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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Cassandro, above, prefers to give interviews in full makeup and ring attire. His "look" is key to a luchador's character. At right, friends and colleagues greet Cassandro on March 10 at Arena Azteca Budokan, Ciudad Neza. Below, the wrestlers hear instructions before showtime at Arena Azteca Budokan.



Glitter and pain

Openly gay, cross-dressing *luchador* has fought battles in and out of the arena

By Paul Imison
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

MEXICO CITY — Like any other great performer, he never really leaves the stage. Cassandro is one of the best-known *exóticos* — cross-dressing *luchadors*, or wrestlers — in Mexico, with nearly a quarter-century of high-flying grappling under his belt and a résumé that includes tours of the United States, Europe and Japan. He was also Mexico's first openly

gay *luchador*, a brave move in the theatrical but overwhelmingly "man's man's" world of professional wrestling.

Born and raised in El Paso, of Mexican descent, Cassandro (Saul Armendariz) learned the ropes just across the border in Juárez. Now 41, he has been wrestling professionally since he was 17.

Although he performs around the world for various promotions, Cassandro is a proud proponent of the daredevil *Lucha libre* style — wrestlers

of generally smaller stature than their U.S. counterparts, with an emphasis on skill and breathtaking dives over power or physique.

Lucha Libre is, of course, the spectacular variant of pro wrestling that originated in the 1930s in Mexico, where the majority of performers don superhero-style masks and closely guard their true identities. It became a pop-culture phenomenon thanks to the advent of television in the 1950s. Mexico's greatest *luchador* of all time, El Santo (The Saint), became a national icon, featured in a string of successful comic books and movies as well as the squared circle.

The classic image of the masked *luchador* is now as emblematic of Mexico as tequila, mariachis and Day of the Dead — seen everywhere from soccer crowds to Independence Day parades. Today, there are also *luchadoras* (female wrestlers), *mini-estrellas* (dwarf wrestlers), and the *exóticos*, largely defined by their flowing locks, made-up faces, sparkling outfits and camp personas.

All *luchadors* look amazing when they step in the ring, but *exóticos* tend to turn it up a notch. The dresser in Cassandro's Mexico City hotel room is fit to burst with moisturizer, makeup and other beauty tools.

An artist in more ways than

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Luchador

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one, he explains how he designs his own ring gear, often incorporating the flag of whichever country he is touring and never wearing the same outfit more than twice. "I give them away to fans," he says.

He proudly displays a ring jacket he had made for a recent string of shows in Canada.

Mexico is often viewed as the home of machismo, and though times are changing — Mexico City legalized gay marriage in 2009 — homophobia still exists in everyday society.

However, Cassandro doesn't feel that his sexuality has hampered his career, in which he became the first *exótico* to hold a title in one of Mexico's top wrestling promotions, the UWA World Lightweight Championship in 1992.

"Of course, I've had drinks thrown at me, people in the crowd wanting to take a shot



Cassandro and colleagues attend Mass at Mexico City's Basilica de Guadalupe.

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having the worst day of your life, your body hurts, you're exhausted; but if you're booked to wrestle, you walk through those curtains and smile, like any performer."

Currently a free agent, he wrestles for a variety of promotions when the jobs come along ("Sometimes I'm booked a month in advance; other times six"), and he can work up to seven nights a week.

As elsewhere in the entertainment industry, the unorthodox lifestyle and emotional necessity of having to get up for a show each night has led many pro wrestlers into boozy, druggy temptation. Cassandro is open about the alcohol and drug addictions he suffered until 2003.

He has a tattoo on his back with his "sober date" beneath the image of a lighthouse, which he says symbolizes the path ahead.

Today, Cassandro takes consolation in San Judas Tadeo and the Virgin of Guadalupe and wears a crucifix around his neck. Like many other recovering addicts, he came to know the

"Of course, I've had drinks thrown at me, people in the crowd wanting to take a shot at me, but that happens to all the luchadors, gay or not," he explains. "It's part of the show; you're there to be either loved or hated."

"But the reactions I get, even in Mexico, are mostly positive. I have fans of both sexes and all ages. Women will yell at me to come over and kiss their husbands, which I do. It's part of the craziness of the show."

If anything, the biggest problem in the early days was with some of his colleagues.

"Wrestling is obviously a contact sport, and early on there were some guys who didn't want to work with me," Cassandro said. "It meant I had to work 10 times as hard to show them I was their equal in the ring. Wrestling may be choreographed, but there are a lot of egos and jealousy involved."

"Twenty years later, all the guys in Mexico know who I am and they just respect me for how good I am in the ring."

Unlike most other luchadors, Cassandro doesn't wrestle with a mask — all the

better to show off his chiseled looks and pink-dyed mane. In Lucha Libre, the tradi-

tional way to settle a rivalry between two wrestlers is a "lucha de apuesta," in which



Backstage at the "Los Exóticos" show March 10 at Arena Azteca Budokan in Ciudad Neza.

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the loser has to remove his mask — the ultimate humiliation — but exóticos often put their flowing locks on the line instead. A respected veteran, Cassandro usually wins such bouts, but he did lose a Hair vs. Hair match to the son of the legendary Santo, known as El Hijo del Santo, in Los Angeles in 2007.

One of Cassandro's favorite and riskiest moves is a stunning dive off a second-floor balcony onto an opponent lying prone on the arena floor. Asked how you execute such a maneuver without getting hurt, he laughs: "You don't."

He has seven pins in his left leg from surgery, he has a dislocated shoulder, and at the time of this interview he was about to see a doctor about surgery on the other knee.

However much it's a show, wrestling can be as physically grueling as any other professional sport.

"Like any job, you do it even when you don't want to do it," he said. "You might be

fix around his neck. Like many other recovering addicts, he seems to have overcome his demons and made peace with the hand that life has dealt him.

But at age 41, that body — however heavenly — won't take the punishment forever. His next knee surgery will keep him out of the ring for at least nine months.

"Wrestling has given me so much. It's enabled me to lead a wonderful life — I'd do it forever, and I'll miss it when I can't," he says, evoking memories of Mickey Rourke's character in the movie "The Wrestler."

"But I wouldn't want to be one of those guys who carry on until they're broken down and can't walk away from the spotlight."

He shouldn't have to. He's already gone back to school and graduated as a massage therapist and chiropractor for the day when he finally has to hang up those treasured tights.

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