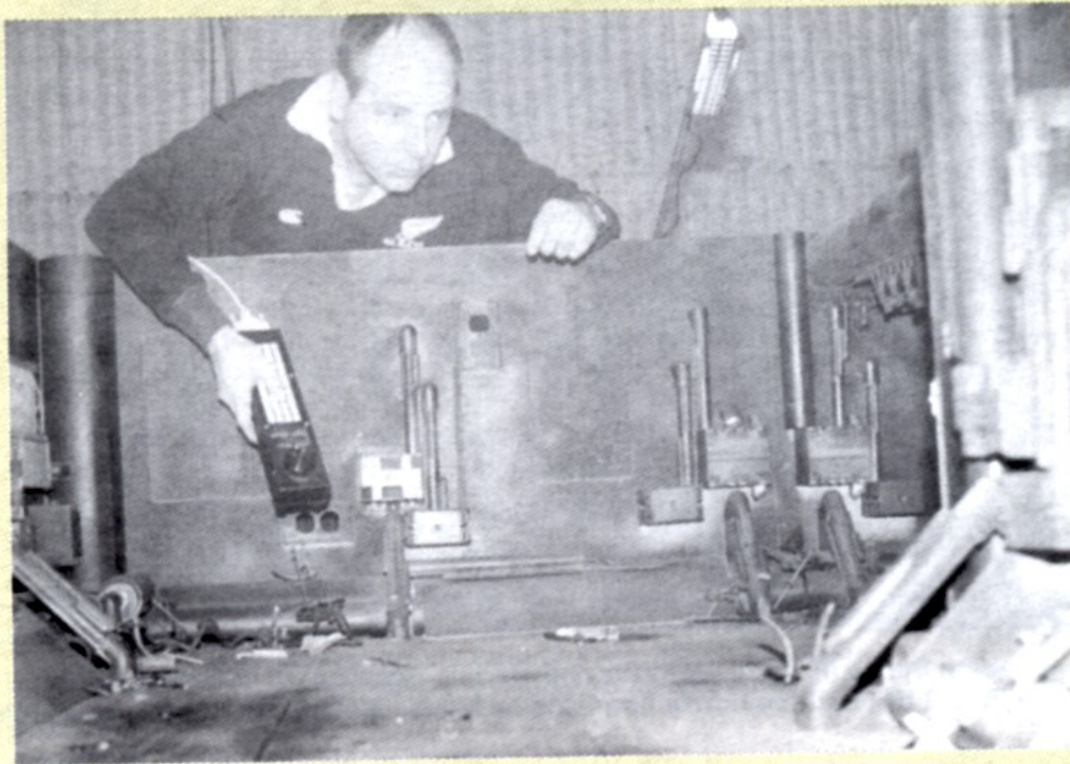
With ride-film attractions becoming more and more popular in theme parks, it seems only natural to base them on popular movies. There's STAR TOURS at Disneyland, BACK TO THE FUTURE at Universal Studios, THE RIGHT STUFF at Six Flags, ELVIRA'S GRAVEYARD SHIFT at Caesar's Palace, ROBOCOP: THE RIDE, Digital Domain's upcoming TERMINATOR 3D, and now, ALIENS: RIDE AT THE SPEED OF FRIGHT.

Produced by Praxis Films in association with Iwerks Entertainment, the company responsible for ROBOCOP, the new ride-film made its debut last year with 28 titles, at San Francisco's Pier 39, as well as three theatres in Japan. Iwerks has the most extensive library of simulation films in the industry with an installed base of theatres now exceeding 165. Directed by Stuart Gordon of RE-ANIMATOR fame, with cinematography by Paul Gentry, former effects supervisor at Full Moon Entertainment, the attraction features effects scenes from 20th Century-Fox's ALIENS, along with new footage created specifically for the ride.

"This will be a film beyond anything you've ever experienced," said director Gordon. "Not only will you see the action, you'll 'feel' it too. It really is the next generation of film experiences."

