

Lord of the cask: Michael Flatley escapes home worries with a leap into whiskey

Erin McCafferty

Michael Flatley, the former *Riverdance* star, has spoken of his distress over drama with his home, Castlehyde House in Co Cork.

The Chicago-born Irish dancer, 65, who is celebrating 30 years since he shot to fame following his performance at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994, has brought proceedings against several parties before the commercial division of the High Court over an alleged €30 million worth of damage

to the house. The defendants are fully contesting the case.

"My heart is broken over this whole thing," he says of the issues with the house, which was damaged by a fire in 2016. "I started to notice once we moved back in that it didn't feel the same. We handed the keys over to the insurance company. We can't go back in. It's not fit for purpose, and we can't even go in to get our clothes," he said.

In the meantime, although he also has houses in Monaco, Italy and London, he and his wife, Niamh, are

currently living out of hotels. "It's not the same as having a home to go to," he said. "Sometimes you just want to make a sandwich, you don't want to have to order food."

His 17-year-old son, Michael StJames Flatley, is at boarding school abroad, and the dancer misses him terribly when he is away.

"He has mother's brains and his mother's looks, thank God. He's a great lad. He does well at school and he's creative. He plays a bunch of different instruments, sings, and does acting," he said.

Recalling his recent cancer diagnosis, Flatley said it left him in the "loneliest place in the world".

"Lying on the gurney in the freezing cold hallway of the hospital, I asked myself, 'Am I going to come out of here?' There's nobody there to hold your hand. You're on your own and it's the loneliest place in the world," he said.

He is now in remission and feeling "great" but finds himself more appreciative of everything. "I'm blessed that I have the most beautiful wife and son and I couldn't ask for

a better life. I've got to do what I love for a living."

The dancer has recently turned his hand to making whiskey. Flatley Irish Whiskey: The Dreamer, a five-year-old triple-cask blend, aged in former bourbon, port and Pedro Ximenez sherry casks, launches in Ireland this week. It's a project that is close to Flatley's heart.

"When I was a young lad, my father, a big, strong Irishman, used to come home from work every evening, and have a whiskey. But it had

to be Irish whiskey, and it was always just the one," he recalled. "My father was my hero. I've wanted to produce my own whiskey ever since."

In 1999, when Flatley bought Castlehyde House, then a rundown mansion built in 1790, outside Fermoy, one of the first things he did was install whiskey barrels in the basement. He has since built a luxurious whiskey room.

He would have held the launch of his whiskey there, but for the fact he and his family were forced to vacate

the property suddenly last October, due to the presence of dangerous chemicals.

"I've spent the past 30 years touring the world promoting Ireland and Irish culture, and in many ways this Irish whiskey is an extension of that. It promotes Ireland in what I think is a classy and dignified way, and that's important to me," he said.

Following on from the movie *Blackbird*, which he produced, directed and starred in, Flatley is eyeing two other movie offers. He's also producing a new dance

show to take place next Christmas in Dublin and Belfast. "While I'm not dancing on stage, I've created all the steps, and I will be putting the dancers through their paces," he said.

At the moment, however, he is focused on his whiskey, made with the master blender Noel Sweeney.

"We must have done 100 iterations of it, but we came to the last one, looked at each other and smiled. I said, 'Noel, is this as good as I think it is?' And he said, 'It's just fabulous. It's a masterpiece.'"

Israeli fans accused of harassing Bambi Thug over Gaza support

Irish delegation complains to organisers as Varadkar says Middle East state should have skipped this year, writes *Patrick O'Donoghue* in Malmö

Bambi Thug is at the centre of another row and an official complaint has been lodged claiming several Israeli fan club members were able to "harass and harangue" the Irish Eurovision delegation in a nightclub, which caused Bambi "a lot of distress".

While Eurovision 2024 was marred by controversy, the disqualification of the Netherlands contestant, protests and the shadow of the Israel-Gaza conflict, two of the contest's official fan clubs found themselves at odds following an alleged incident in EuroClub, a Eurovision nightclub, shortly after Ireland's act Bambi Thug, who is a vocal supporter of Palestine, was voted through to the final.

Frank Dermody, president of OGAE Ireland, lodged an official complaint with OGAE Sweden and OGAE International, and said: "This was harassment of another club against OGAE Ireland on a political matter ... They followed and screamed at Ireland's entrant and delegation for a protracted period of time in the VIP [area]," he alleged.

Dermody also alleged another Israeli fan "invaded" the VIP area before being removed by security. Dermody followed up the complaint after meeting Nir Harel, the OGAE Israel president, and said it was disappointing no action had been taken. "OGAE Ireland demands the immediate expulsion of all members of OGAE Israel who were involved in the incident on Tuesday," he said.

