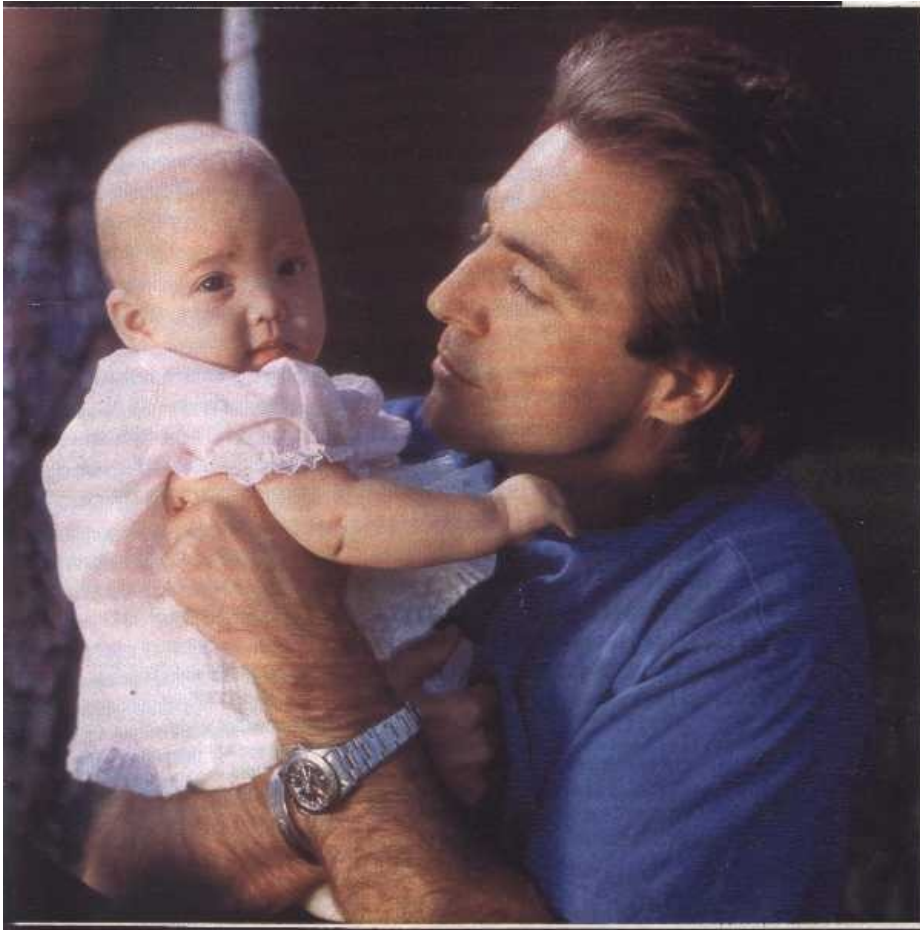


INSIDE HOLLYWOOD

July/August 1992
by Robin Milling



Far from his suave
Hollywood image

**ARMAND
ASSANTE**

Finds that family
life on the farm
suits him just fine

Hollywood leading man Armand Assante who is best-known in Britain for his part in the recent mini-series *Jack The Ripper*, in which he co-starred with Michael Caine and Jane Seymour, casts off his urbane screen image the moment he leaves the set.

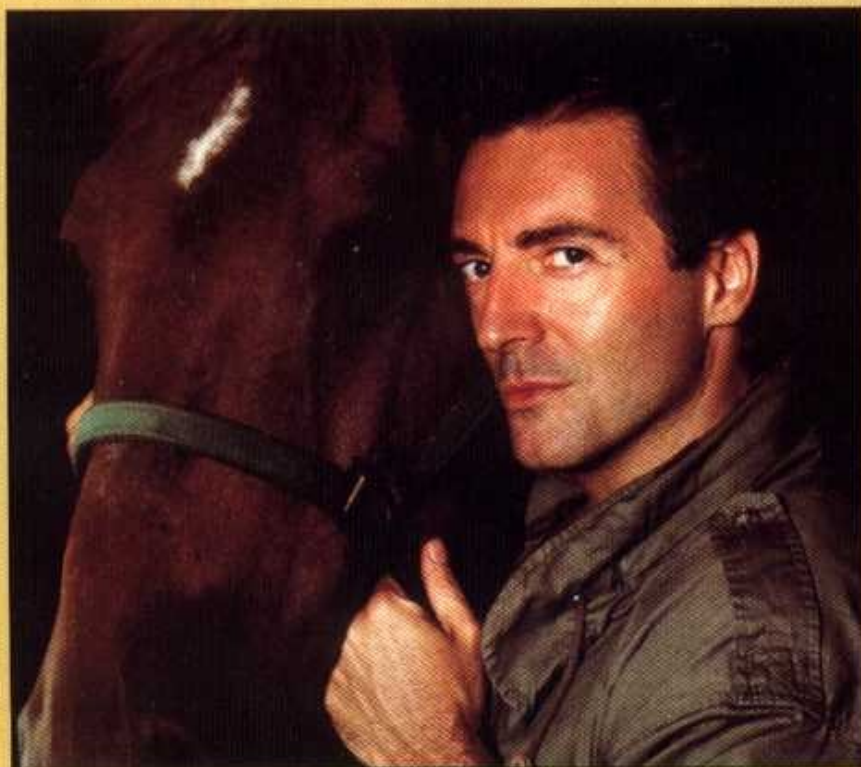
His own life revolves round Lone Oak Farm, a 218-acre spread north of New York ▶