The pre-show begins with the discovery of a distraught marine who has lost his squad on the Alien planet. In flashback we see what happened to his squad during their routine check of the planet's colony. Corpses are everywhere, covered with the larvae of Aliens. Their only choice is to trigger a bomb. In ten hours it will wipe the planet clean.

But the squad itself is attacked by Aliens from all directions. The marines fire back and attempt to flee but the tunnel is clogged with debris. As the awful details of the survivor's story sink in, the marines interrogating him realize that some of the squad may still be trapped alive. With time running out on the ticking bomb, the marines board an



Filming ALIENS: RIDE AT THE SPEED OF FRIGHT, Les Paul Robley adjusts the motion control camera using a Kuper jogbox inside a trench miniature.

APC (Armored Personnel Carrier), steering it into a dropship on a rescue mission to hell.

You ride with them as they descend to the planet using footage from the original sequel. As we witness a point-of-view image on the screen, the APC tank crashes through the complex, now desolate and littered with debris. Each level we ascend finds acid holes covered with strange resinous material as the tank rumbles over things in its path. At one point we nearly fall into one of the huge acid blood holes. Following a faint distress signal, the marines find the wreckage of the other APC and they begin dragging wounded men from the rubble.

With only two minutes left, the Aliens awaken, coming out of the walls and ceiling to attack the men. You try to escape in the tank. The creatures give chase as your machine careens out of control around corners, banging into walls and over debris. A scene from the film shows one of the Aliens being crushed by the wheels. Someone in your squad yells: "Watch out for the hooolllee...!" as your tank plummets and crashes through four levels of acid-eaten floors of lessening circumference. You finally land in the darkened egg chamber being guarded by the giant Alien Queen.

Iwerks' ride simulation theatres synchronize giant screen high-resolution movie images with high-tech motion bases. Gentry photographed the new material on 35mm

5248 VistaVision color negative film that has been optically enlarged to Iwerks large format 870 film (8-perforation 70mm film), a frame half the size of IMAX. VistaVision was chosen as the taking camera since an 8-perf 65mm would have been too large and bulky to use within the confines of the miniature. The aspect ratios of the two formats are very similar, with some side information lost on the VistaVision frame.

The sets consisted of life-size props and miniatures with no CGI used in the film. Iwerks ride-films of the past have relied on computer-generated effects which tend to lose realism when blown-up on their large

theatre projection screens. Thus, miniatures were chosen for a more realistic appearance. Heading the set design were artists who worked on the original ALIENS. The largely British crew used everything from ALIEN model kits to conduit flex to dress the sets, using Giger's Alien book as a logical source of reference material. The same trench was re-dressed for each level as the APC lumbered further into the organic ALIEN interiors.

A snorkel lens was mounted to the motion-control rig in order for the camera to navigate the tight confines of the 40-foot-long miniature trench. As many as 16 channels of axis movement were programmed into the computer using Kuper RTMC130 software by operator Les Paul Robley. Motion control makes up half of the four-minute ride, with some continuous shots lasting as long as 40 seconds. As the camera rounded corners or plowed through debris, wipes provided a means by which to transition each level of the trench.

A searchlight above the tank was operated by stepper motors and programmed via live encoder pan and tilt controllers into the shot. Flickering lights and interactive spark lights—used when the tank scraped against a wall—were programmed using the new DAC (digital-to-analog conversion) feature in the Kuper. The levels of these lights, along with practical stage lighting on the set, could be raised and lowered for each axis as a

RIDE

Fox's ALIENS.