OGAE Israel confirmed that there had been "a dialogue" and said the matter was "being dealt with internally".

"The Israeli fans are very proud and happy to be celebrating the Eurovision Song Contest. We'd like to use this opportunity to reach out to all the Eurovision family and ask to stop further politicising Eurovision, and to not cause people to feel hated just because of their origin country. The slogan is 'United by music', so let's do just that," he said.

Dermody told *The Sunday Times* that there were several Israeli protesters inside EuroClub when Bambi arrived. "Wherever Bambi went in the VIP box, protesters would follow. Bambi handled it excellently. They ignored the harassment at them and focused on their Irish fans at the side," Dermody said, adding that OGAE Ireland had raised more than €1,000 for Gaza charities.

RTE confirmed that the delegation was aware of an incident in the EuroClub in Malmö, Sweden, on Tuesday but declined to provide further comment.

OGAE Sweden and OGAE International did not respond to queries.

There was a big security operation in Malmö last night for one of the most politically-fraught competitions in the show's 68-year history. There was a heavy police presence around the arena, with snipers stationed on rooftops and fans facing a long wait to enter as they went through airport-style security checks. Police officers were deployed from neighbouring Denmark and Norway to assist with the operation. However, pro-Palestinian protests still took place outside the venue during last night's final.

Bambi Thug did not appear during a rehearsal show yesterday afternoon, casting doubt over whether the singer-songwriter from Macroom, Co Cork, would appear in the grand final. In a statement shared to Bambi's official Instagram, the artist said a situation requiring "urgent attention" from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) had occurred backstage.

"The EBU have taken this matter seriously and we have been in a discussion about what action needs to be taken. This means I have missed my dress rehearsal - I am really sorry to the fans that have come to see me. I hope to see you on the stage tonight," they said in a post with the hashtag #CrownTheWitch. Instead of a live performance, a pre-record of Bambi's song, *Doomsday Blue*, was shown.

The controversy continued when, on the afternoon of the final, Alessandra Mele withdrew as Norway's Eurovision points spokeswoman. Malmö descended into speculation as to who would appear on stage in front of the expected TV viewership of about 200 million people.

Bambi, 31, expressed anger at descriptions of their act by Eurovision commentators on Kan, Israel's public service broadcaster. Viewers watching the contest with children were warned



MARTIN SYLVEST ANDERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; MARTIN MEISSNER/JAP; JESSICA GOW/EPA

Eurovision star was always bewitching, say schoolfriends

Patrick O'Donoghue

"Mesmerising, unique and iconic" was one of the descriptions given by Irish Eurovision superfans when asked to sum up the otherworldly Bambi Thug.

Bambi Thug, 31, real name Bambi Ray Robinson, has gone from singing in a school choir and practising ballet in Macroom in Cork to representing Ireland on the world stage with *Doomsday Blue*, an experimental and provocative fusion that blends elements of witchcraft and primordial screaming.

Bambi Thug, a member of the Swedish Lagerqvist family but born in Cork, uses the pronouns they/them, is a self-described "goth gremlin goblin witch" and a trailblazer of the "ouija pop" genre.

People who knew the performer in the earlier stages of their life and artistic development have said their gifts were always obvious.

Jessica Ring was best friends with the singer-songwriter when the pair attended St Mary's Catholic secondary school, and remembers a "brave and strong" individual. She said it was always a "no-brainer" that Bambi Thug would play the lead role in any school play.

"They always had the most talent. They were always very, very fun. They were always the life of the party and always very artistic," Ring told *The Sunday Times*.

Ring and Bambi Thug have not been in touch since parting ways after their Leaving Cert exams but said the signs were there in school that Bambi would go on to become a star.

Jane Kellaghan, who was Bambi Thug's dance course director at Cork College of Further Education, said the Eurovision star was a "very genteel" and "non-assuming" young person when they first enrolled at the college at the age of 18 before they moved on to the prestigious Urdang Academy in London.

However, Kellaghan also recalls a budding artist who was always "authentically themselves" and who had a "standout factor". "You sort of imagine that a student that would make it

to the stage where Bambi has made it, to that level of fame, might have a more egotistical persona. But Bambi, although they were very ambitious in terms of doing well, wouldn't have had that sort of cockiness or arrogance which a lot of performers would have," Kellaghan said, adding that they had been a "very popular" student.

