

THE MAMBO KINGS



From left: J.T. Taylor, Armand Assante and Antonio Banderas perform as the Mambo Kings in this romantic drama about two Havana brothers trying to make it in New York in the '50s. Below: Cathy Moriarty plays a cigarette girl who smoulders for Assante.

A MUSICAL STAR TURN FOR SCREEN HUNK ARMAND ASSANTE

In *Private Benjamin* he was Goldie Hawn's self-absorbed Parisian love interest. In *Unfaithfully Yours* he was a Hungarian concert violinist. In *Belizaire the Cajun* he was a Cajun folk healer in 1850s Louisiana. In *Q & A* he was a smooth Puerto Rican drug dealer. And in the upcoming **The Mambo Kings** he plays an ambitious Cuban bandleader.

It's no wonder Armand Assante continues to confound Hollywood pigeon-holders who have trouble deciding what to do with his exotic leading-man looks and vague trace of an accent. But after two decades in the business, the native New Yorker (actually of Italian and Irish descent) just might receive the career boost he's been searching for with his latest assignment.

Based on Oscar Hijuelos's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, the drama tells the life-affirming story of a pair of musician brothers who travel from Havana to New York City in 1953, right at the height of a big mambo craze. Eager to latch on to the American Dream, suave Cesar Castillo (Assante) and his younger, introverted brother, Nestor (Spain's Antonio Banderas), are given their big break when Desi Arnaz (played, in a brilliant stroke of casting, by Desi Arnaz Jr.) invites them to appear on an episode of *I Love Lucy* as Ricky Ricardo's singing cousins.

In order to get into character, Assante, who won the role after Kevin Kline declined, studied with a Cuban dialect coach. That was in addition to taking percussion lessons with legendary bandleader Tito Puente (who appears in the

film along with Celia "The Queen of Salsa" Cruz), voice training and the obligatory mambo lessons courtesy of the renowned Cuban Pete.

Marking the directorial debut of producer (*Legal Eagles*, *Gorillas in the Mist*) and art-gallery owner Arne Glimcher, **The Mambo Kings** is an ideal vehicle for showcasing Assante's considerable talents. His own dance with stardom dates back to the early '70s. Following intensive actor's training in New York, he headed for the West Coast where Sylvester Stallone spotted him on an episode of *Kojak* and got him a job as an extra in 1974's *The Lords of Flatbush*. Director Stallone came through with something more substantial several years later, casting Assante in *Paradise Alley*, a largely forgettable film in which Sly also crooned the title song.

Assante persevered, taking roles in *Prophecy*, an unintentionally

funny horror movie, and *Little Darlings*, which featured Tatum O'Neal and Kristy McNichol as a pair of adversarial campers who compete to lose their virginity. Box-office and critical respectability finally came with *Private Benjamin*, in which he played a less-than-faithful French gynecologist who turns out not to be Goldie Hawn's knight in shining armor.

Assante has been able to find more consistent, albeit less satisfying, work on television — challenging Richard Chamberlain's claim to the miniseries crown — in such ratings-winners as *Rage of Angels*, the filmed-in-Toronto *Evergreen*, *Hands of a Stranger*, *Jack the Ripper* and *Passion and Paradise*.

While he's hoping **The Mambo Kings** will increase his visibility among casting agents, Assante is still taking the Hollywood scene in stride. Whenever possible he seeks refuge at the 250-acre farm in New York's Hudson River Valley that he shares with his wife, Karen, and two young daughters.

"I was never offered any extraordinary roles," he recently told *GQ*. "My work accumulated. If I made any mistakes in my life, I'll tell you, I just wanted to work. And I just kept working."

— Michael Rechtshaffen

