

TV Close-Up: Alfred Molina

by Eirik_Knutzen

When approaching Alfred Molina with a lucrative job and all other things on the table are equal, think location, location, location. With the kids up and gone and his wife ready to travel on a moment's notice, the London-born, Los Angeles-based actor can't wait to explore the foreign environment off the set.

ALFRED MOLINA - Alfred Molina portrays Harvey Torriti, a hard-drinking CIA master spy of the old school in the TV drama 'The Company.' CNS Photo courtesy of Erik Heinila. "I'm a bit of a tourist," admitted the dark, droopy-eyed, 6-foot-3 thespian - the product of a Spanish father and Italian mother - who can pass for a male member of any ethnic group clustered around the Mediterranean. "I always try to arrange for a few days off before or after a shoot just to look around.

"And I'm easy to spot because I'm the guy wandering the streets with my mouth half open, staring up at buildings and taking photographs of inane things," he continued, laughing. "I especially like to experience a foreign country where I don't speak the language, always checking out the museums, art galleries and markets."

Molina happily followed his routine in Canada and Hungary while filming a three-part, six-hour miniseries called "The Company," despite the fact that he had worked in both places before. There was much to catch up on in Toronto where he shot Peter Yates' "Eleni" and Budapest, where he has worked several times over the years, including on soon-to-be released "The Moon and the Stars."

"Budapest is a beautiful, beautiful city with incredible architecture and two fantastic art museums, the National Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art - I finally got to see them this time. The last time I was there, I only had one day off per week - just right to catch up on some sleep and do the laundry. I hope to see the city's spectacular buildings at least one more time. It's lovely."

The hulking, 54-year-old thespian - who has worked everywhere from Hollywood ("Boogie Nights") to Durango, Mexico ("Frida"), to Paris ("The Da Vinci Code") and Jerusalem ("The Little Traitor") in recent years - also knows locations that are absolutely the pits.

Tactfully omitting the movie's title, Molina claims that "the most dismal place I have worked was the bottom of a flint quarry in the middle of Wales. We spent about two awful weeks down there, so deep that it was always pretty dark and cold because the sun didn't penetrate quite that far even in summer. The most exciting place I've worked in is New York City ("Spider-Man 2"), for obvious reasons.

"The most exotic place was St. Petersburg, Russia, where I shot 'Anna Karenina,'" he continued. "Not only does the great city have some amazing architecture, including churches and palaces dating back to Peter the Great, but in the Hermitage, it has one of the finest, most impressive museums in the world, too. I can't even describe the cultural jolt when you arrive."

Once his curiosity in Hungary's capital was satisfied, Molina got down to hard labor on "The Company" - a massive project based on Robert Littell's 894-page novel of the same title that chronicles four decades of the Cold War.

The moves include the CIA and KGB setting up shops in Berlin, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Billed as an espionage-action-psychological thriller, Molina shares the lead with an international cast that includes Chris O'Donnell (Jack McAuliffe), Michael Keaton (James Jesus Angleton), Rory Cochrane (Yevgeny Tsipin), Alessandro Nivola (Leo Kritzky) and Ulrich Thomsen (Starik), directed by Mikael Salomon ("Band of Brothers") from a teleplay by Ken Nolan ("Black Hawk Down").

Molina portrays Harvey Torriti (aka The Sorcerer), an extra-large, hard-drinking CIA master spy of the old school relying on an immense network of contacts, gut instincts and strong hunches; he is the antithesis of the cool, brainy, logical and idealistic recent Yale graduates representing the United States' new model of espionage agents as World War II became just one more chapter in history.

"I've always loved the spy genre - I was a big fan of the James Bond movies in my teens and loved reading the books by John le Carre and the older generation of spy writers," said Molina, a veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company and Broadway. "To me, Harvey is an amalgam of all the great characters in those books, with flaws. Plus, he's enormously fat. I had to use several fat suits.

"And the Sorcerer drinks a lot, yet functions at a high level," he continued. "But he also belonged to the generation of the three-martini lunch, when alcohol was considered a social lubricant. My father was in the catering business and a couple of glasses of wine over lunch was considered the norm. He'd consider me a wimp."

The man who grew up in the London working-class section of Notting Hill and studied acting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama now resides in a cushy Los Angeles neighborhood with his wife, British actress Jill Gascoine, now that their three adult children by previous marriages have fled the nest and taken their two grandchildren with them.

"Best of all, none of them are actors," he chuckled.

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