

Brando is back in South African drama

Here and now

FILMETER



ROBERT DIMATTEO

By Robert DiMatteo

In Movie Theaters

A DRY WHITE SEASON (R) This fictional tale of two families — one white, one black — in racially torn South Africa features the first movie appearance by the great Marlon Brando in nearly a decade. The now mountainous actor plays a sharp-tongued barrister who is hired by Ben du Toit (Donald Sutherland), a newly politicized white schoolteacher, to take on the apartheid system in a court battle.

Ben has seen the devastating consequences of racial inequality as it has affected his own black gardener and the gardener's son; little by little, he has found himself unable to remain detached — to remain an insulated member of the white ruling minority. Unfortunately, Ben's politicization carries with it great risks, not the least of which is the loss of his wife's loyalty and support.

This thriller with moral dimensions is based on a 1979 novel by Andre Brink, and it marks the major directorial debut of Euzhan Palcy, a Martinique-born black woman. Palcy's earlier low-budget film, "Sugar Cane Alley," was a beautiful little effort — that rare movie in which politics and art successfully fuse. Her new movie tries for a similar fusion, and it has its moments, especially when Brando is on screen giving a juicy, hammy performance. But Brando's role is basically a cameo, and the rest of the movie never quite springs to life.

Working on a larger scale than in "Sugar Cane Alley," Palcy shows that she is still a novice director in certain respects. There are crowd scenes that are stiffly staged. And Palcy fails to get a very interesting performance out of Susan Sarandon, who turns up in the thankless role of a white liberal journalist.

But the bigger problem is one of familiarity and focus. Like "A World Apart" and "Cry Freedom," this is one more movie about South Africa in which the hero is a principled white. Why can't the terrible story of apartheid be told from the point of view of blacks (the way Athol Fugard does in his plays)? Besides, "Dry White Season" is not as skillful as "A World Apart" at showing how a parent's unpopular political commitment can tear at a family. Nor does it operate on as sweeping a canvas as "Cry

Freedom." But the movie does give us the chance to see Brando (even if the gargantuan sight of him is a shock). And the subject is certainly an urgent and important one, though unevenly handled here. **GRADE: ★★★½**

THE PACKAGE (R) This clever little movie plays on U.S.-Soviet relations in the age of glasnost, with as-



IAN MCKENZIE (Marlon Brando) is a South African civil rights lawyer who investigates the deaths of a gardener and his son in the film 'A Dry White Season.'

pects of a paranoia-inducing, topsy-turvy political thriller like "The Manchurian Candidate."

The two superpowers are on the verge of signing a disarmament treaty, and the Russian leader (played by an actor who is the spitting image of Gorbachev) has arrived in Chicago. Meanwhile, an Army sergeant (Gene Hackman) who is transporting a prisoner (Tommy Lee Jones) from Berlin to the United States discovers that the man in his custody is an impostor. Slowly but surely, these two plot threads come together in a potentially catastrophic manner.

Hackman is good as always, and Tommy Lee Jones is effectively creepy. In the role of Hackman's ex-wife, the beautiful, underappreciated Joanna Cassidy has a winningly earthy maturity. This may not be a movie of any significance, but it is well-acted and gripping. **GRADE: ★★★**

New Home Video

RAIN MAN (R) MGM/UA. Dustin Hoffman stars as Raymond Babbitt, an autistic savant who can't take care of his most basic life functions, yet who can somehow perform complicated multiplications instantaneously. When his father dies, Raymond inherits \$3 million — though Raymond doesn't even understand the concept of money. However, his crass, yuppie brother (Tom Cruise) certainly does.

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