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Beyond the Looks That Kill



The star as seriously dumb hunk, facing off with Sean Young in the comic parody *Fatal Instinct*

Most often cast as a sexy, brooding foreigner, this sultry maverick has a passion to play morally correct roles. But until he gets his way... oh my! By Marilyn Stasio

ARMAND ASSANTE can't help what he looks like. And what this dark, intense actor with the silky hair and sultry eyes looks like is a lover. A passionate, possibly dangerous lover. The kind you don't necessarily want to introduce to your best friend or take home to meet the family. "Looks never hurt anybody," Assante says without a trace of self-consciousness, "especially in our society, which places so much emphasis on physical appearance. It's just too bad we don't look beyond the image."

For someone so unnervingly attractive, Assante doesn't preen. You won't catch him fiddling with his clothes or cracking his knuckles the way men do when they know you're watching. Today, sitting in the MGM executive offices in New York City, he's at ease in tight black pants, beat-up cowboy boots, and a celery green camp shirt open at the neck. When he's deep in thought, he might rub his freshly shaven jaw, which, even from four feet away, smells of something spicy and manly.

After working steadily for twenty-seven years—in such acclaimed feature films as *Q & A* and *The Mambo Kings*, and in so many television dramas and miniseries that he's lost track—the forty-three-year-old actor has come to accept that "part of the reason I work as much as I do is because I look the way I do." He's not apologizing either. "Listen," he levels, "I'm a product of the Hollywood scene. I bought into the system to the extent I make my living from that community."

He can even joke about the United Nations of ethnic roles his exotic looks have landed him. Too foreign, according to Hollywood's taste, for conventional leading parts, Assante has been cast as everything from a French gynecologist (in *Private Benjamin*) to a Hungarian violinist (in *Unfaithfully Yours*). "That's me," he says, "the ethnic Everyman."

Assante's suave appearance may seem continental, but he himself is 100 percent U.S.A., born in New York in 1949, the only son of an Irish-American mother and an Italian-American father. His name may be a little unusual, but it's his own, given to him at birth. His voice may sound vaguely accented, but

it is the product of his stage training at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, which he entered after passing up a chance to study as an opera singer. And even though he looks like someone bent on breaking a girl's heart into tiny pieces, that impression is also deceiving, because he considers himself a real family man.

Married eleven years ago, Assante is the father of two daughters, Anya and Alessandra, aged five and ten. He met his wife, actress Karen McArn, when she was barely out of the University of Southern California drama school and he was just starting to get decent parts in Hollywood. "It was basically a love-at-first-sight situation," he remembers about their chance encounter at the now-defunct Joe Allen's, an actors' hang-out in Los Angeles. He was with a crowd of friends at one table, she with a crowd of friends at another. They both looked up at the same time, and in his words, "It was one of those across-the-room things."

At that point, Assante had been in Hollywood since 1977, palling around with Sylvester Stallone (whose brother he played in *Paradise Alley*) and enjoying his first taste of the fast life. He had also had a tempestuous, highly public affair with Dyan Cannon, at least a dozen years his senior and at the height of her movie career. There had been other women too, exciting and difficult women whom he once described as "selfish and wild." Now he was ready to make a commitment, and he found someone as young and unaffected as McArn especially appealing.

Although nine years younger than Assante, McArn was also ready to settle into a long-term relationship, having spent her formative years bouncing all over the world. "I think the attraction was of two people who'd

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STYLING: JANE SASSER OF SECURITY FILMS; MAKEUP BY FRANCESCA FOLIO; HAIR: GEORGE LANGRISH/THE LINE; (RIGHT) PETER SOBEL/COURTESY OF MGM; (BOTTOM RIGHT) BOBINS LENSES

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lived on the road all their lives looking for some semblance of permanence," Assante says. "It was our mutual emotional need to establish some permanence in life."

Assante has given a lot of thought to that defining need in a relationship. "The most important thing people do for each other," he says, "is the simple act of making the other person feel safe. I think that's the essence of the male-female relationship. But it takes work" to keep that promise of unconditional safety made to a loved one, a child, or even a friend. It takes "constant awareness and never-ending attention" to the relationship, he says, "because you can never take any relationship for granted. You can't take *people* for granted."

