



Nicholson and Brando on the set: Banking on explosive star chemistry

Back in the Saddle

Two years after his sensational appearance in "Last Tango in Paris," Marlon Brando is back before the cameras, riding the Montana badlands in "The Missouri Breaks," an 1880s Western co-starring Jack Nicholson. Brando and Nicholson get equal billing, but no one splits the screen equally with a legend. "My part's bigger, but Brando's bound to dominate," says the admiring Nicholson. "His mystique is amazing. The ground quaked here for weeks before he arrived."

The day after he arrived on the main location, on rattlesnake-infested hillsides 15 miles southeast of Billings, Mont., Brando refused to emerge from the seclusion of his luxurious motor home until director Arthur Penn had entered into a "discussion period" with him about his character—an eccentric hired gun contracted by a local rancher to wipe out a band of rustlers. The heated colloquy lasted four hours while the production stood still, potentially costing the \$8 million project delay charges estimated at \$186,000. When the two emerged, Brando had won the right to carry his character further into the risky terrain of madness.

Admiration: The film is the creature of executive producer Elliott Kastner, who commissioned the novelist Thomas McGuane ("Ninety-Two in the Shade"), who lives in Montana, to write an original screenplay. Kastner then baited Penn, Nicholson and Brando into the project with a considerable amount of money and their own mutual admiration for each other's work. "I did it particularly to work with Marlon," says Nicholson. Says Brando: "Arthur and Jack are inventive people. All you have to do is think up

a few inventive moments and you have a movie." Penn completes the circle: "Frankly, what attracted me was the chance to work with these two."

Once the deal was set—Brando got \$1,250,000 and Nicholson \$1 million—the script had to be drastically retailed to the two stars. "The picture was scheduled to go within a couple of days," says Penn, "and there was only one scene between these two characters. You get those guys up on the screen, you want to see them go at it."

Superstars: McGuane and Penn closeted themselves with the script during the first two weeks of shooting and emerged with three more confrontations between Brando and Nicholson, who plays the raffish chief rustler. Of his relationship with his two superstars, Penn says: "I keep thinking of myself as a sort of hot walker at the track. Cool 'em down. Walk 'em off after the race. They need to decompress. They also need to gear up. So far it's been fine. They like each other, which is helpful." Says Nicholson, who moved next door to Brando in Los Angeles five years ago, "I haven't seen Marlon socially at all since he's been here. I try to talk with him during the day. We get along pretty well."

Hardly anyone sees Brando off the set aside from his small entourage, which includes secretary Alice Marchak, her teen-age niece, Mims (who wears a T shirt with the words "Marlon's Go-fer"), personal costumer David Watson and a young studio driver. Brando spends after-hours time alone, teaching himself Morse code, reading about solar energy and tinkering in his mobile home with materials he bought at a Billings hardware store. On that rare visit into town, he wore dark glasses, and when rubbernecking locals

asked, "Isn't that Marlon Brando?" his driver would tersely reply, "No."

Nobody is making extravagant claims for the script of "The Missouri Breaks." Instead, the producers and Penn are hoping that explosive star chemistry will lift this Western above the genre. Brando says that he took the job only because he "went broke" financing experimental sea-farming projects on his private Tahitian island, Tetiaroa. He has been trying to raise sea tortoises for meat and has made generous grants to American and European scientists to analyze Tahiti's ocean currents in connection with his sea-farming projects.

Impact: In a rare interview off the set, Brando was characteristically morose about movies. "It's a disappointment," he says of the social impact of film, "and I'm a disappointment to myself." Instead of talking movies, he uses interviews to advance the cause of the American Indian, which has become his obsession. Having thus far failed to find American financing for his long-projected film, "Wounded Knee," he says he tried to turn "The Missouri Breaks" into a vehicle for the advancement of Indian aims. "My ideas were not met with a great deal of enthusiasm," he adds wryly.

"I thank my lucky stars every time I'm in Tahiti, on my own island," he murmurs. "It doesn't matter where you are. You can't escape the depletion of the ozone. You can't build your own citadel." Perhaps, but Brando's performances have always been his own citadel. Even in the worst of his films, his acting has always shown a commitment to his art and the self-confidence to improvise.

Already, he has begun to show just that on "The Missouri Breaks." As the camera rolled the other day, the 235-pound Brando galloped across the broiling range, his silver locks flowing under a brown, flower-bedecked hat. Having mumbled his lines to memorize them, he turned to a passing beauty on horseback and said in a peculiar Irish lilt: "Yer bloomers are showin'." Then, with the gift for improvisation that is unmistakably his own, he leaned forward and put a hand over his horse's ear to shield him from the ungallantry.

—PAUL D. ZIMMERMAN with MARTIN KASINDORF in Billings

Guy Fawkes Day

There is a new brand of thriller that demonstrates with mounting tension how historical events that never took place failed to happen. "The Day of the Jackal," for example, conjured up a bungled attempt on the life of Charles de Gaulle, and in the same mold HENNESSY recounts the story of a fictional character who didn't blow up the House of Lords on the opening day of Parliament.

Because colorful stock footage is used of the Queen herself opening Parliament, the movie is obliged to acknowledge at the start that Elizabeth II and the members of her retinue did not, in fact, willingly cooperate in the making of the