Despite this, Kellaghan said a fascination with the kind of artistry on display in Bambi Thug's Eurovision entry was always apparent, and drew comparisons between them and Kate Bush due to their subversive similarities. Kellaghan also said Bambi had chosen to forge a career in music in order to become "the front person" in their projects, because they were not content to remain in the chorus line with a group of other dancers.

Aoife Donovan, Bambi Thug's choir director at St Mary's, said they had been very interested in songwriting from an early age and were always coming forward with ideas for songs the choir could perform. Bambi also helped the choir win an All-Ireland schools competition.

"They were a huge help to the younger students in the choir and always wanted the performance to be the best that it could be," Donovan said.

Bambi Thug's high-octane routine features a heavy emphasis on occult symbolism which has divided commentators online, with some claiming that *Doomsday Blue* carries underlying satanic or demonic messages. The singer claims that the imagery harks back to Ireland's pagan roots.

Gráinne Phelan is an Irish traditional witch who serves as the high priestess of the Ravenseye Coven, which regularly gathers at the Hill of Tara, Co Meath. Phelan said Bambi Thug was "shining a spotlight" on the spiritual community and that she would be sending spells to Malmö to help Bambi Thug claim victory.

"They are bringing a more modern twist to the witchy style and the aesthetic," Phelan said, adding that Bambi Thug's act would encourage younger audiences to learn more about witchcraft.



the act would be "the most scary". The commentator said: "There will be a lot of spells and black magic and dark clothing, satanic symbols, and voodoo dolls, like we are at Cats Square in Jerusalem in the mid-Nineties," adding Bambi was known to "speak negatively about Israel".

In an interview with RTE yesterday, Bambi said they were "angry with other teams breaching the rules of the EBU, and still being allowed in ... So there's definitely a war drum sounding in my heart to push the performance even more".

The EBU said it had spoken to the Israeli broadcaster and "reiterated the importance of all commentators respecting all the artists taking part".

Leo Varadkar, the former taoiseach, who was in Malmö, said he felt the EBU should have eased tensions for this year's contest by suspending Israel, whose artist Eden Golan was booed last night as she sang *Hurricane*.

But he said Ireland was right not to boycott the contest, adding: "If we did [boycott Eurovision], we'd have to boycott the Olympics, Paralympics and everything else. Our policy should be to be present and to try to isolate Israel, not to be absent and isolate ourselves."

Uncertainty hung over the final after the removal of the Joost Klein of the Netherlands from the line-up following a complaint from a female member of the production crew. But travelling Irish fans did not let the difficulties spoil the party.

A contingent with sequin jackets, tricolours and painted faces gathered outside EuroClub on Friday with Marty Whelan, the veteran broadcaster who has provided official Irish commentary at the Eurovision for 25 years, to beam in to *The Late Late Show* from the streets of Malmö.

Whelan said his involvement with the competition had been his "favourite" and "maddest" part of his career. "This is a week out of my life every year that I gladly am a part of, so for me it's a great thing."

Whelan praised Bambi's act for its originality, calling it a complete departure from previous Irish entries. "We've never, ever had a performance like this in the Eurovision so we are proud as punch ... Bambi manifests a changing world in terms of theatre and performance, and I love it for that reason."

Conor Downey, 23, from Macroom, which he called "Bambieland", booked his Eurovision 2024 tickets before the 2023 event even ended. "Booking.com actually got on to me about unusual activity as I had so many hotels booked. The music is brilliant and the community is brilliant. Most of my friends would be people I've met through Eurovision," Downey said, adding he had been obsessed by Eurovision since he was nine.

It didn't take long for Marty mania to take hold, and Marko Bojic and Vukojica Zivanovic, a pair of passing Serbian Eurovision fans, posed for pictures with Whelan and said Bambi Thug was trending at No 3 on Serbian YouTube. Bojic and Zivanovic showed photos on their phones of themselves carrying cardboard Marty Whelan masks.

Last Friday, Bambi Thug broke down in tears when asked about Israel's qualification. Fiddling with an Irish flag and wearing a Palestinian Keffiyeh, Bambi said: "I cried with my whole team."

Bambi has said the EBU stopped them wearing a painted ogham inscription-translating to "ceasefire and freedom" during their semi-final performance.

The EBU said the body art contravened Eurovision rules designed to uphold the "non-political nature of the event".

Back in Macroom, a giant screen was set up in the town centre for people to watch their hometown hero Bambi, who said after their show: "Love will always triumph over hate." A minute's silence was held during the Israeli set.



Bambi Thug, a vocal supporter of Palestine, sang at Eurovision after boos were heard during the performance of Eden Golan of Israel, below left

“Love will always triumph over hate”



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