Armand with five-month-old Alessandra (left) and with his wife Karen and their other daughter, Anya, five, in the gardens of their farmhouse (right)

Family and the peaceful environment of his upstate New York farm provide fulfillment for this actor's actor

Feature Interview by Robin Milling

There's a place I used to visit in upstate New York to get away from it all. Just 60 miles north of New York City you can smell fresh air and actually see wildlife and trees. One weekend I will never forget, I woke up early Sunday morning to find my girlfriend's sister stationed next to the window. I thought it was wonderful that she also



Showing Star 123

ARMAND ASSANTE

REALITY AND ILLUSION

ARMAND

Most recently Assante starred as a flamboyant underworld drug dealer in Sidney Lumet's *Q&A*, which questions police brutality and earned Assante a Golden Globe nomination for Best Supporting Actor. A role opposite Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger in *The Marrying Man* followed.

Although Assante has appeared in numerous films, his fame has been associated with television performances. He won critical praise for his performance in the miniseries *Hands Of A Stranger* as a stalwart cop who discovers his wife (Beverly D'Angelo) was raped while being unfaithful to him.

He has, however, vowed never to make another telefilm. And he may not have to. Assante is magnetic and alluring in the recent *The Mambo Kings* as Cesar Castillo, a passionate musician obsessed by the American dream. The movie is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs Of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos. Assante becomes Castillo, a self-styled master of seduction, whose great lust for wine, women and Mambo is surpassed only by his deep fraternal love for his brother Nestor (Antonio Banderas). Assante even studied under Mambo King Tito Puente. He is keeping busy filmwise, and will appear soon in Ridley Scott's *1492* and Danny DeVito's *Hoffa*.

The adjectives used to describe Assante's characters are often on the sexy side. He exudes sensuality and appears confident and secure. But the most charming quality about Armand Assante is his unpretentiousness and modesty. He doesn't censor his words, and delivers his thoughts with conviction and passion. Critic Gene Shalit cautioned men about *Mambo Kings*, saying, "If you take your wife to this movie, it's at your own risk."

IH: Your character in *Mambo Kings* is quite the ladies man. How do you feel about romance?
Assante: I don't think of it too much because in truth I get unconditional love from my children, and I don't know how much love there really is out in the world. There's a lot, but it takes a lot of energy to get it.

IH: What kind of love story do you see *Mambo Kings* as being?

Assante: It's a love story between brothers. That's really the engine of the story as much as anything else. It's about a flagrant womanizer who thinks he can find love everywhere, and when he loses his brother he realizes he's lost the one true unconditional love in his life. It's not such a romantic story; it's very real. It happens to all of us. In this society love is cheap; it's put everywhere, and we think it's available everywhere. But in truth, how much unconditional love do you have in your life? That's another story, and once you start taking that for granted, it's a stressful situation—at least it has been in my life.

IH: Do you have brothers?

Assante: I have two sisters. I have uncles who are like my brothers. Antonio [Banderas] is like my brother now. We had an incredible male bonding experience. He's a great actor and an incredibly generous person. We spent



Assante feels most comfortable with his wife Karen and their children: "The narcissistic thing of stardom has no appeal... it's an illusion."

hours sharing our feelings and trying to understand who these people were. By the time we started the film we spent seven days a week, 18 hours a day—every waking minute—with each other.

IH: Are you a Mambo aficionado?

Assante: No, not at all. I was very attracted to music as a kid. I was a drummer and a singer in a rock band, and I wanted to be a jazz drummer.

IH: Do you still play?

Assante: I'm going back to it. I want to play because it's great therapy. I put a deposit down on an enormous set of drums. I want to play a gig with Tito Puente. I've really got to get my chops in drumming together.

IH: How are the drums therapeutic?

