

"Dry White Season" Gets Best Out Of Sutherland

BY BOB THOMAS
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER
 LOS ANGELES (AP) --- For a political activist such as Donald Sutherland, the experience of playing the role of an Afrikaner who becomes a fighter against South Africa's apartheid was something to "kick-start" his soul.

The film is "A Dry White Season," which so moved another actor, Marlon Brando, that he ended a nine-year retirement to take the brief role of a civil rights lawyer. The MGM release is also notable as the first major film by Euzhan Palcy, a 32-year-old from Martinique who directed her only other feature, "Sugar Cane Alley," on a \$1 million budget.

Sutherland and Palcy were here to help kick off "A Dry White Season," and in separate interviews both had high praise for Brando.

"He's a genius," declared Sutherland. "A genius as a performer but also as a human being. He has this immense wealth of observation, culture and literary reserves. You start to talk to him, and you can see the ripples of the little stone you throw into the water."

"As a fellow actor, he is blissful and so sharing. He makes you feel so secure. I'm 54, and to work with this man that I used to see in movie theaters and giggle at because he was so perfect, it was incredibly intimidating. I had this crush on him; I just wanted to be next to him."

"He was wonderful," said Palcy, a stunning beauty with a dark helmet of tiny braids. "When Marlon came to the set the first day of shooting - dead silence. Nobody was talking. It was magical, the myth was there. At the end of the first shot, he did something very funny: He said, 'And now I'm going to pee.' Everybody laughed, realizing he was a human being."

Expectedly, Brando brought his own concepts to the role of the defense lawyer: ruffled hair, a limp, a cane and an English accent. "Marlon didn't want to portray an Afrikaner, so he wanted the character to be an English South African barrister," the director said.

Palcy's involvement with "A Dry White Season" began in 1984, when she read the Andre Brink novel about an Afrikaner school teacher whose tolerance for apartheid turns to activism at the sight of the regime's atrocities. Two years later she joined forces with Hollywood producer Paula Weinstein, who had been seeking a project about South Africa.

The pair developed the script at Warner Bros., which decided not to proceed. MGM's then boss, Alan Ladd Jr., agreed to sponsor the project. A key element in getting "A Dry White Season" made was the participation of Brando. The connection was made through the actor's close friend, Jay Kanter, then Ladd's associate.

When Brando approved the script, Palcy warned that the \$9 million budget did not permit big salaries. He replied, "I'll do it for nothing."

Sutherland became involved in "A Dry White Season" through his former agent, Hannah Weinstein, Paula's mother. Paula Weinstein also served as his agent before moving on to production posts at major studios. Sutherland signed on at one-third his usual salary.

"I thought it had the potential to be an entertaining film in the best sense of entertainment," said the actor, who has never visited South Africa. "I didn't want it to be just a message picture."

"I loved the idea of this film being about an Afrikaner, not about a white Anglo liberal, but an Afrikaner whose forebears had forged their way through on that great trek to set up their own community. It was not unlike what we did in North America: We came in and wiped out the local people, put them into reserves."

The locations for "A Dry White Season" were filmed in Zimbabwe, and Sutherland rhapsodized

about such experiences as watching 79 elephants walking noiselessly in the moonlight.

"Of all of the places I've been, including China, Zimbabwe is the only place where my wife and I want to go back on vacation," he said.

Donald Sutherland has traveled far from Nova Scotia, where he grew up plagued by shyness, ill health and gawkiness that

prompted playmates to call him Dumbo and Goofus. He withdrew into a world of imagination, fashioning puppets and performing his own plays. He claims a 40-year career.

"At 14 I was a radio announcer in Nova Scotia," he said. "Then I went to the University of Toronto and got involved in theater there. I studied at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in

London. I worked in the professional theater in England until I got a walk-on part in a film called "The Dirty Dozen."

He recalled sitting around a table with Lee Marvin, Charles Bronson, John Cassavetes and other members of the cast. Clint Walker complained to director Robert Aldrich that he didn't want to impersonate a general because it wasn't fitting for his

role as an Indian.

"So Aldrich, who made decisions faster than you can imagine, looked down the table, saw my shaved head but didn't know my name. He said, 'You with the big ears, you do it.' That changed everything," Sutherland recalled.

Sutherland became one of the screen's busiest actors, with such achievements as "M-A-S-

H," "Klute" and "Ordinary People," as well as duds such as "Start the Revolution Without Me," "Casanova" and "Die! Die! My Darling!" Now his son, Kiefer, is following his father's footsteps.

"He's terrific," said Donald. "He has what I used to have before I went to school and had it trained out of me: a kind of purity."

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