

Irish

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LORDING IT UP

Is Bernadette Flynn's Role As Lord Of The Dance's Leading Lady Finally Over?

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"I'm obsessed," says Bernadette Flynn, who's been 'lording' it for nine years in one of the world's most successful Irish dance shows. "I could never see myself not dancing". But, with Michael Flatley launching a new era in dance shows and a big date in December, times may soon be a-changing for the popular Irish Colleen.

Bernadette

Just in case you hadn't heard, Michael Flatley has a new show out. Hardly a groundbreaking revelation to begin this month's star feature, as I'm sure the cornered roar of the Celtic Tiger will have circulated in your direction long before you read this, but, when I reveal who his new leading lady will be, you might just be taken back a little. Step forward Bernadette Flynn. "What, me? No, no way... I'm staying with Lord Of The Dance, I'm Definitely a Lord Girl!" Bernadette, or little Berry from Nenagh, if you prefer, is Definite with a capital D, and when speaking to her on her favourite topic of conversation, there's Definitely a big D for Dance as well.

Not that our 'Dance Captain' (a role where she looks after the well-being of all the dancers in her troupe) will be offering any more information on Mike's new venture. Even if she has been privy to it through her Lord connections, sworn secrecy surrounds: "My life wouldn't be worth living! It's all secrets, but I can't wait to see it. I think we're a bit 'lord' and this is 'new', so we're excited to see what's going to happen. It's a fresh start and we haven't been involved, but I speak to Marie (Duffy) all the time and it seems to be going really well."



It's barely half an hour before Bernadette (I've taken to calling her that, because that's what her Mam calls her back home) is due on stage for the Ulm show of the German leg of the European tour - her 80th of the year. There's no panic. She laughs off the booming half-hour tannoy shout, as "another day, another dollar, the calls are always five minutes early," and the nerves seem less frayed than the sparkling white gown she'll be wearing in her role as Saoirse, the Irish Colleen. She already has her hair done, make-up fixed and has all the time in the world to speak, whilst playfully mocking her 'uber-cool' production manager for sitting back and flicking through a lads' mag.

Mind you, there'd be something wrong if she wasn't in stride by now, she's not short of experience. She's been in Lord for nine years, right back to conception with warehouse rehearsals in Dublin, under the watchful eye of Michael and Dance Director, Marie. Not that she had much of an idea that she was set to become the lead dancer, in the lead troupe, in one of the most successful Irish dance shows in the world. "It all fell into place after a couple of weeks. Marie and Michael were in the room and they just told us to dance, do anything we wanted, just use our hands and dance. All of a sudden, they're measuring me alongside Michael Flatley. It was crazy, just mad."

She's since progressed to become one of the most loved female dancers on the planet. "Not her drawn out 'o's are full of giggly embarrassment, "Don't ask me questions like that. I guess I've been in Lord of the Dance a long time and a lot of people have been interested from the start. Other than that I could not tell you..."

"I'm staying with Lord Of The Dance, I'm Definitely a Lord Girl!"

And this reluctance to blow her own hornpipe is probably one of the key reasons she's not only a popular dancer, but universally recognised as just about the 'nicest' as well. Her numerous fan sites give testament to this, as one such devotee, Kristine, aka Eire Saorise the 2nd, told us, "I live in the US and have been a fan since I was about 13 years old. I'm now turning 21. She goes out of her way to greet fans and make them feel comfortable around her, and is stunning to watch perform. You just can't take your eyes off her."



Rumours are that Bernadette may be coming to the end of her time with Lord, but having known little else since she packed in her schooling and dedicated herself to the show at 16, it will be a massive wrench. "It's been an experience I'll never forget and that's why I'm slow to move on. A bit of me is afraid to go back to normality."

Ironically, the show that has embraced her and made her so recognisable in the dance world, could also provide the spark that will eventually lead to her final curtain call. When Damien O'Kane was reinstated in Troupe 1 as lead dancer after Flatley's final, awe-inspiring farewell at Hyde Park in 1998, romance blossomed between the new lead couple. A proposal was accepted in 2003 and a two-year engagement will come to fruition on December 28 this year. The marriage in Dromoland Castle in Nenagh, Bernadette's home county of Tipperary, is set to be a 'who's who' of Irish dancing. "There'll definitely be a step down the line! If I had my way, I'd love about 100 guests, but in this business, you meet many close friends, so the number will be around 250-ish!"