To continue to believe in that promise of security, moreover, takes trust. "And I think you have to trust yourself," Assante says. "You have to be incredibly honest and you have to demand honesty, really *demand* the same kind of honesty from other people. You have to make emotional demands on other people to find out who they are. You also have to be forthcoming and courageous enough to accept their emotional demands on you—because who'd want to be with a person who didn't demand the same honesty from you?"

Given his commitment to family and close personal relationships, Assante finds it hard to recognize himself in the "macho, violent, sexy, dark, brooding, foreign image" that Hollywood persists on casting him in. Which is one reason he took the lead in *Fatal Instinct*, Carl Reiner's comic parody of popular sex thrillers like *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction*. Costarring with Sean Young, Sheryl Fenn, and Kate Nelligan, he has a fine time spoofing his role of seriously dumb hunk who thinks of himself as tough cop, ruthless lawyer, and irresistible lover. "I've had to play this type of violent, sexual man a lot in films, and I loved the notion of sending up the character by playing him as the total moron he is," says Assante with a wicked grin. "I did everything I could to appear to be a dork, to be a completely nonsexual idiot."

Besides wanting to poke fun at Hollywood's designer image of himself, Assante claims his more serious purpose was wanting to make a "healthy" movie that would mock the cynical values of films glorifying sex and violence, as well as sexy, violent, narcissistic people. "It's unbelievable how utterly narcissistic—how *fatally* narcissistic—this whole culture is," he says. "If you look at the characters we admire in the cinema today, they're all pretty screwed-up people with very warped value systems. And this romantic power we attribute to sex and violence—it's really sick!"

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That high-minded pronouncement may sound a bit odd coming from someone who played Mike Hammer in *I, the Jury*, one of the most brutal and sexually exploitive movies in the Hollywood vault, but to his honor, Assante doesn't duck the issue. "I've done that stuff," he admits. "Sometimes I look at the films I did years ago and say, 'That's a very violent scene. It could be misinterpreted by young people.' And that disturbs me." He mentions, in particular, a scene in an otherwise respectable TV miniseries, *Hands of a Stranger*, that virtually traumatized his daughters. "I saw my children burst into tears at the end of the story in which violence was done to me," he says with real anguish at the memory. "It scared the hell out of my girls to see that image of their father. And it scared the hell out of me to see how seriously they took it."

"That's another reason I did *Fatal Instinct*," he adds. "I wanted to make it clear to my kids that their daddy exists in a world of make-believe. We have a moral obligation in what we impart to the young, and I get afraid of the images we're foisting on their minds."

Assante would like to see popular entertainment "elevate and illuminate" its audience, instead of bombarding us with ugly, degrading images of ourselves. "People don't feel good enough about themselves in this society," he says. "We don't get to see enough stories that lift our self-esteem, that make us feel good about our value systems and affirm our belief in ourselves."

When Assante talks like this, you can almost see his Catholic parents nodding in approval at the way they raised their boy. "I come from a very close family with strong moral values," he says. "I grew up with people who supported me emotionally and psychologically through the most difficult times of my life."

The tight family bond was established early, and under tragic circumstances. Shortly after he was born, his mother was paralyzed by polio and for many years had to wear leg braces. Young Armand's care, meanwhile, was left largely to his paternal grandparents and several young uncles who became like brothers to him. "It's natural for me to want to share my family's values," he says, "because that's the way I was brought up."

One of the ways Assante puts his values to work is through the Creative Coalition, an organization of New York-based actors with political agendas on nuclear and environmental issues. At one time, he was a spokesman on behalf of the homeless but nowadays prefers spending hands-on time in a shelter, where he cooks two hundred to three hundred meals with a friend who owns a restaurant. "I'd rather do things than just talk about them," he says. "And since I don't get involved in a lot of

causes, I want to make sure whatever I do is something that's in my gut."

