

Heading towards Michael Flatley's suite in the Hyde Park Hotel for our scheduled interview, I can't help wondering what type of personality, or indeed ego, I am going to encounter. Since that memorable evening at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest when the interval filler exploded onto our TV screens in the form of Flatley, Jean Butler and the *Riverdance* troupe, many column inches have been devoted to him, not all complimentary.

Dressed all in black, looking lean, tanned and relaxed, my reservations melt instantly as he warmly welcomes me into the chintz and crystal filled suite which he has been living in since the London premiere of his current show *Lord of The Dance*.

Since his sensational departure from *Riverdance The Show* in October 1995, he has been working on the idea of bringing *Lord Of The Dance* to the stage and, after its sell-out run at the London Coliseum, he

is embarking on a British and then worldwide tour.

"The idea was formed pre *Riverdance*. It was always something that I wanted to do. I had always had the idea of doing a one hundred per cent Celtic story, which is what *Lord Of The Dance* is, as that is very important to me."

The storyline is a simple one, good versus evil, using Irish mythical clans, warriors and warlords. Don Dorcha is The Dark Lord who challenges Flatley, as the Lord of the Dance with dancing duels. The show is a spectacle using a rock and roll set, lighting and the state of the art pyrotechnics.

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"I wanted to have a show that was some place in between theatre and film. Something that could be put up and pulled down in a heartbeat. It had to be the type of show which would appeal to all ages from five to 85 years and it had to be something that could do arenas because we wanted to create bigger audiences." The show took a record breaking eight weeks from creation of storyline to first day on stage.

"Before the show, it was 14 hours per day training. Those eight weeks were tortuous and brutal, but they were worth every minute."

Michael has no doubts that "the best team in the world surrounds this show". An impressive roll call includes Harvey Goldsmith as Promoter, John Reid as Manager and Arlene Phillips as Director. As creator and choreographer of the piece, how difficult was it to stand back and let somebody else direct, especially a fellow choreographer?

"What I love about Arlene Phillips is that she is a tremendously gifted person and she has a great disposition. When I went hunting for a Director I wanted somebody who was going to be my objective eyes in the audience and that would listen to my ideas to allow me to have enough time to work as a soloist and to perfect details with the troupe. She would come in and accomplish things in half the time it would take 10 other people to do it. I'd tell her what I wanted and she would do it exactly the right way. She's heaven to work with."

After the London premiere in July this year, Flatley was the darling of the media as rave reviews flooded the press but in October of last year it was a different story. Slanderous stories littered the papers in their documentation of his controversial dispute with the producers of *Riverdance* and his consequent sudden departure.

With smiling blue eyes and his softly spoken Irish voice, he explains in his endearing down to earth manner, "Oh, I don't pay any attention to them. I'm the luckiest guy in the world. They are making money off my name by selling papers. When they stop talking about me I'll worry; that's how I look at it."

Of his time with *Riverdance*, he said, "It took off overnight and the next thing we were faced with having to put on a whole show. Some Spanish and Russian numbers were brought in which I disagreed with but it worked out well in the end and was very successful. I have to say what really carries the show



EAGLETON'S ANGLE

MICHAEL FLATLEY TALKS TO JULIE EAGLETON

are the big Irish numbers. That's what makes it work. I built those numbers in *Riverdance* to last and they will last. It has proven itself and with any luck will go on forever."

Flatley was born 38 years ago in Chicago to Irish parents, his father was originally from Sligo and his mother from Carlow. Does he feel more of an affinity with the Irish or American culture? "I think it is pretty much an even balance. I probably feel closer to the Irish people but growing up in the States, there was a lot of the fast paced lifestyle that I am used to: all of the sports activities and wide open spaces, but my heart is in Ireland."

Flatley started dancing at the age of 11. He went on to become the first American to win the All World Championship in Irish dancing at the age of 17, but astonishingly had only taken Irish dance classes for three years and had never taken classical ballet or tap.

"I went on and taught myself as I wasn't happy with the teacher. We had different ideas. I had a slightly more flamboyant style. There were too many restrictions in the Irish dance. For competition you had to have your hands down and there were lots of things which I didn't agree with so I knew I would end up changing all that. The day I retired from competition was the last day that I danced that way."

He then opened a dance school which he describes as "very lucrative" but he realised that he missed performing too much so he closed the school and toured the world professionally. Before *Riverdance* he danced mostly as a soloist and performed at venues such as the Hollywood Bowl and Carnegie Hall so he had been getting attention in the States but never had that level of exposure in Britain.

For a dancer who has been described as having the "Sensuality of a ballet dancer and the swagger of a matador", what drives him?

"I'm just naturally like that and have always been that way. Everyday I think what's new? What can I do to get ahead? I'm an endless dreamer." He breaks out into gentle laughter: "Have you ever heard the saying you can't get anything done in the office? Well, all my work is done walking on the beach! Honestly. This show was dreamt up there!"

What's a typical day like during the tour?

"Right now most of my days are tied up with promoting the next leg of the tour and with interviews. I do a morning workout, maybe a short walk in the afternoon and some warm ups before the show. The show ends at 10.00pm. I'm not great at chilling out so probably fall asleep around 3.00am."

Any special dietary requirements?

"I have to eat anything I can get my hands on just to keep my weight on during the run of the show, but generally I drink what I want and I eat what I want. Most of the hard work is done before the show goes on the road."

Separated from his wife, he refers to his suitcase as his home base. For the last three years he has been living at the Westbury Hotel in Dublin but he has

storage sheds in Southern California, Chicago and London.

I ask if he has time out for any other interests.

"I just take time to create. My biggest happiness is being on the stage and having the power of the entire troupe behind me like an orchestra and feeling the energy of the people coming back to me. That's living life. That's being alive. I only have one magic act and that's it", he offers sincerely.

Where does he see himself when he finishes the tour and indeed when he hangs up his dancing shoes for good?

"Polygram and Disney are talking about a film deal with John Reid, my manager, so I'll take a look at it but no firm plans. I'll try anything, but I am currently focused on taking this around the world at the present time. The big day in my life will be the day that we take it to New York, bring it back home to the States. At the moment, though, every day is a bonus."

Already my time is up and the interview is at an end. We embrace like old friends while phones constantly ring around the suite emphasising just how busy and frenetic a life Flatley leads. The National Geographic Society have already declared Michael Flatley a Living Treasure. A difficult title to live up to but with his exceptional talent, drive, steely determination and affable nature, it looks like he'll have no problem rising to the challenge. □



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