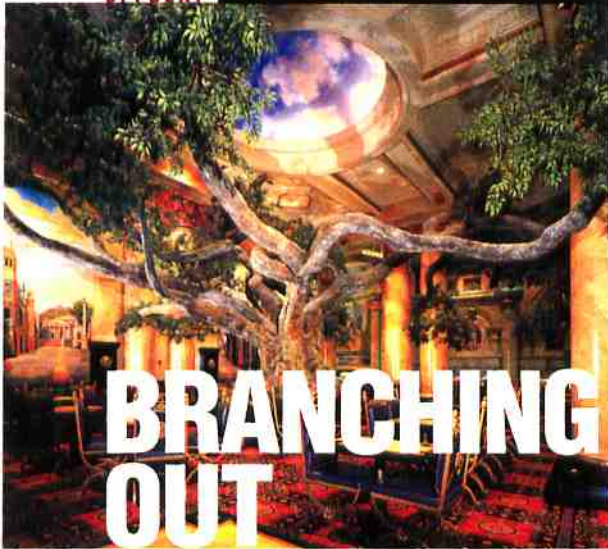


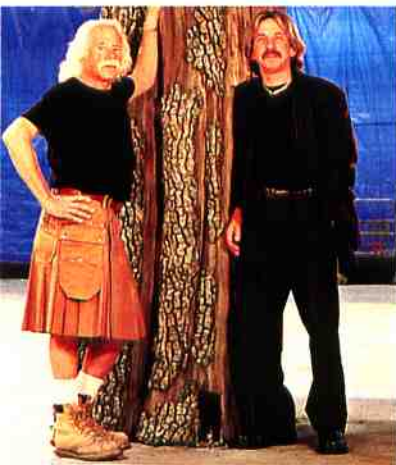
OFFBEAT



# BRANCHING OUT

Have you ever stared at a six-story oak tree looming over a hotel lobby and wondered if it was the real thing? If so, you were probably admiring the arboreal art of **NATUREMAKER**, a \$6 million, 50-employee company that creates trees up to eight stories tall for hotels, retailers, and a few well-heeled individuals around the globe. Their work, usually unsigned and costing \$25,000 to more than \$1 million, graces courtyards and atriums from Caesars Palace in Las Vegas (above) to real palaces in the United Arab Emirates, from Le Cirque in Mexico City to Oinkerz BBQ in Bartow, Florida.

The genius behind NatureMaker is artist, sculptor,



and ecologist Bennett Abram (pictured, on the left) who uses a cantilevered steel substructure and a malleable bark-like compound (sorry, it's a trade secret) to achieve uncanny realism. The company's business mind, president Gary Hanick, says NatureMaker started out in the Eighties as "the anti-

dote to dying trees" in shopping centers and office buildings. Today, Hanick says, the company selects only 25-35 "major" commissions a year.

NatureMaker's trees are so realistic, some appear to have been struck by lightning or damaged by insects. The results can fool even the trees' owners. A few months after an installation in Ecuador, Hanick received a phone call from the irate property manager. "Hey, we've got a problem," the man complained. "There are bugs in these trees."

"We took that as a real compliment," Hanick says with a laugh.