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The Mystical Man; One of the most elusive writers of our time, Carlos Castaneda returns (briefly) to share a few secrets with devotees. To remain invisible, he says, is the sorcerer's way.

By: Benjamin Epstein

Special to the Times

Carlos Castaneda, the 20th century's own sorcerer's apprentice, has been nearly invisible for 25 years. Not that he was ever exactly in plain view. The author of nine books based on his experiences with Juan Matus, a Yaqui seer, Castaneda has been seen as a bridge to the unknown by millions of spiritual seekers-- especially in the soul-searching '60s and '70s.

Now he's back. Or was back.

Castaneda was center attraction earlier this month in Anaheim at a two-day "Tensegrity" seminar. More than 400 devotees paid \$250 each to attend the seminar led by three women, called "chacmools," who taught a series of "magical passes," or movements.

Castaneda has succeeded in being one of the most elusive writers of our time-- to remain invisible, he says, is the sorcerer's way. In the '80s, he effectively vanished altogether. He never allows a photograph or a tape recording of his voice. He only rarely has granted interviews-- but unexpectedly agreed to one in Anaheim. (See accompanying story).

His books continue to sell-- 8 million copies in 17 countries-- and have never been out of print. Did he make up his fantastic desert tales, with their shimmering supernatural events, as his critics maintain?

"I invented nothing," he said at the seminar. "I'm not insane, you know. Well, maybe a little insane. But not ridiculously insane!"

In 1993, his book "The Art of Dreaming" (Harper Collins) was published. The same year, with the assistance of the chacmools, Castaneda and three fellow Don Juan disciples began presenting a few Tensegrity seminars. Tensegrity, Castaneda says, is derived from an architectural term relating to skeletal efficiency and seems to mean a way of tensing and relaxing the body.

Workshops were held in Arizona, Hawaii and at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. This month the show came to Anaheim.

"To be young and youthful is nothing," said Castaneda, exuberantly taking the stage before the devotees. "To be old and youthful, that is sorcery!" Castaneda is both. His hair is gray and cut short; his manner energetic and engaging. He's small and trim. He dresses simply and his olive complexion shows few signs of wear and tear.

The seminar participants, mostly middle aged, came from around the world-- about a third from California-- in hopes of seeing the charismatic Castaneda and to learn about Tensegrity. Many wore Tensegrity T-shirts ("The magic is in the movement").

In an open hall, the chacmools each stood on elevated platforms and demonstrated the elaborate Tensegrity sequences step by step, the seminar attendees following along closely. As each

sequence was mastered, everybody stopped to applaud.

While learning Tensegrity filled most of the seminar hours, at least one couple came for another purpose: "We're not disinterested in Tensegrity," the woman said. "But we came to hear Carlos."

Among Castaneda's remarks to those at the seminar:

"We are all going to face infinity, whether we like it or not. Why do it when we are weakest, when we are broken, at the moment of dying? Why not when we are strong? Why not now?"

"We repeat slogans endlessly. We don't know how to think for ourselves... 'We are made in the image and likeness of God?' What does it mean? Nothing. Yet we hold on to it. Why?"

"Me, me, me. Everybody, it doesn't matter, is egomaniacal. The other person tells you what he did, then you say, ah, but I did this..."

It's hard to pin Castaneda down to one answer on points that, for most people, are pretty simply stated.

According to "Contemporary Authors," Castaneda lists his birth date and place as Dec. 25, 1931, in Sao Paulo, Brazil; immigration records indicate Dec. 25, 1925, in Cajamarca, Peru, and other sources the late 1930s. One New York Times article put him at 66 years old in 1981.

Similarly, biographies variously list the years he earned his degrees in anthropology. The records at UCLA, though, show he earned a bachelor's in anthropology in 1962, a doctorate in 1973.

In other words, this is one slippery organic being. (According to Castaneda, he spends a great deal of time among inorganic beings.)

While studying at UCLA, Castaneda traveled to Arizona to research medicinal plants. There he met Don Juan Matus, who sensed in the young man the possibility of a successor. Matus later moved to Sonora, Mexico, and Castaneda followed.

