

## Armand Assante as JUAN in The Penitent

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### "The Penitent"

Movie Review

By Caryn James

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Ramon (Raul Julia) has recently joined a two-century-old religious sect called "the penitente," which re-enacts Christ's Crucifixion every year. The victim is chosen by lot, tied to a cross, and left for a day in the blistering sun.

This penitent sect still exists, a title card tells us, in New Mexico, Colorado and northern Mexico, though we're left to wonder which of those areas contains Ramon's dusty little village. And that is the least of the film's questions.

Why has Ramon become a penitente? It has something to do with his dead father.

Why does Celia (Rona Freed), the wife in Ramon's arranged marriage, run screaming into a corner, in a fit of overacting, whenever he tries to touch her?

"She is young," the troubled Ramon tells his friend **Juan (Armand Assante)**.

Yet Celia looks to be in her 20's, and Ramon is old enough to know that muttering "Try not to be afraid" is not the best way to comfort a hysterical wife. But then, he's a man who believes in the power of will.

Juan squints in the sun, grins aimlessly and proves that a truly bad haircut - an extreme sort of crew cut - can make an attractive actor like Mr. Assante very unappealing. Yet Celia is seduced by the charmless Juan. Maybe it's the way he throws her into a lake, knowing she's afraid of water.

If there were a hint of religious conviction in "The Penitent," if Ramon were a spiritual being rather than a cipher, the story could have made sense. As it is, the film's excruciatingly long crucifixion ritual becomes a farce, full of easy, empty symbolism: Will Ramon or Juan be the sacrificial Christ? Who will carry the burden of sin, the guilty or the innocent? "The Penitent," which opens today at Cine 1, is a sham, a Harlequin romance lurking behind a facade of religion.

"The Penitent" is rated PG-13 ("Special Parental Guidance Suggested for Those Younger Than 13"). There are some gory scenes. FOR CULTISTS - THE PENITENT, written and directed by **Cliff Osmond**; director of photography, Robin Vidgeon; edited by Peter Taylor; music by Alex North; produced by Michael Fitzgerald; released by Cineworld Enterprises Corp. At Cine One, Seventh and 48th Street. Running time: 94 minutes.

This film is rated PG-13. Ramon...Raul Julia Juan...**Armand Assante** Celia...Rona Freed Corina...Julie Carmen Margarita...Lucy Reina Mayor...Eduardo Lopez Rojas Ramon's mother...Juana Molinero