

## Lording it over the dance



Photo Maxwells

**Michael Flatley was Riverdance's star until he was dropped at the height of its success. Now he has created a rival show of his own. He talks to Ismene Brown**

**Riverdance's video has sold more copies than any video ever**

MICHAEL Flatley did not want to talk about *Riverdance*. "I'm so bored with it. Let's talk about something exciting." Skinny like a sprinter, tanned like a star, and tight around the mouth like a man feeling the sharp side of publicity, he wanted to discuss his new show, *Lord of the Dance*, which makes *Riverdance* look like a Sunday school show.

*Lord of the Dance* couches Irish dancing in a theatrical idiom more familiar from Michael Jackson rock events: loud, thrusting, fiercely lit, larger than life.

It features girls dancing in their underwear ("working clothes", said Flatley warningly, though to most of us it would look like underwear), and - most important of all - it does unambiguously what he thought *Riverdance* should have done, enshrine him as the star.

You could deduce one or two things about the dispute just from comparing the names of the shows. The brilliant, charismatic Flatley, probably quite rightly, thought he was the lord of the initial *Riverdance* success, tried to adjust his contract to gain control over all sorts of things, from choreography to curtain calls, and was dropped audaciously on the eve of *Riverdance*'s second London opening last October.

The *Riverdance* team, led by the producer Moya Doherty, insisted that it was a group success, not a star vehicle. Flatley, a Guinness World Champion Irish dancer and sometime performer with the Chieftains, had indeed choreographed the original seven-minute Eurovision 1994 diversion, and he had also made all the Irish numbers when it was expanded into the first show early last year. But, said Doherty, there was much more to *Riverdance* than just the Irish dancing, there was Bill Whelan's music, the production ideas, and the other kinds of dancing in it - though she conceded that Flatley's choreography and performance had made a major contribution, adding that he had been handsomely paid for it.

The fact is, her team argue, that *Riverdance* is running quite happily with other dancers in his place in London, some of Flatley's numbers have been replaced, and a long *Riverdance* tour is already booked from October in America.

SO did *Riverdance* succeed because of Flatley, or Flatley because of *Riverdance*? It's more than a petty question, especially as it involves sums of money that look like telephone numbers.

The *Riverdance* video has sold two million - more than the Three Tenors, more than *The Lion King*, more than any video ever. Flatley fell out with the *Riverdance* team over money when he was earning £50,000 a week (by comparison, Elaine Paige, it's said, only gets half that). The claims over future royalties will amount to millions.

But one figure means more than any of those. 38. Michael Flatley's age.

It accounts for everything: his demonic speed on stage, his *dramatis persona* as the indestructible hero, his aggressiveness about money and recognition, his careful tan and his thinning hair, the punishing physical regime, the lack of charm.

*Riverdance* has a homely feel to it, girls and boys dancing expertly and demurely, singing, playing instruments, with that Irish twinkle that makes you think of butterchurns and shamrock fields. Its weakest part is precisely what Flatley says he never wanted in it: the rather artificial New World multiculturalism.

American tap works well enough, because it is related to Irish dancing, but the Spanish flamenco and whirling Russians look "like filler", said Flatley accurately to me. *Lord of the Dance* is going to be all Irish dancing. It's "to show kids a way forward. At the moment they win their world titles, they hang up their shoes and go look for a job."

He is passionate about the tradition, for all his flashy American showbusiness ideas. "My footwork is traditional Irish. I still dance with my feet crossed and use an awful lot of the basic pure rhythm patterns. But I pumped up the volume a little and accelerated the pace. And I see expression as more part of the game, and they don't."

Sexual expression, in particular. Where you could bring all *Riverdance*'s performers home to Mother, *Lord of the Dance*, all hard men and either virginal or vampish girls, reminded me of nothing so much as an arcade game.

There are searchlights, smoke, and flashes, and six Celtic-knotted towers that resemble Daleks. It's a game that Flatley can't lose. Nominally there are goodies and baddies, Warlords and Warriors, but they're virtually indistinguishable, and he is the only real hero, flashing into trouble and out of it as slickly as the little bleeping figure you drive with your joystick.

There's a tiny gold person with an Irish tin whistle who gets everywhere - I made the mistake of asking Flatley if she was a leprechaun. This did not go down well.

"She's the spirit, the little girl's dream. This whole thing is her dream. I was looking for magic of a little child. No matter what you say now" - and he looked hard at me - "you still have a little girl's heart. And late at night, there's things that I dream about, when I'm still a little boy. And the biggest men in the world, who play rugby or anything else, they might be tough guys on Saturday night, but when they go home there's that little place somewhere. And that needed to be touched."

I can believe that Michael Flatley is many little girls' dream - his name alone was enough to sell out three weeks at the London Coliseum this month. I believe in the sleepless nights; he is the most driven man I've ever encountered. It struck me that Flatley wants success so badly that he hasn't time to be amused or moved by real things. Dublin, as we sat, was tugged between mania over the Irish Derby meeting at the Curragh and the horror of last week's assassination of a crime reporter. Yet Flatley was almost oblivious to either event. (A couple of Dubliners described him to me as a "plastic Paddy".)

However he also said that Brian May from Queen had told him how "all those years playing in front of all those adoring people, never once was he there in the moment enjoying it. He was always thinking about yesterday or tomorrow. And that stuck in my head. Now I look at people's expression in the audience and remember them exactly. You have to be in the moment, because tomorrow it could all be gone."

ONE has to remember that all this began only two years ago in a very frustrated life.

Flatley is the son of an Irish builder in Chicago: a clever young man who hopped through high-octane big-money jobs in stockbroking, gaming - "good at passing tests, making cash", as he puts it - but never sticking at anything except his dancing. He got into the Guinness Book of Records in 1989 with 28 taps in a second (a Devon man has now done 32), but apart from odd dates with the Chieftains, there was no opening for his brand of virtuoso dancing.

Then one day, aged 35, as he was on the phone "doing a really big deal", he says, the other phone rang with the offer to do the Eurovision *Riverdance* number.

"I put the phone down on the deal. Someone once told me, 'Luck is when opportunity meets preparation.' I had prepared for that moment for 20 years."

He presently lives in unreal luxury in the Westbury Hotel in Dublin, surrounded not by family (though married for 10 years he rarely sees his wife) but by retinues of associates and sycophants. He's often accused of being vain, but he says he goes to the mirror for truth.

"It's my biggest friend and my worst enemy, because I consistently chase what I see in my head all the time, and I can't do it, I can't catch it. I know that there's more, an awful lot more, but the question is is there enough time left? Before my legs go completely. I've only got a few miles left in me. If only this had happened to me 10 years ago."

He also said a chilling thing when I asked him whether, as a man approaching 40, he felt the lack of family life: "Long after I'm gone, people aren't going to be saying" - putting on a cod-Oirish voice - "Now wasn't that noice that he had a lov'ly family loife?" It doesn't exactly fit a little girl's dream, that answer, nor a little boy's either.

*Lord of the Dance* opens at *The Point*, Dublin, tonight, then goes to Liverpool, *The Empire*, on July 11, the Manchester Apollo, and the London Coliseum from July 23.