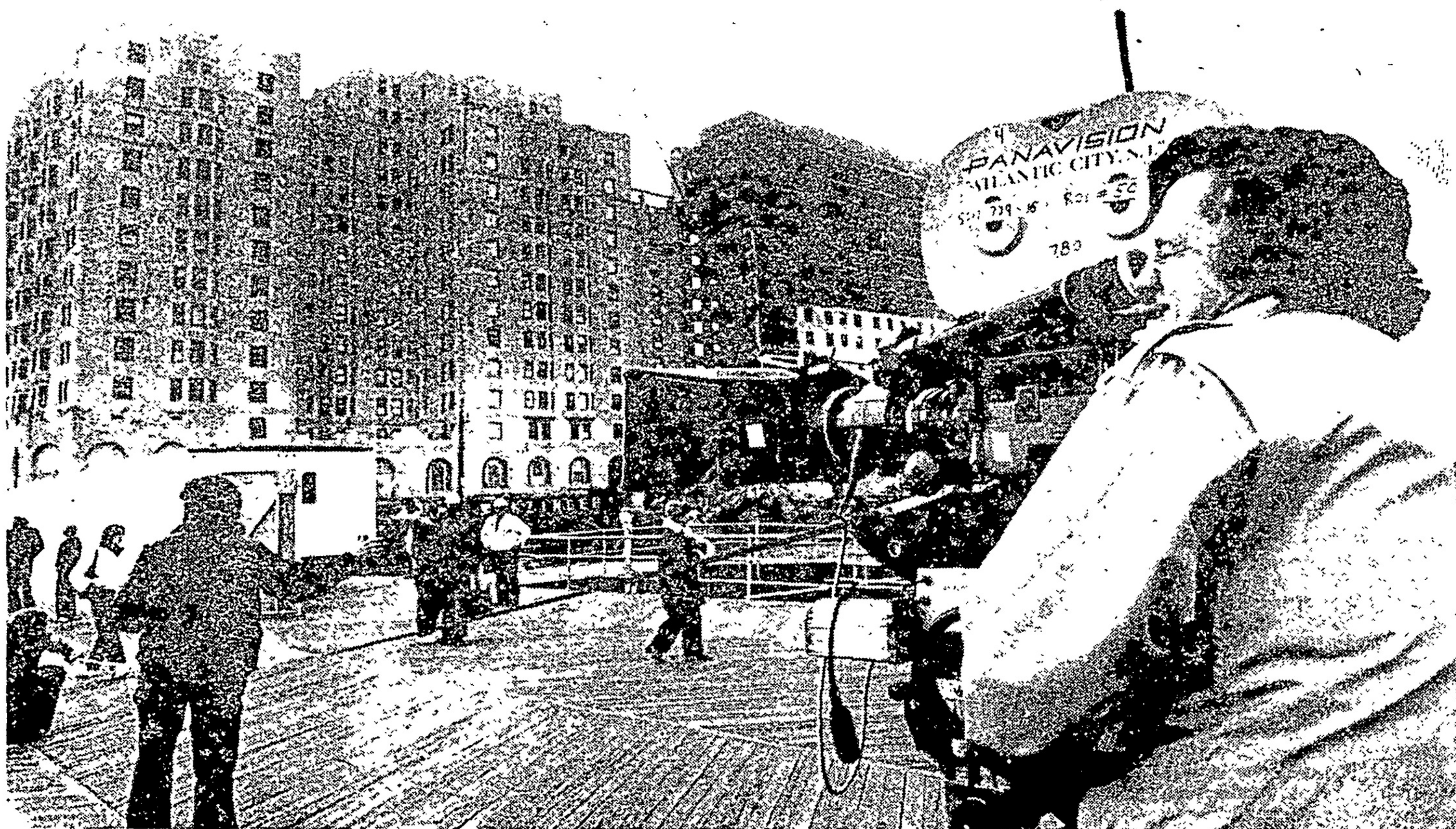




Photographer Richard Ciupka scans the ever-changing skyline of the territory that lent its name to Louis Malle's "Atlantic City, U.S.A." (Photos by Mike Mercanti).

Atlantic City: Filmdom's New Back Lot

First in a series of articles on
movie-making in Atlantic City.

By Larry Toppman

WATCH Louis Malle direct a film, and you'll know what it must have been like for God to invent the dinosaur.

The script becomes a fragile spine that changes shape daily; from it Malle hangs the bones of a few hundred shots, designing each to fit a pre-ordained purpose.

As the massive creature evolves, it takes form with painful deliberation. Only after months does the celluloid cartilage that holds it together harden enough for it to be sent into the world. And even then it stands an equal chance of thundering across the countryside or falling into the tar pits of history.

Malle and a Canadian-French-American crew descended quietly upon southern New Jersey this fall to work their collective magic upon a picture titled (for now, anyway) "Atlantic City, U.S.A."

Undaunted by the staggering failure of "The King Of Marvin

Gardens," the first feature shot in A.C. (in 1972), Canada's International Cinema Corporation and France's Selta Films entrusted Malle and his cohorts with \$6.2 million and a cast that included Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon and Kate Reid. After a casting call for extras October 27, the movie took to the streets.

Anyone who approached the company as it commandeered a short stretch of the Boardwalk or buried itself in the musty confines of the Club Harlem would have found himself surrounded by cables; blinded by lights and buffeted by a thousand voices.

The apparent confusion — but only apparent, since organization generally wins out — is exaggerated by the sense of endless movement, the barked commands, the sudden gearing-up and winding-down of equipment.

Cast and crew slog through a thousand rehearsals and retakes to produce two hours of screen time. This industry offers a smaller physical return on effort invested than any other: The rigmarole required to shoot an eight-second scene seems as cost-efficient as

heating up a dirigible to ferry one passenger across town.

"Now you know why movies are so expensive," whispers a production assistant, as the crew spends half an hour preparing for one reaction shot. Such is the ponderous superstructure that lies beneath the frailest of dreams.

After you spend a week on the set, memories and impressions commingle beyond separation. Did the fight scene take place in the morning or the afternoon, in fog or in sunshine? Did Lancaster wear a white suit or a gray one in the hotel sequence? (Only the person who takes care of continuity has to worry about such things.)

This diary may compress two incidents into one now and again; memory, like a clever filmmaker, plays tricks without being caught. But sometime, somewhere, these things did happen. Over and over and over and over....

6:30 a.m.: First call. A pale sun reluctantly begins to illumine a salmon-colored sky while the crew gathers, sleepily but amiably, in an upstairs room at the Monaco

Motel. Fifteen people share the cramped quarters with cooking equipment and silverware, boxes of doughnuts and rolls, a heater that works when it has a mind to, and a portable television. One of the French-speaking crewmen insists on Woody Woodpecker.

7 a.m.: The crew leaves for the

(Continued on page 4)

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1979, ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. 3