

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

ARMAND ASSANTE and RAY SHARKEY

Elisa Leonelli · Tuesday, February 8th, 2022

You may ask what do these two actors have in common. I photographed and interviewed each of them at home for magazine layouts in the early 1980s, and they were both Italian-Americans who loved Italian Cinema.

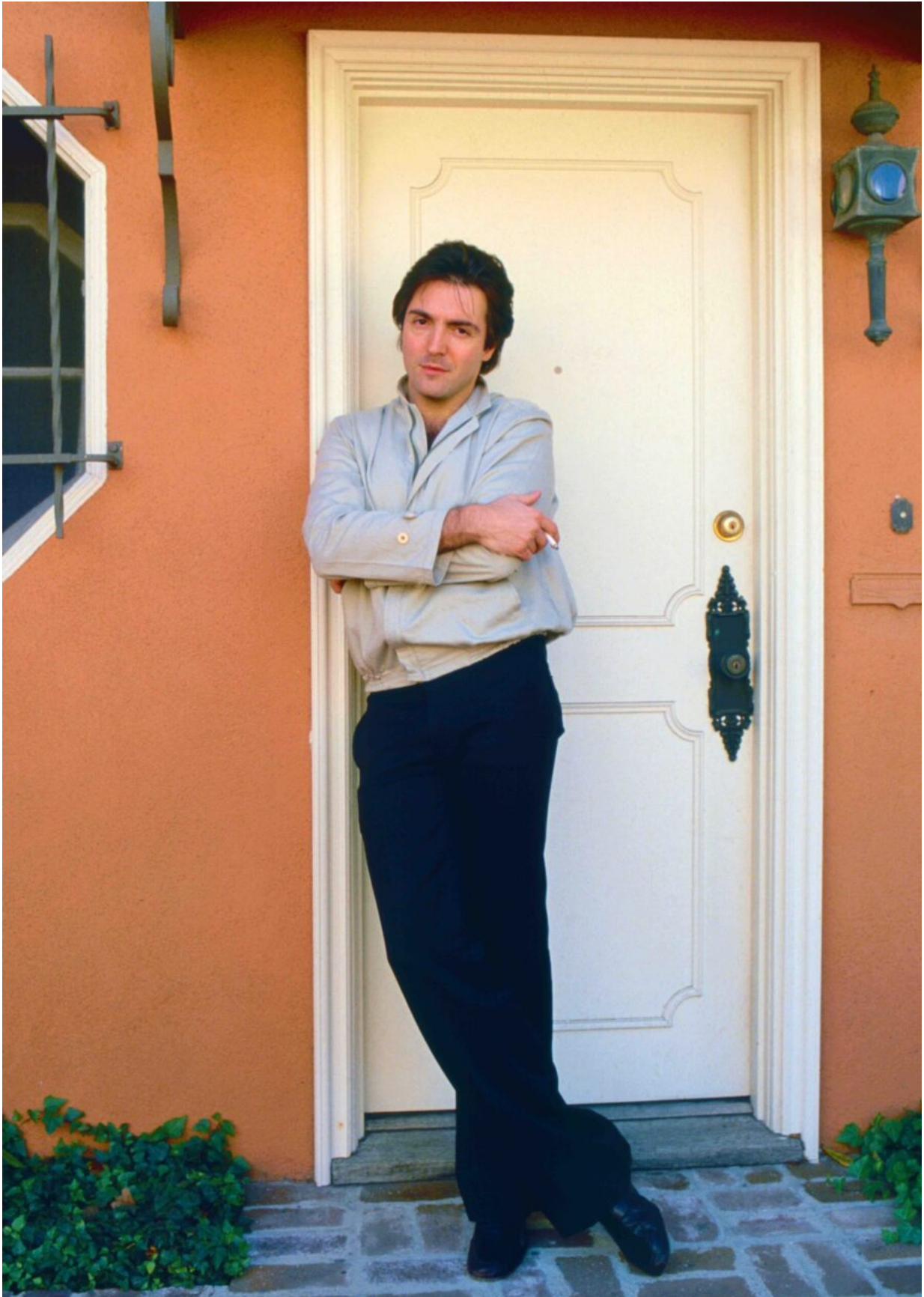


Armand Assante (c) Elisa Leonelli 1980

I met [Armand Assante](#) in November 1980 during an exclusive interview for the journalists of the Hollywood Foreign Press to talk about *Private Benjamin*, a comedy starring Goldie Hawn. I knew he had played Sophia Loren's father in a TV movie, so I asked him about it and he refused to answer, which intrigued me and made want to know more. So I requested a private interview and photo session, which was granted for a week later. Those were the good old days when photo-

journalists like myself had easy access to movie stars, particularly young upcoming actors who welcomed some publicity.

I went to his house in West Hollywood, with my trusted portable strobe, the Norman 200B, a blue backdrop and my Nikon cameras; I took his portrait in different locations, against various backgrounds, then we sat down for the interview. He described the French gynecologist he played in *Private Benjamin*: “Henri is a superficial chauvinist, he is the appearance, but not the substance. He represents the epitome of the values that a Jewish American princess is conditioned to seek in her life, he is Mr. Fantasy.”



Armand Assante (c) Elisa Leonelli 1980

He did reply to my questions about *Sophia Loren: Her Own Story*, and justified Riccardo Scicolone's behavior, which I called "rotten" for not marrying the mother of his two daughters, as that of a man who was a product of his time and his environment. "Fascism was about to take over Italy, the problems then were very complex, they had to do with poverty, and the need to survive

was phenomenal, so his decisions were based on survival.” He added that the reason he took the part was to work with Sophia Loren, who played both herself and her mother, Romilda Villani.