Castaneda's first three books-- "The Teachings of Don Juan" (University of California Press and Ballantine, 1968), "A Separate Reality" and "Journey to Ixtlan" (both Simon & Schuster, 1971 and 1972, respectively)-- describe a rather thickheaded student often bungling his way through a 12-year apprenticeship to become a "Yaqui man of knowledge."

All received enthusiastic reviews and made the bestseller lists. The most respected critics of the day praised them on one hand as "the best that the science of anthropology has produced" and, on the other, said that the tension between academic rationality and the magic of Don Juan's world made them first-rate literature, "remarkable works of art," in the words of Joyce Carol Oates. His more recent works have received somewhat less attention, but sell well nonetheless-- and increasingly well in other countries.

At least two volumes by other authors attempted to debunk Castaneda. One dismissed him as a fraud; the other, "Castaneda's Journey," (Capra Press, 1976) by Richard de Mille, found many discrepancies in his work, but the writer decided early on that Castaneda "wasn't a common con man, he lied to bring us the truth. ...This is a sham-man bearing gifts."

Shaman or sham-man, readers didn't care, and reviewers who saw him as a "trickster-hoaxer" still took him seriously. A Saturday Review critic wrote that Castaneda "works a strange and beautiful magic beyond the realm of belief... Admittedly, one gets the impression of a con artist simply glorifying in the game-- even so, it is a con touched by genius."

At UCLA in the '60s, Castaneda was perceived as "the little brown man with the big smile." Not much has changed; he's about 5 feet, 5 inches, funny and charming.

He can be amazingly convincing when describing some out-there ideas, such as: his life among inorganic beings; the assemblage point, a place about a foot behind our shoulder blades that can be shifted to visit other realms; a predatory universe in which "fliers" incessantly feed on mankind's awareness, taking the sheen off our luminous eggs and leaving only a rubble of self-absorption and egomania.

Back in the three-dimensional world of self-absorption and egomania, Castaneda is represented by talent agent Tracy Kramer. (Kramer also represents "Rug Rats," "Duck Man" and "The Real Munsters," and notes that "somewhere there's a purity about all of them.")

Both Kramer and Cleargreen Inc., which organizes the seminars, are based in Los Angeles. But it's unclear--as is so much else-- where Castaneda is based. Kramer contends that "the majority of [Castaneda's] time is not spent here. And what he does do here he doesn't share with me." Castaneda reportedly bought a home in Malibu sometime in the '70s. If a passing remark at the seminar was to be taken literally, he continues to pay property taxes somewhere.

At the center of Castaneda's books is the premise that the world as we know it is only one version of reality, a set of culturally embedded "agreements" and "descriptions." Time magazine described Yaqui sorcerer Don Juan Matus as "an enigma wrapped in mystery wrapped in a tortilla."

According to Castaneda, Matus gave him psychotropic plants-- peyote, Jimson weed and mushrooms-- only because he was such an intractable student.

Although the use of hallucinogens boosted the popularity of the first two books, they subsequently gave way to nonherbal perception-altering exercises. Castaneda believes that the negative connotations of the words sorcery and magic are rooted in Western man's irrational fear of the unknown. He recommends that people be intrigued rather than terrified by the unknown.

"It is a thinking universe, a living universe, an exquisite universe," he said. "We have to balance the lineality of the known universe with the nonlinearity of the unknown universe."

"The Art of Dreaming" ends with Castaneda recounting an episode in the mid-'70s when he and fellow Matus disciple Carol Tiggs were "dreaming" in a hotel room in Mexico City and Tiggs disappeared into those dreams. According to Castaneda, Tiggs reappeared 10 years later in a bookstore in Santa Monica where he was giving a talk. It was the reconstituted Tiggs who provided the impetus to compile the "magical passes" of Tensegrity.

Castaneda and Tiggs were among four disciples of Matus who were each taught a separate line of magical passes. The others, Florinda Donner-Grau and Taisha Abelar, have also published accounts of their apprenticeships, markedly different from Castaneda's but still endorsed by him. Tiggs, Donner-Grau and Abelar attended a bonus Castaneda appearance the final night of the Anaheim seminar but didn't address the group.

