

All American

around 1998 ?? a year before the movie was finished Movieline dec/jan issue

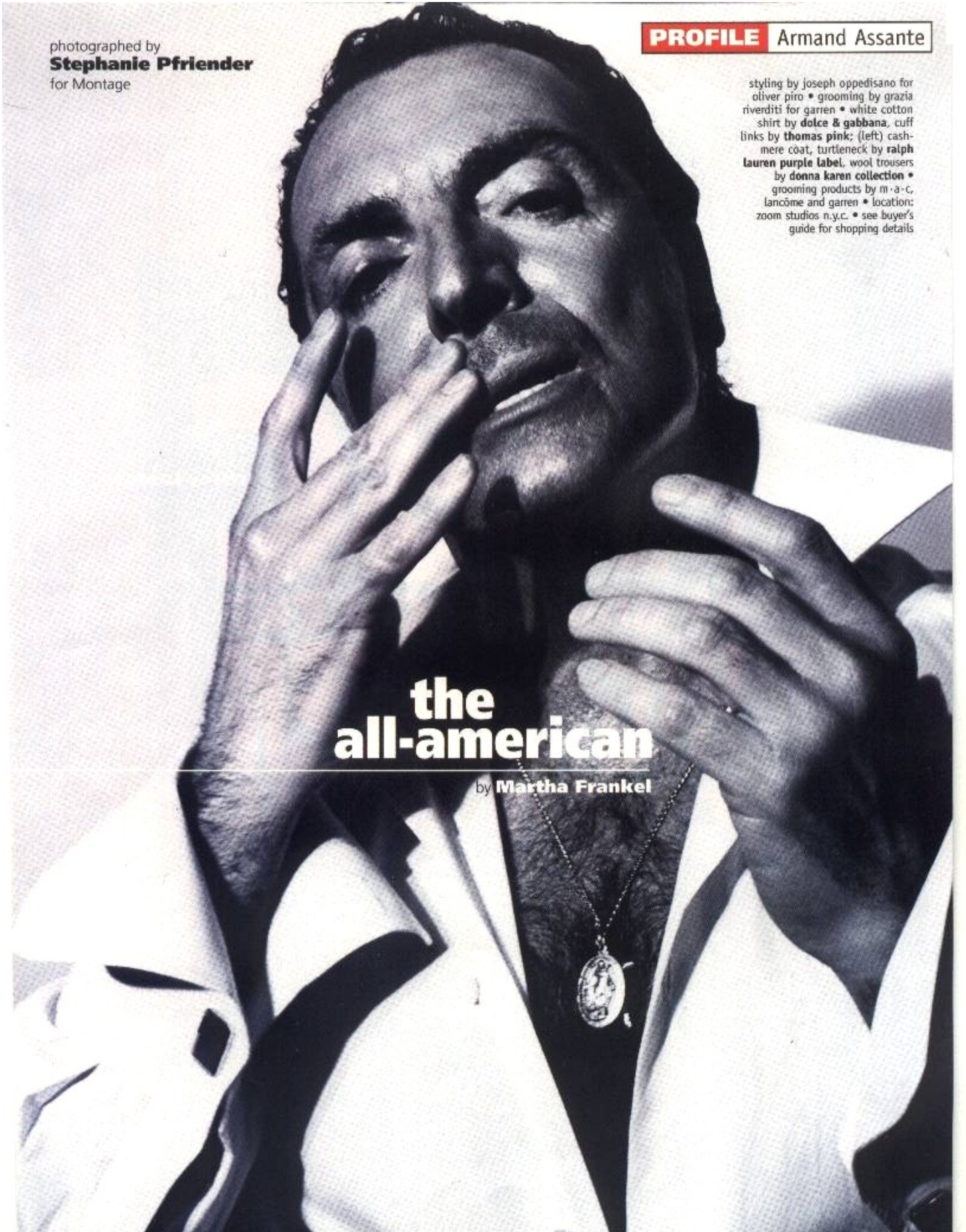
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PROFILE Armand Assante

styling by joseph oppedisano for
oliver piro • grooming by grazia
riverditi for garren • white cotton
shirt by **dolce & gabbana**, cuff
links by **thomas pink**; (left) cash-
mere coat, turtleneck by **ralph
lauren purple label**, wool trousers
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the all-american

by **Martha Frankel**



A RMAND ASSANTE IS NOT WHO YOU THINK HE IS.

He's not, for instance, European, which is what lots of people have thought ever since they saw him as the dashing Frenchman Goldie Hawn fell for in *Private Benjamin* back in 1980. Nor is he French American like the testosterone-fueled bayou dweller he played in *Belizaire the Cajun* back in 1986. For that matter, he's not Cuban, like the singer he played in 1992's *The Mambo Kings*, or Latino, period, like the gangster he played in *Q&A*. Or perhaps you just took note of Armand Assante's existence recently when he played mobster John Gotti in HBO's *Gotti* and you figure he's Italian or first-generation Italian American straight out of Little Italy. Well, the truth is that, despite his exotic name, Assante was born and raised right in New York City, the son of an Irish mother and an Italian father.