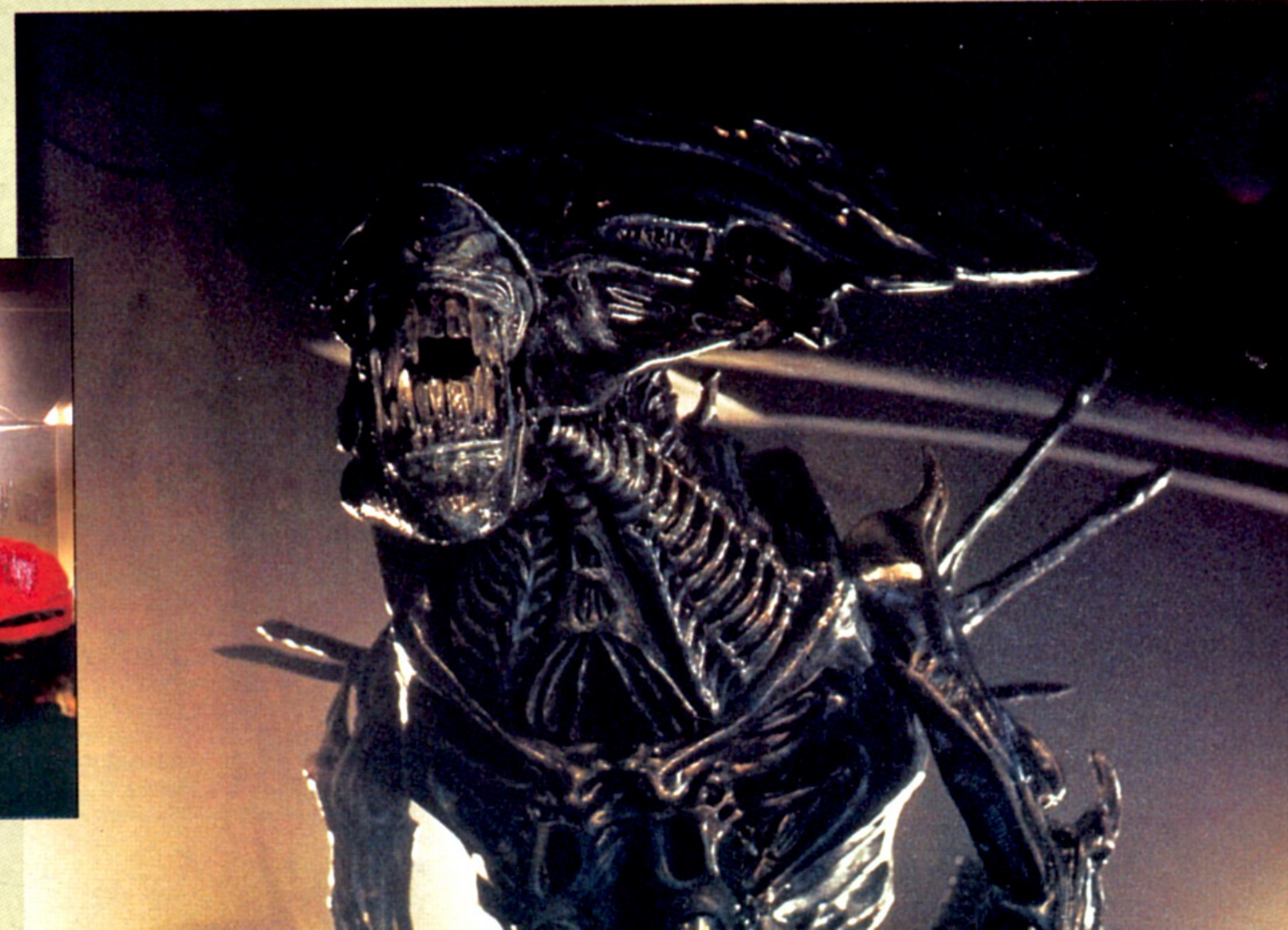
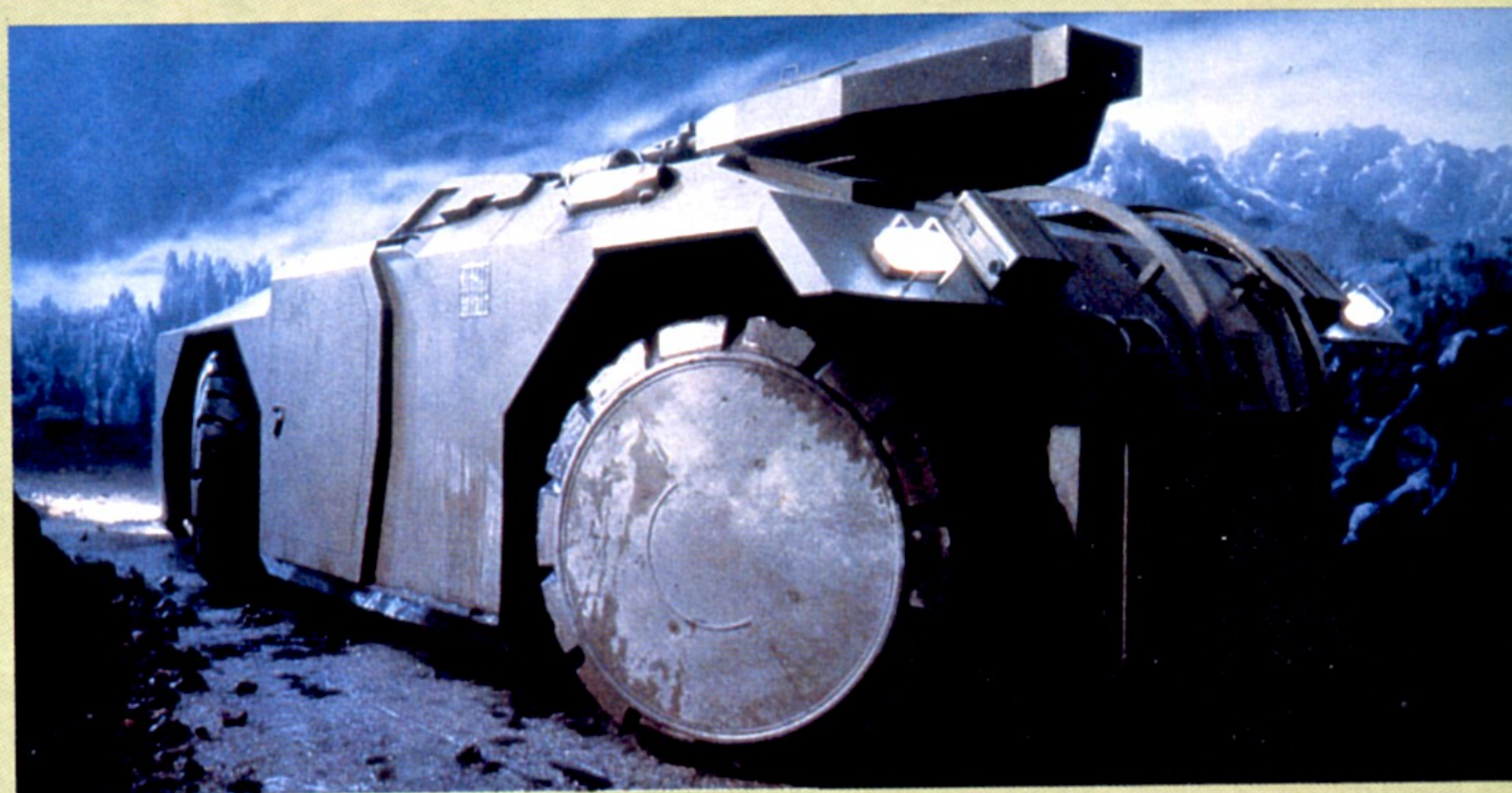
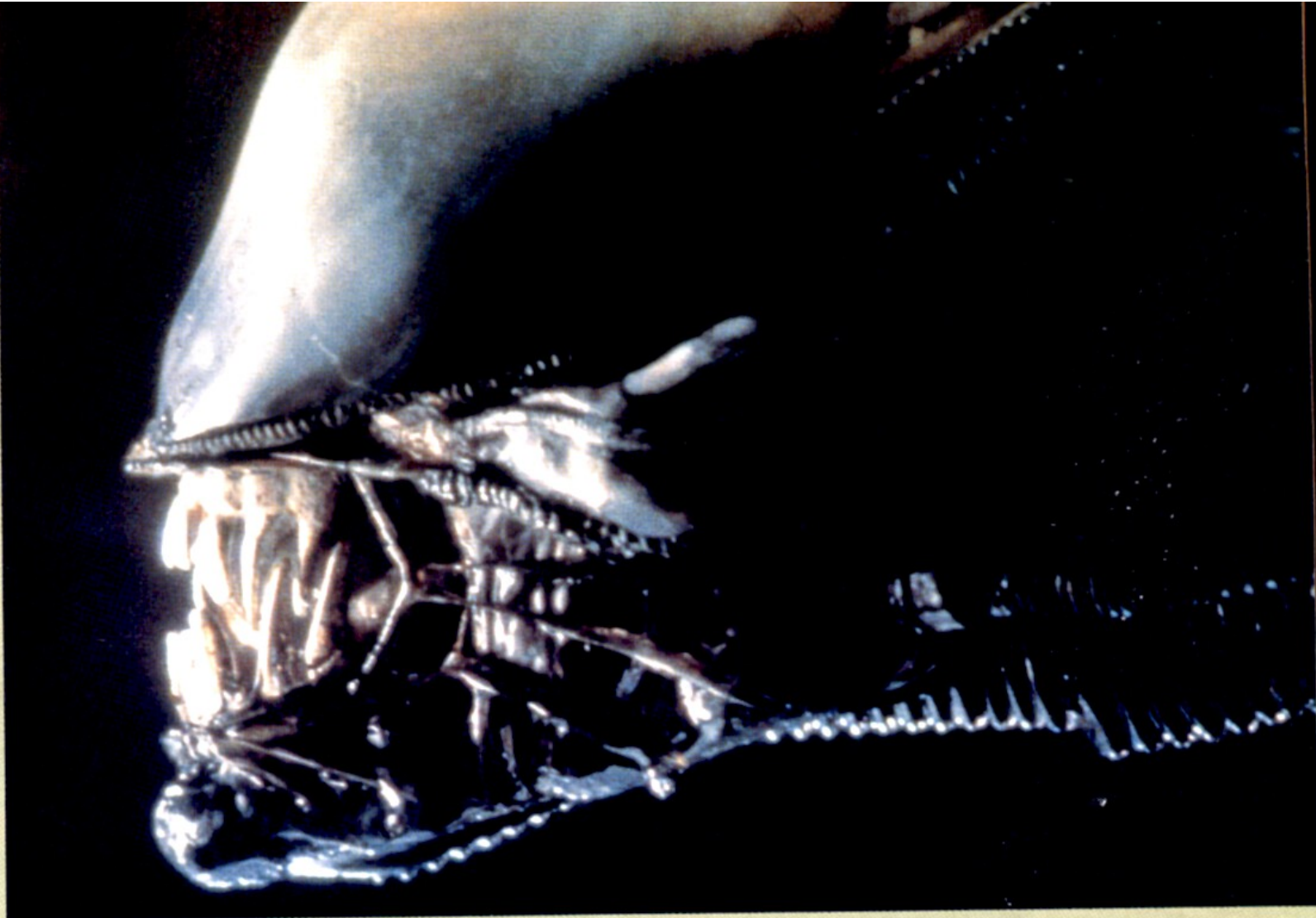
means of fading in or out at any given frame number. This proved invaluable for Gentry when lighting the intricate set. A given light could be faded once the camera passed, since ceilings had to be removed to permit access for the periscope lens.