Assante: As a boy I was just mesmerized by

rhythm and by drummers. I love drumming. I think rhythm is a part of everything in our lives, but we don't recognize it. There's a great book, *A Different Pulse*; it's the study of rhythm. Even as an actor, if you work on a scene long enough, whether you come from a method school or whatever, you will eventually find there's a rhythm in the way an author writes. There's a rhythm to almost everything you do. I'm just obsessed with rhythm.

IH: Did you sing in the film?

Assante: That is me singing, but there are like three notes that are overdubbed because the music director thought I was slightly flat—I could murder him for that. When I find the person that overdubbed the three notes of my song, I'm going to give him a sore throat!

IH: What about the dancing? Is that you



"I get unconditional love from my children... but how much do you have in your life? You start taking it for granted."

slithering on the screen?

Assante: That's me dancing, too. No double, I can assure you (laughs heartily). I had to study Mambo. Mambo was very difficult for me. To get it in your body—the look of the Mambo is a particular way of dancing. You have to have it in your hips. If it's not correct, anyone who's a dancer can spot it. Any Latino can spot it; they can see that it's not in your hips. And your hips have to move the correct Cuban way. It's that specific. It's a cultural thing.

IH: Where did you go to do your research?

Assante: I went to the Latin clubs every night after work. I had to draw on something for these characters because they really exist there. Mambo Kings have existed in American society for the past 40 years. And they're everywhere if you go to the inner city clubs.

There's a whole revolution of Latin music boiling in this country that people don't know about. It's there if you want it.

IH: What attracted you to the project? It's a little different from your previous roles.

Assante: I was not drawn to the product, although I was very acquainted with the book. I was not drawn to it for one reason, and that is I did not want to be *the* representative of Cuban culture. That was the most frightening aspect about doing the film. When I met Arne Glimcher [the director], he said, 'Look, I bought this book before it went to print. I'm not trying to do a definitive story about Cuban culture. I'm trying to present the story of two brothers, the eternal immigrant dream story of anyone who ever came to America. This is an American story.' I still was reluctant

ASSANTE

because I knew that I would be criticized and put on the spot for doing this Latino role. The bottom line was that Arne said if I didn't do the film, it wouldn't get made. Arne was in a *Catch 22* with Warner Brothers. He could neither cast nor find a Latino actor he wanted for the role, and at the same time was bent on my doing it (which I appreciate). But again, I didn't want to be the target for everyone.

IH: Well, maybe he was right. Your performance was hailed by critics, and women are falling in love with you. How does it feel to finally get public support?

Assante: Generally, I've received tremendous support because I was endorsed by Tito Puente and Celia Cruz. I think many Latinos that worked on the film, if they didn't endorse me, they wouldn't have made the film. I could never have done the role without the endorsement of the musicians, because they're the ones who really gave me the juice I needed to play the role. They were as much responsible for the role as I was. And also I'm very grateful that the Hispanic community is respectful of the film because it treats the Hispanic community with great dignity. It's a film about people trying to hold onto their values.

IH: Don't you think it odd to be criticized for taking a role?

Assante: Yeah, because it's a subliminal form of racism. I don't endorse that kind of racial thing. Andy Garcia played an Italian in *The Godfather Part III*. Actors are actors. Lawrence Olivier played a black man. An actor should be given freedom; they're artists. It's the actor's view of that particular culture. I can't embrace this ideology. I know where it comes from; it comes from economic repression, and I respect that. But do I embrace it? No. I don't endorse the idea that an actor has to be from the minority he plays. Acting is about masking and becoming something you're not.

IH: So what sealed the deal about making the film?

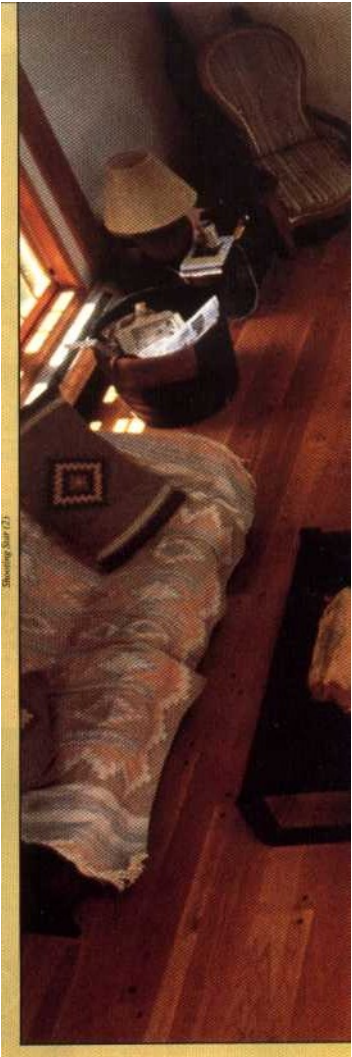
Assante: I welcomed the brotherly thing. When I met Antonio I felt at one with him. The two brothers are really the two sides of every individual in that Cesar is the eternal dreamer and Nestor is the eternal idealist. Never the twain shall meet. He's much more like Cesar and I am like Nestor in terms of who we are as real people. In a way it was like role switching.