The actual teaching of Tensegrity at the seminars and in instructional videos has been carried out by the three chacmools-- Kylie Lundahl, Nyei Murez and Reni Murez. The movements taught to seminar participants were often angular and fierce in character-- less like Yaqui yoga, more like martial arts. Tensegrity videos-- there are two volumes-- were on sale for \$29.95.

According to Cleargreen President Talia Bey, proceeds from the seminar will help fund publication of a Castaneda periodical, the Warriors' Way: A Journal of Applied Hermeneutics.

At the close of the seminar, Castaneda delivered remarks both lighthearted and serious, and peppered with his self-deprecating humor.

But then, Castaneda obliquely dropped a bombshell: He was relieving the chacmools of their teaching duties. The announcement left many in the audience unsettled.

"Look, the whole front row is shaking in their boots!" Castaneda said. "The chacmools will be

erased today. They go on to something else."

Seminar organizers later clarified: Although "erased," the chacmools will remain on the payroll at Cleargreen in capacities yet to be determined. And the teaching of Tensegrity will apparently continue-- a seminar is planned in Oakland, Feb. 9-11, and a women's workshop in Los Angeles for March 1-3. Said Castaneda: "If the chacmools go away, something else will appear. That is a world that is alive, in flux. ...If I am needed, I will be there. Just call me."

OK, Carlos. But who has your number?

Photo: Carlos Castaneda's "Tensegrity" seminars are led by three "chacmools," Kylie Lundahl, from left, Nyei Murez and Reni Murez, who teach "magical passes," a series of movements, angular and fierce in character.

Photo: Reni Murez, from left, Nyei Murez and Kylie Lundahl teach movements designed to heighten awareness, focus and increase energy.

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Q & A: A Rare Conversation With the Magical Mystery Man

When Benjamin Epstein caught up with Carlos Castaneda in Anaheim to ask if he would agree to an interview, Castaneda unexpectedly invited him to join his party for lunch. In a conversation over a this-worldly melted cheese sandwich, side of bacon and fries, Castaneda was personable and spontaneous.

Here's some of what he had to say:

Question:

Why don't you allow yourself to be photographed or tape recorded?

Answer:

A recording is a way of fixing you in time. The only thing a sorcerer will not do is be stagnant. The stagnant word, the stagnant picture, those are the **antithesis** of the sorcerer.

Q:

Is Tensegrity the Toltec t'ai chi? Mexican martial arts?

A:

Tensegrity is outside political boundaries. Mexico is a nation. To claim origins is absurd. To compare Tensegrity with yoga or t'ai chi is not possible. It has a different origin and different purpose. The origin is shamanic, the purpose is shamanic.

Q:

Where would Jesus fit into all this? Where would Buddha fit in?

A:

They are **idealities**. They are too big, too gigantic to be real. They are deities. One is the prince of Buddhism, the other is the son of God. Idealities cannot be used in a pragmatic movement.

The difference between religion and shamanic tradition is that the things shamans deal with are extremely practical. Magical passes [movements] are just one aspect of that.

Q:

Is that what you've been doing all this time, magical passes?

A:

Nooooo... I was very chubby. Don Juan [Matus] recommended an obsessive use of magical passes to keep my body at an optimum. So in terms of physical activity, yes, this is what we do. The movements force the awareness of man to focus on the idea that we are spheres of luminosity, a conglomerate of energy fields held together by special glue.

Q:

Where do you live?

A:

I don't live here. I'm not here at all. I use the euphemism, "I've been in Mexico." All of us divide our time between being here and being pulled by something that is not describable, but that makes us visitors into another realm. But you start talking about that and you start sounding like total nincompoops.

Q:

According to your book "The Eagle's Gift," Don Juan Matus didn't die, he left, he "burned from within." Will you leave, or will you die?

A:

Since I'm a **moron**, I'm sure I'll die. I wish I would have the integrity to leave the way he did, but there is no assurance. I have this terrible fear that I won't. But I wish. I work my head off-- both of my heads-- toward that.

