

MICHAEL FLATLEY:

THE NEW "LORD OF THE DANCE"

Michael Flatley, creator and star of the Irish dance spectacle, "*Lord of the Dance*" is a one man epidemic of enthusiasm. He returns to his native America and talks about life after "*Riverdance*" with Larrian Gillespie.

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With only one hour until curtain time, Michael Flatley, creator and star of "*Lord of the Dance*", a new-style Irish dance extravaganza touring the US, warms up to performance pitch, then silently walks to the front of the stage and kneels down. Out front, a single seat has been saved in tribute to his late grandmother, Irish dance champion Hannah Ryan, who encouraged him to dance when he was only 4 years old. "I ask my grandmother for guidance each night because she's the one person that I know is watching me, somehow, because she believed so strongly in what it is I do." Spiritual words from a man who in 1995 was dismissed from *Riverdance* for refusing to relinquish his choreographic copyright and blasted in the British press as a delusional, conceited, egomaniac who deserved to slink away into oblivion. But having met this 38 year old, startlingly handsome man with laser-focused blue eyes, I came away with a completely different impression and would never bet against him in a race.

And so he has returned to the stage with his own powerhouse production, which has grossed over \$100,000,000 in only six months, and sold over 1.5 million videos in under 12 weeks, topping the World Music Chart. You can almost feel the electricity surrounding this performer as he talks about his creative development in a lilting American-Irish brogue. Surprisingly, he was discouraged from trying Irish hard-shoe dance at the age of 11 because he was too old. "But my mates were in the classes and there were girls, and I'd never seen such a thing, so I tried it. It

came to me so easy what they were doing because it was in me - I got good at it fast. I had to learn so many steps to catch up with the other classes, and I was learning at such a fast rate compared to the other dancers, that when I got to class I was bored to tears working at that speed. So I had to take private lessons and pretty soon, I was just learning so fast I realized I needed to teach myself, so I made up my own steps." Those unfamiliar with Celtic dance should know that, in its pure form, there is no upper body movement: hands are kept tightly against the sides, legs never go above waist level and the dancer stays in place, making it ideally suited for pubs and small stages. But Michael began to change the rules.

"I had to do something completely new and different. It would have been easy to add ballet arms, to do tap movements or to do straight flamenco. It was just something that came from inside." He began to train with triple weighted shoes so his legs would kick higher and tap faster, earning him a spot in the Guinness World Book of Records for the fastest feet in the world- a blinding 28 taps per second. By the time he was seventeen he became the first American to win the World Irish Dance Championships. "Not bad for a kid from Chicago who started out doing the jig," he laughs. Along the way he boxed to Golden Glove level, won the World Irish Flute Championship and qualified for membership in MENSA.

But it was a vision he had while touring America with the Chieftains, an Irish folk music group, that would result in the entertainment phenomenon, *Riverdance*. Suddenly Irish step dancing was masculine and sexy. "When I want to create something I go away from the rest of the world. I don't watch television, I don't go to other shows only because I am afraid it would influence the type of work that I do when I am creating something. It's really important that what I do is fresh and new and comes from inside." As a result, he envisioned rows of dancers beating out a

syncopated rhythm that would resonate deep inside the soul of every viewer. It only began as a seven minute number during intermission for the Eurovision Song Contest, but the world was put on notice that something bold and revolutionary was happening. Michael Flatley had taken his first leap into stardom.

Working furiously, Michael began training other dancers in his visionary style and the little dance number was expanded into a full show which premiered in Dublin in 1994 to standing ovations. Moving on to London, Flatley continued to pack them into every performance. Over the next year, there could be no doubt that a pioneering creative genius was at work, but soon he had the arrows in his back to prove it.

On the eve of the show's return to London, Michael Flatley received the phone call that would change the rest of his life. He was informed another dancer would perform in his place. " I felt like I was terribly betrayed. For someone to take your work is not an easy thing for an artist to live with. It was heartbreaking. I was devastated. You can't do that to somebody. I can't imagine somebody doing it for money for anything - I can't imagine it. That was a great motivator in driving me to prove that I was the man who created it all regardless of what anybody says. They could take my ideas and my steps, but not what was in my heart."

The result can be seen in "*Lord of the Dance*", a mythological Celtic story of good versus evil, featuring a cast of 36 dancers who can vibrate your soul with their synchronized cadences while flying high on joyful energy. Michael Flatley, who will be performing at the Academy Awards, is himself a one man epidemic of enthusiasm, eating up the stage like a tiger with its first kill.

