

 Lord of the Dance: Dangerous Games

at Palace Theatre, Manchester

Reviewed by Matthew Dougall April 2017

It was way back in 1994 when Michael Flatley and Irish dancing took the world by storm in a specially commissioned piece for the interval at the Eurovision Song Contest. The show has morphed and changed somewhat since then growing in both size and popularity.

There was even a well publicised and acrimonious split between Flatley and the producers who both went their separate ways, forming two first class companies touring the world, both gaining acclaim and recognition with full houses wherever they went. I haven't seen any of the previous Flatley incarnations prior to this evening, and so was highly curious and extremely expectant.

Of course the dancing did not disappoint. The routines and the execution of them were utterly stunning and spellbinding. Choreographed by Flatley, these dances were part contemporary ballet with a wholesome dollop of Irish Celtic flavour - even when they were not performing their trademark Irish 'line' dance. I did find the whole thing though very egocentric and rather arrogant. The show started with a video projection of Michael Flatley and his son, and a montage of what can only be described as shameless backslapping promotion, whilst the penultimate number saw another video projection of three Michael Flatley's tap dancing together; and the male protagonist of the show, the Lord Of The Dance himself was given trademark Flatley poses and stances as part of the choreography.

This show had also lost some of its original intent and despite the whistling and screaming from enthusiastic audience members - more than likely because there was quite a lot of unnecessary bare flesh on show this evening - the experience did not thrill and excite me as much as I had hoped it would. Gone were the choral singers. Gone were the traditional Irish instruments and Gaelic music. Gone was the flamenco dancer - and she had seemingly been replaced by an evil lascivious nymphet working for the dark side. We did have 2 female fiddlers, and a female 'pop' vocalist - perhaps in a bid to try and 'update' the show somehow.

The bare stage was given unending video projections of scenes both real and fantastic, some more relevant than others, which were both distracting and mesmerising, meaning you had two points of focus on stage all the time, the projections and the dancers; and to try and justify the storyline of this show - an evil cyborg destroys the penny whistle of a wood spirit in order to capture the Lord Of The Dance and become the Dance Lord himself, only to be defeated by another group of humanoid robots. They used video projections and music as well as onstage pyrotechnics, but it all seemed a little weird; especially when the dancers came on in gym workout gear for one dance and sexy black bras for another - for no apparent reason. Watching an Irish dancing evil cyborg though has to rate as one of the funniest things I have ever seen!

That being said though, it doesn't really seem to matter to Flatley and his company what the critics say. They are bullet proof, and garner full houses and have a loyal following wherever they go. Perhaps this is because the dancing and the 'spectacle' are superb and flawless.

In this evening's performance (I hope I am crediting the correct person here, since some roles are performed by more than one performer), the Lord Of The Dance was

danced with immense energy, passion and incredible skill by **James Keegan**; whilst his evil nemesis, the Dark Lord was no less a charismatic and proficient performer **Zoltan Papp**. The female lead - I can hardly say 'love interest' since there was nothing in the show to suggest this, except for one small piece in the second act when the evil temptress steals him away - was danced with some excellently executed high leaps by **Nikita Cassidy**; whilst her nemesis, Morrigham was **Mide Ni Bhaoill**.

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The others I can credit with impunity since they remain constant; **Jess Judge** as the penny whistle playing gymnast, Little Sprite, and the singing was provided by **Sophie Evans**, who sadly sounded decidedly tired and off-key this evening. And a faultless and incredible ensemble of superb dancers, who for me ARE the show. Without the iconic long line of Irish stepping, or the clever interweaving Celtic-folk-based dances, there would not be a show, and the ensemble perhaps deserve most of the applause here since they undeniably dance and are on stage much more than any of the protagonists.

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Lord Of The Dance: Dangerous Games is Flatley's 'Homage to Flatley' but is nonetheless a spectacle and a thrilling and exciting experience to behold.