Michael and Marie will definitely get an invite, but the troupes are working over Christmas anyway, so it's bit harder for them to get time out. I'm really excited now. Every time I go home it's getting a little bit closer."

And the marriage should see Bernadette carried over the threshold of a spanking new love nest, currently being built in Youghal, Newtown, Nenagh, just five minutes from her family home. Any suggestion that it'll be big enough for a posse of little Bernies and Damiens to jig around the garden is greeted with another drawn out "No, definitely not. I've got three nephews and that's plenty, so no plans, definitely not."

But there are plans for Bernadette to finish the current tour before taking a break from mid-December and hooking up again, post-honeymoon, with the troupe in February. She has no thoughts to leave the show before the summer of next year, but what will she do when eventually she has to hang up her soft shoes?

"Oh, no, don't ask that. I'm never going to stop dancing; I don't think I could ever actually not dance. I'll be dancing with my zimmer frame! I'd even like to do other dance, like Salsa, as a hobby. Any kind of dancing I'm obsessed with, I just love watching it, really I do! I love it!"

Perhaps a route into teaching beckons, so she could bottle some of her bubbly persona and attempt to uncork it for the next generation of young dancers. Yet, she admits she lacks the discipline of her fiancée when it comes to making the grade. Damien studied for his 'teacher's' on tour and passed at the end of 2004.

Bernadette keeps promising to follow suit, but for now, the Berny & Damien (or Flynn & O'Kane) Dance Academy will have to be put on hold: "I really need to sit down, open that yellow book and do it properly."

If and when it does happen, and if her own tutelage is anything to go by, her relationship with the pupils will be intimate. Dorian Brown took a young Bernadette under her wing from the age of four, and it was very much a one-to-one relationship that saw intense competitive dancing until sixteen, bearing fruit with numerous awards, including six World titles. "She passed away last October, but was an incredible lady I was very close to. She always had a small class and it was difficult when I went into the show, because she had to let go of something that she was very much involved with. Suddenly it was gone. No more Feiseanna on a Sunday, and no more competitions. When she got sick, we kept up our relationship, and I saw her all the time. It was very sad, but she was a great woman, and her personality was very much loved in the world of Irish dancing."

Dorian struggled with cancer for the last five years of her life and tragically only got to see the early days of her prodigy's illustrious show career, the last time after the return to the Point in Dublin in 1997. "She just loved being there. It was more what we did together, than what we got out of winning."

The Irish dancing show scene was just making the breakthrough when 16 year old Bernadette waved a fond, if abrupt, farewell to the competitive scene for good. She recalls the wonder of first seeing Riverdance hit the Eurovision screens: "I was mesmerised by it" - before circumstances pulled her the way of Lord and auditions in Dublin. "I was in my last year in competition. I was nervous and didn't know whether to go or not. School had to finish there and then, but then again, I would never have got to be the lead dancer for so many years."



After nine years, much has changed on the competitive scene, as Bernadette witnessed when returning to the Worlds in Ennis this year, if only to spectate. "I can't believe it's changed so much. I couldn't get over the costumes, absolutely unbelievable; works of art; crazy; very glamorous compared to when I was there; I don't know how they carry them."

As the 'five minute call sounds', I couldn't let her go without asking whom her favourite partner is... onstage.

"You could get me into a lot of trouble. You didn't even ask me that question!" Having danced alongside Michael for two years and then six with Damien, is it markedly different? "Yeah, completely don't know how to answer this. It's good fun with Damien, but it's been one of the most amazing experiences to share the stage with Michael Flatley. At first, we were in such awe of him as he was such a superstar. Nobody will ever have the same charisma as Michael; he's got something really special. I don't know how to explain it. He's unbelievable, he really is."

Whatever the future holds for Bernadette, you can bet it won't be too hard to find her somewhere in the world of dance. To steal a quote from the much-mentioned Flatley: "Dancing with Bernadette is like dancing with the air, you don't have to look and see, you can feel her, no matter where she is!"