IH: Really? By the characters you've played in the past, your image has always left people with the impression that you possess the qualities of Cesar.

Assante: I think Cesar is the shadow within every man. He's the shadow that you want to drag out of yourself. It's so much easier to be Cesar (laughs), because life is so much easier, you know? It's liberating. That's the way you would *like* to live your life. You cannot in this society; for some reason the Cesars of the world are the ones that become the downfall. They're the conquerors. Anyone who tries to go out and grab the world the way Cesar does

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ASSANTE

is knocked down for it. It's like a hero that's just cut down immediately.

IH: You're well-known from the television movies you've made. Will *Mambo Kings* be your ticket to more movies, or will you return to television?

Assante: I don't get uptight about roles in Hollywood. I could care less. I don't want to do television anymore. I quit television in 1988. It's too quick. It reduces almost everything to the common denominator. I think there is good television, but it's completely a producer's medium. It has nothing to do with actors and directors. If you have a great producer who can keep the networks off your back and out of your hair, chances are you'll come up with a good product. Most producers in television are scared 'yes' people, though. They have no idea how to run a set; they have no idea how to deal with creative people. So it doesn't appeal to me at all. But it's a way to make a living. It certainly supported my independent films.

IH: Which ones?

Assante: *Belizaire*, *The Cajun* and *The Penitent* were films that people came to me about, and I got behind them. I helped get them made. I did them because I always wanted to do interesting stories on a small scale, and curiously enough *Mambo Kings* was a similar experience, although it happened to be done under a big studio.

IH: How would you describe your acting technique?

Assante: It's from my theater background, the same process I use in the theater. But as I get older, I respect the fact that I'm a slowpoke. I don't like to work fast. And when I *do* work fast, I have enormous anxiety; I can't achieve anything. I have to take my time.

IH: Are you prepared for movie stardom, or are you geared to remain separate from the pack?

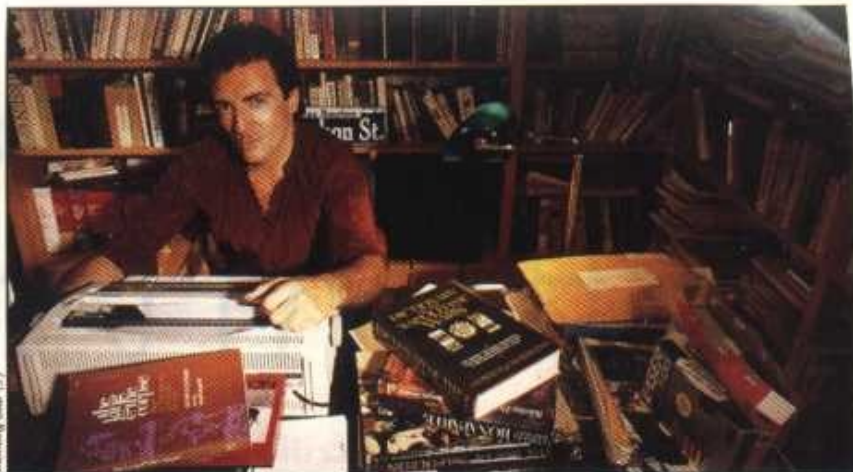
Assante: I'm just trying to look for good stories. I'm moving in the back way. I'm coming in ass backwards. I suppose. I would never use movie stardom for power.

IH: Obviously you are ambivalent towards Hollywood. Where do you actually make your home?

Assante: I live on a farm in northeast Monroe, New York. A lot of people don't know this, but I bought it because I didn't want an apartment, and it was actually cheaper. Ironically, I bought it in 1983 during the land boom, and I ended up land rich because I chose to buy this whole farm rather than an apartment in New York. I have horses and I ride a lot when I'm not working. I like being close to nature. You can literally be completely depleted and you have to recharge. So I use it as a retreat. It's good for my kids (two daughters) to be in a smaller, more focused community.

IH: What interests you most about acting?

Assante: I'm interested in having a say in a good story and surrounding myself with the right sensibilities to do that. This whole narcissistic thing of movie stardom has no appeal. It's an illusion that's attached to a person.



Researching and perfecting each role brings benefits for Assante; the chance to run the farm and enjoy the outdoors he loves.

