



Phone Interview  
By **Omar P.L. More**  
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**POPCORNREEL FILM FOCUS**/"La Linea" (The Line)

**Armand Assante's Line On The Industry And The Craft Of Acting**

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Armand Assante as a priest with ties to the crime underworld in Mexico, in James Cotten's film "**La Linea**" (**The Line**), currently playing in major media markets in the U.S. as part of Maya Entertainment's series of Latin American-themed films. National Hispanic Heritage Month is September in the U.S. (Photo: Maya Entertainment)

NEW YORK CITY

The phone rings. Armand Assante is on the line. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I just have to call my daughter. I'll be back with you in thirty seconds." He politely apologizes again, even after being assured that the call to his daughter isn't a problem. Less than thirty seconds pass before the phone rings again and the decorated veteran actor returns.

Precise. Exact.

The New York City-born thespian has made a career of playing memorable characters, including Gambino crime family boss John Gotti, for which he won an Emmy Award several years ago. Now approaching his 60th birthday and at the peak of his powers, Mr. Assante appears in the new film "La Linea" (The Line), a thriller released by Maya Entertainment as part of their group of Latin American-themed films that are currently making their way around the eight highest-profile media markets in the U.S.

"La Linea", directed by James Cotten and written by R. Ellis Frazer, tells a powerful story of a hierarchical crime cartel gangland in Tijuana, Mexico headed by an aging boss named Javier Salazar, with control transitioned to a hotheaded protégé. The film boasts an all-star cast of performers: Andy Garcia, Ray Liotta, Esai Morales, Joe Morton, Bruce Davison, Danny Trejo, Valerie Cruz and Jordi Vilasuso, also an Emmy winner. Mr. Assante plays a priest who forges ties with Mr. Morales' character amidst the moral ills committed and dilemma created.

Speaking via telephone at a hotel here, Mr. Assante was enthralled by Mr. Frazer's screenplay. "It was a clever, smart script written with a very unromanticized view", Mr. Assante said recently.

That view of an unrelenting world of drug cartels and crime families amidst which undercover narcotics officers had to maneuver seemed to appeal to the actor the most. "It's a very dangerous, dark and brutal work," said Mr. Assante. "[Mr. Frazer's] depiction of those characters was very interesting."

For his role Mr. Assante had to prepare by meeting with a priest for research on his character and spent about a week on the film set.

Asked if he typically took the characters he portrayed home with him, Mr. Assante offered this response: "I don't believe in eating, drinking and breathing a character 24-7 but I have a lot of respect for actors who do. I completely empathize with [them]. I've learned over the years to separate my personal life from my public life and my public life from my creative life. I put my work to bed when I go to bed."

"Unfortunately [living a character off-camera] goes with the territory of being an actor."

After thinking some more on the subject, Mr. Assante noted that there was a time when he did immerse himself beyond the two-dimensional parameters of the camera. On a film where he portrayed the German scientist-philosopher Nietzsche in 2007, Mr. Assante revealed that everything became a 24-hour obsession to detail the truth of the character he was playing. "I convinced myself that I was German and also the rhythm of [movement] had to show a Germanic understanding of the text and that was as crucial as English. I had to cut out my personal life," he recalled.

As an actor, Mr. Assante added, "you want to be on point as much as you can." While the Nietzsche situation was a one-off occurrence, what wasn't was the difficult environment in which actors had to work.

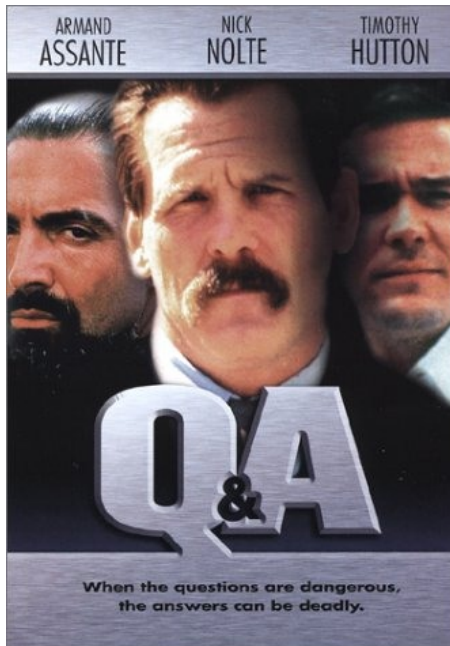
"You've got 50 people that really want to go to lunch -- they don't really care what's going on," he said of a typically crew on a film set. "It's the obligation of the director and producer to create synchronicity on the set, otherwise it can be an incredibly chaotic experience.