" Every night I am really naked out there. I walk on the edge all the time and it's open and honest. I don't plan it, I'm just out there living through the energy. The whole show is about

energy. We pump out an enormous amount of good energy every day to that audience and at the end they give it all back times ten. People are hoping I'm going to give the performance of a lifetime every night and that's my job to do that and that's what I live to do. That's what I was born to do."

His demeanor intensifies as we talk about choreography. "I'll tell you a secret about how I created "Hell's Kitchen", (a face off number in the second act between the Lord of Darkness' posse and his own.). I went into the room, turned out all the lights, covered up all the windows and I created it in the dark. I don't normally dance in front of the mirror, I dance against the mirror, away from it. Most of my work is done just on feel, and how it feels, putting out an enormous amount of energy. If you are not exhausted after doing it, you didn't do it right. The hardest thing was taping myself doing one of the sections and then I went back and danced against it, creating all those contrapuntal rhythm patterns. I do everything by energy and what feels right. It's all about getting the heart beat going." Focusing energy is another facet in Michael Flatley's personality. " Those ideas are up there in the universe and it flows through you. When the channel is open it is amazing how fast and furious it comes. It's like a Concorde taking off." As if being charismatic wasn't enough, Mr. Flatley has the gift of speaking with his feet. In one step, he mimics riding a horse with his upper body, while his legs gallop like a wild stampede, leaving your ears to listen to his thunderous clipping hooves. " That's why our symbol is the unicorn" he gleefully admits.

"*Lord of the Dance*" accelerates the pace with a primal rhythmic score by Ronan Hardiman and features one of the finest synchronized choruses of dancers ever to hit the stage . It's pure, athletic sexual energy from beginning to end. But the audience is waiting for Flatley's entrance, which at

one moment is like a supernatural vision erupting from a radiant light and the next is seen disappearing in a puff of smoke. You can feel the energy build the instant he returns. In full command of his audience, Flatley invites its members to dance with him, a spectacle repeated nightly during the riotous encores. "I fire off my coat at the end of the show and run across the stage because I want to give them an excuse to stand up and throw caution to the wind. They can get up and dance and have fun and they do! They leave with a true sense of joy in their hearts." You can almost sense the child-like wonder he feels at all this. "I suppose my biggest fault is that I am still a little kid deep down inside. I think everyone in the world is like that. I think they all have that still, they just need to be in touch with it and realize everyone else is that way."

Michael Flatley is no one's fool when it comes to marketing either. As the producer of this gargantuan event, he spends his days talking to the press, doing advance work and watching ticket sales skyrocket with each additional booking. So how does he prevent burnout? "I go on a lot of fast walks. I walk everywhere and try not to take cars wherever I can help it. I get as much fresh air as I possibly can and I sometimes do floatation tanks. I love them. It removes my body and just puts my brain to work. That's what I love to do. It deprives me of all other outside influences and forces me to focus. I can picture in enormous detail, in living color, exactly what it is I am planning on doing next, exactly what the outcome is, what the feeling is, what the smell is. Every last detail is covered when I am in there." Such control seems out of place in someone whose very essence is movement. So how does he stay so balanced as a person?

"I read motivational books. Everyone of those books is the same book with a different hat on. Really what I'm doing is programming my subconscious mind by reading them because it stimulates my mind and I start thinking about something creative. It forces me to continually

program my mind to achieve the goals that I want to achieve. It's the power of the mind. It controls everything and there is nothing that it can't do."

Charisma, creativity, chemistry, control - all balanced and packaged inside a powerhouse called Michael Flatley. So how does success feel for the youngest recipient ever of a National Heritage Fellowship from President Ronald Reagan and who was also recognized by the American National Endowment for the Arts as one of this country's greatest performers?" Michael takes a breath. " I'm out there to entertain and I go with the flow. I go with what my instincts are and I've been right. I'm a risk taker on stage and off. I put every last penny that I had in this world into that show and if it would have failed, I would be broke with nothing. But it took off , thank God, and on stage every night I go to the limit and every night I go farther." With all that positive thinking, one can't help but agree he has only just started to drink from the well of success. May the Force be with you Michael.

SIDE BAR

"Lord of the Dance" will be appearing at the Universal Ampitheatre in Los Angeles from March 27-30. Tickets are available from Ticketmaster outlets or at the box office. If you're unable to find a ticket, you can console yourself by owning the magic of Michael Flatley in this dance spectacle video, filmed at the Point Theatre in Dublin. The foot stomping score is available on CD or cassette but I should warn you: Listening to this music while driving could bring on a serious attack of "happy feet".