The entire sequence took over a month to shoot. The first motion-control shot took over a week to build, light, program, shoot, and re-shoot. Because the wide 16mm Nikon lens had to be stopped down to f16 to keep the long trench in focus, the low footcandle light levels required the camera to shoot as slow as 10-second exposures per frame. This meant a 40-second shot consisting of 1200 frames might take as long as seven-hours to shoot when taking into account the shutter closed time. The Kuper has a synthetic shutter option whereby the operator can fool the camera into turning faster when the shutter is closed, thereby increasing motion blur in the open position. The motto on the stage at Praxis Film Works was similar to the one heard on Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. Do it right, Do it better, Then do it all over again.

Once a move was completed, a video camera recorded the action onto a Personal Animation Recorder for the PC. This could be played back at real-time to make any changes to the camera move. Once a move

continued on page 61

Above: Giger's Alien and the APC in which you ride as seen in footage used from Fox's ALIENS. Right: You end up inside the egg chamber, faced with the Alien Queen. Below: Rehearsing marines for the ride footage in front of an APC mock-up.



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ALIEN RIDE

continued from page 15

was okayed, a videotape of it was sent to Iwerks where a technician programmed a movable hydraulic chair (similar to what the audience will ride) to match the bumps in the move.

The lighting started off murky and mysterious—with rays of light casting spectacular patterns from the ceilings above. The roofs consisted of forklift crates. But producers decided they wanted it brighter so riders could better see and anticipate what's coming ahead. Top lighting had to be kept to a minimum since the ceiling removals would've changed the lighting during the shot. Therefore, side lighting and ambient lights inside the set were chosen. Even a small fluorescent was mounted on the camera below the Dedo searchlight to provide some visibility up close.

At one point in the middle of the first seven-hour take, a can of Coke fell into the set right in front of the lens. Unfortunately, the shutter had been in the open position and the take had to start over. The ultra-slow moves enabled the grips to remove the ceiling tops with relative ease, yet created extra-long working hours for all concerned. This was especially unfor-

tunate when the room had to maintain an accurate smoke level in order to simulate a hazy atmosphere for the miniature. Crewmembers were forced to breathe this obnoxious oil for hours.

The Aliens were played by actors in suits. The costumes and heads were fabricated from expensive store-bought items. The Alien Queen designed by Fizel was about two-feet-high and animated via rod puppets. Shots of Aliens from the theatrical film were freely intercut using an Adobe Premiere non-linear editing machine.

ALIENS was licensed by Iwerks from 20th Century-Fox Licensing. In addition to creating a simulation ride based on the movie, ALIENS will become the first motion picture to be developed into an interactive virtual reality attraction. Iwerks Virtual Adventures will debut the new "Aliens" attraction later this year.

Filming began in February '95. Due to the tight budget, the entire production was kept under wraps as the filmmakers did not want outside influences. Alien designer H.R. Giger noted, when he heard about the project, "It's good that they're doing it, but I would like to be informed." Maybe he'll ride it someday and actually live the terror of his creation.

SPACE EFFECTS

continued from page 57

cas set the pattern. You can go beyond it, which hopefully we've done, but what do people refer to? Lucas used World War II footage as his template. He took the old stuff and cut together black-and-white footage of WWII movies and made his dogfight happen, and replaced it with space ships. We've done essentially the same thing for the same reason. That's what Jim [Wong] and Glen [Morgan] started with, not using STAR WARS as a template, but the same WWII movies that inspired Lucas. So by default, we're in the same universe that Lucas already blazed a path on, but we're there for the same reason: it's 'Let's get that leathernecks-in-space feeling.'"

The extensive CGI in SPACE: ABOVE AND BEYOND makes for some long days and nights for the Area 51 animators, but Tim McHugh feels the time couldn't be more rewarding. "It's the most collaborative team I've ever worked on and the best TV experience I've had," he enthused. "The previous shows we worked on were never anywhere near this open, or so willing to try things and experiment. We've got a much richer show for it."

SPECIES DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

continued from page 34

workers at Boss, three key men guided Edlund through the digital realm: visual effects co-supervisor Jim Rygiel (THE LAST STAR-FIGHTER); Andre Bustanoby, who created the mechanical aspects of the puppet; and Jeff Platt, a brilliant electronics supervisor who is also head of R & D at Boss.

Boss is developing a remote version of motion control. Past computer-driven, motion-control shots required mammoth precision equipment tied to a multitude of umbilical cables attached to pulse-driven stepper motors. The system, lovingly called "The Boom-a-saurus," was repeatable, though big and clumsy. A new breakthrough using light-emitting diodes to feed distances into the computer may work in conjunction with this mechanical beast.

Boss' next big production is Harold Ramis' MULTIPLICITY, with Michael Keaton as a working man who clones himself to ease his workload, until the clones start doing the same thing. Boss will use similar real-time digital techniques to create on-set composites with traveling split screens to aid Keaton in interacting with as many as four of his clones in one shot.