Assante still lives close to the parents who imbued him with such strong moral values, on a 250-acre retreat in upstate New York. His father helped him buy the property in 1983, and father and son continue to work together on building it into a working farm. "It's very beautiful and very isolated," Assante says of the spread he calls Lone Oak Farm, where he and his family live "very, very privately." Although he commutes to Manhattan almost daily to nourish what he calls "my urban energy," he spends the rest of his time between films at Lone Oak, riding his horses, raising his hay crop, and doing the kind of strenuous work that helps him "decompress" and "revitalize" for his next acting project.

Some people, although not his friends, call the actor a recluse, and he doesn't exactly deny the label. But he thinks what they're really referring to is his outspoken aversion to the Hollywood life-style. "I don't want to live in L.A.; it drives me crazy," he says. "Even when I'm finished working, I always feel like I'm still at an industry lunch table where everybody's talking movies, movies, movies. Life out there never gets away from movies."

If Assante is really stressed, he finds a place even more secluded than Lone Oak to hide out and regenerate. Which is what he did after filming *Fatal Instinct*, when he spent two weeks sailing alone in the Caribbean. "I needed to be on that boat, in the middle of the ocean, in the middle of nowhere," he says. "I was wiped out."

Not all actors are so exhausted after a movie. But not all actors drive themselves as hard as Assante does. Five years ago in London, after putting in his customary sixteen hours a day filming the CBS-TV miniseries *Jack the Ripper*, he collapsed from a mysterious illness. After being misdiagnosed by three doctors as an anxiety attack, the debilitating condition turned out to be clinical hypoglycemia, aggravated by a twenty-year addiction to caffeine and cigarettes. "I was juicing about two pots a morning, and I used to drink it like mud—very, very strong," Assante says of the espresso that, combined with the "nice bottle of wine" he always had to have with dinner, short-circuited his overcharged neural system.

Although he still lifts the occasional coffee mug and the odd cigarette to his lips, he says he has learned his lesson. Not only has he outfitted his home with exercise equipment; he also works out with a trainer at a gym in Manhattan to supplement the heavy labor he does on the farm. "I'm not somebody out there trying to be a body-builder," he says. "I just like to keep

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my cardiovascular system up to par."

Still, he came close to overloading the circuits again a year ago last spring, having worked for eight months straight, traveling to sixteen cities in four countries to promote the international release of *Mambo Kings* and, during the same period, playing supporting roles in *1492* and *Hoffa*. "I ended up at the Great Barrier Reef in Australia," he says with a wry laugh at how symbolic that had seemed at the time.

Of all the pressures of life on the road, the separation from family was the most unbearable. McArn and the girls managed a visit when he was in Spain filming *1492*, but for most of those eight months, the devoted family man was a man without a family. "That's stress—*real* stress—working alone for that duration of time," he says. "My need for family roots is very, very important. But I had no family life. It was all work—and the work I do is not conducive to domestic life."

There's no quick fix for the problem, and Assante's obsessive work habits only compound the difficulty. Even as he speaks, he's about to take off for Canada to work on another film, *Trial by Jury*, which he describes as "a very

dark psychological thriller" with William Hurt and Gabriel Byrne. And despite all the talk about morally uplifting roles, he has been cast as the villain who intimidates a female juror, portrayed by Joanne Whalley-Kilmer, in a mobster trial. "In truth," he says, "I play a psychopathic mafioso. But he's a very interesting character, and at least he's a psychopathic American mafioso."

Assante doesn't presume to speak for his family, who have to share the burden of his workaholicism, but he is convinced that open, honest communication is the only way to survive the kind of unrelenting pressure his schedule subjects them to. "What really creates stress," he says, "is not being able to talk about what you're feeling. Or the *unwillingness* to talk about your feelings. If you can't tell your wife how you feel, or you can't tell your child, you're jamming up your life."

The other thing that can jam Assante up, he confesses, is not being able to work on something he believes in. "I've always been tyrannized by my ideals," he says. "If there's one thing I want to achieve, it's to do life-affirming movies that make people feel good about themselves, because life can be so miserable today. And as long as those ideals are not achieved, I keep reaching out for them. That's what keeps me alive." ☐