Armand Assante (c) Elisa Leonelli 1980

“I am very acquainted with Italian cinema, with the films of Roberto Rossellini, Ettore Scola, Vittorio De Sica, Mario Monicelli, Pietro Germi, I know those films intimately because I’ve seen them many times. So I liked the opportunity to work in Italy, to learn something I didn’t know. I am Italian, my grandparents were from Naples and Ischia. I love Italy, I have been there three times. What fascinates me about Italy is that they have so many different political points of views, they are very concerned, it’s a far more political country that one would imagine. Italians are the most generous people on earth, there is a generosity of spirit in them.”

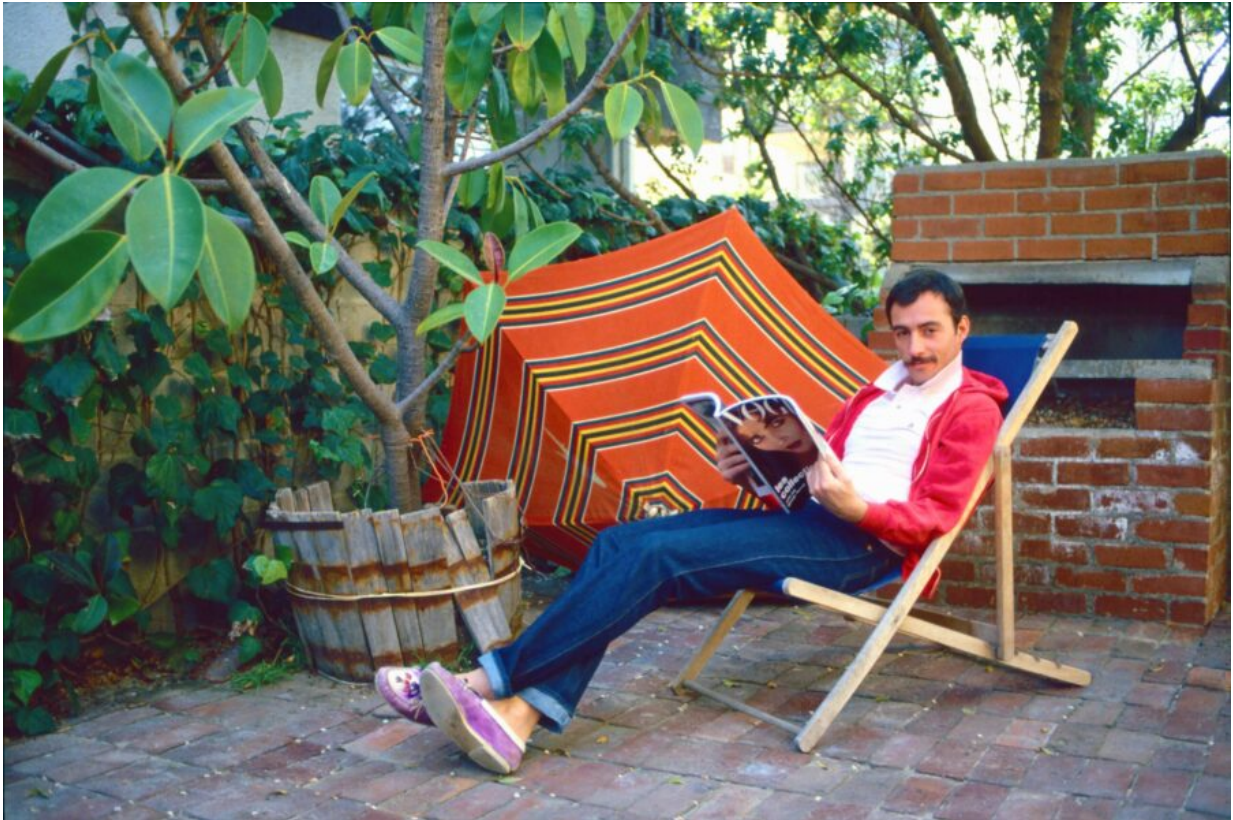
Assante played Italian-American mob boss John Gotti in the TV movie *Gotti: The Rise and Fall of a Real Life Mafia Don* (1996), which earned him one of four Golden Globe nominations, and he is still a working actor today at 72.



Ray Sharkey (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

Ray Sharkey gave a breakout performance in *The Idolmaker* directed by Taylor Hackford, which earned him a Golden Globe award as Best Actor on January 31, 1981. So I asked for a private interview and photo session, which took place at his home in Venice, California a couple of months later. I brought a red backdrop this time. He said, “I am a second generation Italian American. My mother (Cecelia) is Italian from Ischia, I get some of my Italian spirit from my grandmother, and from my great-grandfather who was an opera singer.” He also liked Italian Cinema, “My favorite movie of all times is *Fellini’s Amarcord*. My favorite Italian actors are

Giancarlo Giannini, Marcello Mastroianni and most of all Alberto Sordi, because he is a comedian that makes you cry before he makes you laugh. That's how I learned to act, by watching them."



Ray Sharkey (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

I met Sharkey again in November 1981 with my colleagues of the Hollywood Foreign Press. He spoke about working with Ornella Muti in *Love & Money* (1982) by James Toback, about his favorite movie role in *Willie and Phil* (1980) by Paul Mazursky. He said, "People who do great things stimulate me, give me inspiration. But the only heroes left are in the movies, there are no more heroes in life. It is very depressing sometimes, because all my heroes are dead. Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy are three heroes of mine, I grew up with them and they were killed. William Holden, who died a couple of days ago, was my hero. They all die."

The young actor became addicted to heroine, contracted H.I.V. and died of AIDS in 1993 at 40.

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