"I had a loving family," he says, sipping a double cappuccino in a midtown hotel, "and in that I was very lucky, because it saved me from some of the temptations." As I take note of the fact that in real life Assante speaks with no accent at all, he tells me a story. "I was walking down 72nd Street a few years ago and this guy drove up and said, 'You recognize this face?' I looked at him and even though I hadn't seen him in almost 40 years, I recognized the eyes. This was the kid I used to run the streets with. We talked for awhile, and he told me he'd just gotten off 28 years of heroin. He'd never left the block. I always wonder about those fragile lines of demarcation. If I hadn't known I was loved and cherished, what might have happened to me? As you get older you see that where we're born, where we live and who we're with has a great deal to do with who we become. It's that simple." Assante knocks twice on the table, then shrugs with a look that says he's not actually all that superstitious, but why not cover all the bases?

Now that I see just how American Assante is—neighborhood-kid-makes-good tale included—it's still hard to imagine how TNT came up with the idea to



Even though he most recently played New York mobster John Gotti, most people still figure that Armand Assante is European or Latino. Maybe they'll get it straight when he plays a Civil War officer in TNT's *The Hunley*.

cast him as a Confederate officer in *The Hunley*. He happens to be first-rate as the brooding Southern man with inner demons who takes on the challenge of operating an early model submarine, but I can't help commenting, "It's really odd casting..." Assante arches his eyebrows and launches into a lengthy story about his research for the part. "I drove through the South and went to every Civil War battlefield," he tells me. "I went to every museum and I met guys who are still living the Civil War. And by the time I got to the set I knew who this man was." Determined to halt this train of thought, I bring out a long list of Assante's film credits and put it on the table. He cringes. "I thought maybe we could discuss some of your films," I say.

"There are films I've made that I would never watch," he groans.

"Which ones?" I ask brightly, thinking it would be hard to choose among efforts like *The Marrying Man*, *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, *Fatal Instinct* and *Judge Dredd*.

"I would never say," Assante tells me. "But in my own defense, I will say that I need to work. I have an

outstanding lifestyle, which I enjoy, but the truth of the matter is I also have a big family and a big staff, and everyone's depending on me. So sometimes you make films that are..." Here he trails off, perhaps looking for a nicer word than "shit."

"OK, which of your films do most people like to talk to you about?"

"Well, people liked *The Mambo Kings*, at least the ones who saw it. I was upset we didn't get to film the whole book. There was so much missing."

"Oh, come on. If they'd filmed the whole book, we'd still be sitting in the theater."

"When I did *The Odyssey* for television, I got calls and letters from teachers saying they'd shown it to their classes and the kids finally understood the story." Assante looks thrilled with himself.

"Wouldn't you think the book, which has survived—what, thousands of years?—could hold its own? Now they just watch the miniseries?"

"Hey, lighten up," he laughs. And indeed, Assante has the last laugh. Despite all the clunkers, he's worked steadily for 30 years and is in a position to own a 225-acre farm in upstate New York from which he's loathe to depart to do Hollywood schmoozing. "I'm not willing to sacrifice my life for my work," he says. "This year, I turned down a lot."

As I'm about to ask which parts he passed on, Assante shakes his head. "No way am I going to tell you. Let me just say that I'm always thrilled to be sent scripts, but I think the movie culture is pandering to an adolescent sensibility that is not to my liking."

What, then, is to his liking? Turns out Assante is into heady romantic fare about self-made men like himself—men not always understood in their own times, but eventually lauded for their vision. For the past decade, he's been ferreting out the details of the lives of three artists he'd love to do movies about—the Polish composer Chopin, the

French painter Gauguin, and the American writer Edgar Allan Poe.

"Poe died at the age of 40," I point out. "You're already 10 years older than that."

Assante swats my hand. "I want to produce these films, not necessarily star in them. But I'm not sure if they'll ever find financing. That's why I have to keep making some of these other films."

"So," I say, as we get up and walk out of the restaurant to the sidewalk, "you're going back to your farm now to reread *The Raven*?"

Assante smiles. "Not a day goes by when I don't get down on my knees and rejoice that I got to have the kind of life I do."

Then, as if to underscore his point, a crowd of New Yorkers come up and surround him, shaking his hand and talking about his movies. "We're so proud of you," one of them says, and a luminous smile spreads across Assante's face.

Martha Frankel interviewed Helena Bonham Carter for the Dec./Jan. issue of *MovieLine*.