Q:

I recall an article, at least a decade ago, calling you the "Godfather of the New Age."

A:

It was "grandfather!" And I thought, please call me the uncle, or cousin, not grandfather! Uncle

Charlie will do. I feel like hell, being the grandfather of anything. I'm fighting age, senility and old age like you couldn't believe.

I've fought for 35 years. The three people I worked with have been at it for 35 years. They look like **fabulous** kids. They continually take this energy on and on and on in order to remain fluid. Without fluidity, there's no way to journey anywhere.

Q:

Matus taught you to see. When you look at me now, what do you see?

A:

I have to be in a special mood to see. It is very difficult for me to see. I've got to get very **somber**, very heavy. If I'm **lighthearted** and I look at you I see nothing. Then I turn around and I see her, and what do I see? "I joined the Navy to see the world, and what do I see? I see the sea!"

I know more than I want to know. It's hell, true hell. If you see too much, you become **unbearable**.

Q:

Talia Bey, seminar organizer and president of Clearwater Inc., seems to stick pretty close to you. Are you two a couple?

A:

We are **ascetic** beings. No relationships of a sexual order. This is very difficult, a difficult maneuver for us. Don Juan recommended that I had to be a **conservator** of energy, because I don't have much energy. I myself was not created under conditions of great sexual passion. Most people are not... [Talia] was born with enough energy that she can do what she wants.

Q:

Can married people do what they want?

A:

That question has come up a lot, and it's a question of energy. If you know you were not conceived in a state of real excitement, then no. On one level, it hasn't mattered if people are married. But with the **launching** of Tensegrity, we don't really know what is going to happen.

Q:

You don't know what is going to happen?

A:

How can you know? This is an implication of our syntactical system. Our syntax requires a beginning, development and end. I was, I am, I will be. We are caught in that. How can we know... what you are going to be capable of if you have sufficient energy? That is the question.

The answer is, you are going to be capable of stupendous things, much more exciting than we can do now, with no energy at all... [Don] Juan Matus recommended me to be careful with energy, because he was **grooming** me for something. But I didn't know for what...

Q:

You talk about Matus' line of sorcerers. Are you aware of others?

A:

I ran across one marvelous Indian from the Southwest and that was a memorable event. It was the only time I met a sorcerer outside of Don Juan's lineage, a young man deeply involved in the type of activity in which Don Juan was involved. We talked for two days, [after which] for some reason he felt he owed me something.

One day, I was driving a VW in a sandstorm and it was just about to turn my car over. It had already ruined my windshield, the paint on one side was totally gone. A big rig came and stood between the wind and my car. I heard a voice call down from the cabin, "Hide alongside my rig." I did. We drove for miles along Highway 8. When the wind died down, I realized I was off the paved road. The guy stopped and it was that Indian.

He said, "I have paid my indebtedness. You are somewhere else. We are even now. Back up to the paved road." He went back, I went back. Once out on the main road, I went back and forth trying to find the dirt road but I could not. He took us into another realm. What power, what discipline, exquisite! I could hardly contain myself.

He had taken my VW, everything, there. I could barely take myself somewhere else at that time. I looked for any deviation in the road, but could never find it. Zippo. It was an entrance of sorts. He never talked to me again, ever.

Q:

Some of your biggest fans will say you've contributed great literature, even great anthropology, but would never call it nonfiction. Others would say you're laughing all the way to the bank.

A:

I invented nothing. Somebody once told me, "I know Carlos Castaneda..."

I said, "You met Carlos?"

He said, "No, but I saw him in the distance all the time. You know he admitted he made up all that in an interview."

I said, "Really? What interview, you remember?"

He said, "I read it, I read it..."

Q:

Why do you say you are the last sorcerer in Matus' line?

A:

For me to continue Don Juan's line, I would have to have a special energetic disposition I don't have. I'm not a patient man. My ways of moving are too sharp, too disturbing. For us, Don Juan was there, available always. He didn't disappear. He measured his appearances and disappearances to suit our needs. How can I do that?