In the workaday world for an actor in film you have to do it as brilliantly as you fucking can."

For every disastrous film set experience for an actor -- Mr. Assante revealed that he had more than his fair share -- there were more upbeat journeys for the thespian. "Sidney Lumet is one of those positive directors who ensures the environment he and the actors are in is highly professional and conducive to strong creativity. If you're late to work on his set you can expect an earful.

He doesn't tolerate bullshit," Mr. Assante said. The actor was speaking of his experiences on the 1990 film "Q&A", which he shot with Mr. Lumet in 1989.

Mr. Assante memorably portrayed a low-level criminal named Bobby Texador who refuses to play ball with the green New York assistant district attorney (Timothy Hutton) who wants to bring down a corrupt cop (Nick Nolte). "I remember distinctly -- almost everything [Mr. Lumet did] was shot in one take." The film was shot in 33 days. "We never worked past five in the afternoon."



**Armand Assante played New York druglord Bobby Texador in Sidney Lumet's 1990 film "Q & A".**

**(Courtesy Tri-Star via wikipedia)**

"Eighty-percent of the work and preparation [on "Q&A"] was in the pre-production, which I am a firm believer in," Mr. Assante said. Mr. Lumet, who is now in his eighties (he has a new film expected to be released later this year), has stayed mainly in the independent filmmaking realm, which means typically low budgets and an economy of filmmaking that has served a director who has been in cinema directing for more than 50 years.

"In 1989, ten years before Sidney Lumet got a lifetime achievement award from the Academy I was saying he should have got one."

Contrast Mr. Lumet's economy and methodical work ethic on a shoestring budget with the Hollywood system and you get an Armand Assante who is troubled by the direction that the Hollywood film industry has taken over the last couple of decades or so. "Films don't have be exorbitant budgets and the idea that they do is a terrible fallacy. The budgets of some of these films today can subsidize fucking nations."

There's a hint of disgust in Mr. Assante's voice as he says this.

He compared films in other countries that he has seen in film festivals in Chechnya, Kurdistan, Kazakhstan and Kiev, and rated what he saw as a member of the jury at the Kiev festival -- 53 films in one week, 33 of them documentaries -- far more highly than any of the Tinseltown fare he knows of.

He spoke of Romanian filmmaker Cristian Nemescu, who died in a car crash before finishing his film "California Dreamin'", which Mr. Assante starred in.

The actor had met the director three years before he passed. The film was shot in 31 days and won an award at Cannes in 2007. "I thought his film was strong and that he knew what he wanted.

And he was working on an extremely low budget."

Mr. Assante's observations about filmmakers around the globe working with very little money were particularly noteworthy. "At these festivals I've been to around the world you've got kids working with nothing.

A Hollywood film would walk out with its tail between its legs," he declared.

The actor pointed out 21-year-old Hana Makhmalbaf, an Iranian filmmaker who directed "Buddha Collapsed Out Of Shame", a feature film about kids being manipulated by the Taliban into joining them.

"She was getting Academy Award-winning performances out of three-year-olds and making a politically relevant statement. The fact is that a lot of these films, they will never, ever see distribution.

It eats your heart out," said Mr. Assante, who added that "the media has completely distorted the reality of the industry and our obligations." Even for an actor as accomplished as Armand Assante film roles have not come easy.

"I chase checks all over the world. The last couple of years for me have been brutal. I take [the craft of acting and the industry] very seriously. I gotta hustle my ass."

*"The Line" (La Linea) is now making its way around the U.S. in theaters. A review of the film will appear here tomorrow.*

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