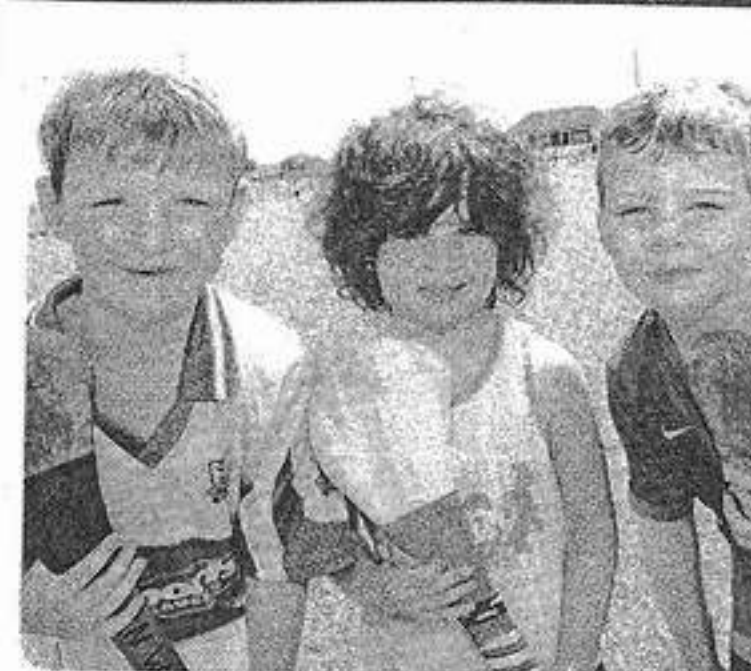


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Curtain up for Frank and Angela

After the book and film comes Angela's Ashes, the city-bound musical. **Anne Sheridan** talks to the creative force behind the production

BARRACK Hill, the last week of June, before the good weather came. The place where it all began for Frank McCourt in the backstreets of Limerick now has graffiti etched on the wall, and two-storey apartments where he spent his "miserable, Irish, Catholic childhood".

The area, just off Wolfe Tone Street, has moved on, but it seems the ghost of the Pulitzer Prize winner is destined to live on.

Frank joked that he wanted his ashes scattered in the Shannon – "let them pollute the river" – but it's here they really lie. As if on cue, a group of tourists round the corner and pace their way up the top of the hill, led by a tour guide revealing the chequered youth of Limerick's most famous author.

Moments earlier, drizzle began to fell and umbrellas were quickly parachuted open. The omnipresent rain of Angela's Ashes.

Adam Howell, the composer behind Angela's Ashes: A Musical, and actress Sarah Ayrton, who will play Angela in the forthcoming

production, could only smile at this series of serendipitous moments.

"Did you see that that was an Angela's Ashes tour," he says with delight, after the photographer finishes taking their picture.

"The cast of 22 has become like a little Angela's Ashes club or society and they don't want the journey to end."

"It's very eerie being here, looking out over the River Shannon, being in South's pub and having a Guinness is very strange, and being in the McCourt museum where Frank used to be in the classroom," he says.

This is his second trip to Limerick. He has seen all the newspaper cuttings about Frank framed in South's, where he had his first pint; he has spent hours in the Frank McCourt museum,

housed in Frank's former school Leamy's on Hartstonge Street, and Sarah has even posed for a picture by the toilet doors in South's, named Frank and Angela.

The cast of 22, he says, has "become like a little Angela's Ashes club or society" and they don't want their journey to end.

Adam never got to meet Frank, but since reading the book at the age of 15 Frank's life has indelibly been woven into Adam's, becoming a part of his own and sometimes it's hard to separate the two. "I've read the book numerous times and watched the film countless times," he says.

On his last trip, when he returned to Derby and told the cast they had visited Windmill Street "everyone was like 'Ooh, what's Windmill Street like?'"

Now just 26, the theatre graduate from Derby in England has been determined to bring it to the stage for years. He wrote the music lyrics for the play, while collaborator Paul Hurt adapted the book for the stage.



Adam Howell, who wrote the musical version of Angela's Ashes, at Barrack Hill with Sarah Ayrton, who will star as Angela

Picture: Adrian Rutledge

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An all-singing, all-dancing Angela's Ashes

➔ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

They succeeded last year in bringing it to a theatre in Derby for three nights, and the vice chancellor of the University of Derby was so "bowled over by the production" that he gave them the go-ahead for funding to bring it to Limerick.

The Lime Tree at Mary Immaculate College jumped at the chance of showing it here, and expect it could be a sell-out when it runs from Wednesday July 17 to Saturday July 20.

The McCourt family in the United States—including Frank's widow Ellen and brother Alphonse and his wife Lynn—were so supportive of the play when they saw it in Derby that they are returning to Limerick to enjoy it all over again. Brother Malachy and his wife Diana will travel to to see it for the first time.

In the UK, they could have got away with not having the Limerick accents spot on, but that is one of the challenges in the show they've addressed ahead of its Irish premiere.

A local voice coach will be hammering home the phonetics with them over the coming weeks, and when they're not working, they're watching videos of *The Rubberbandits* online for a modern take on the mother tongue.

"There's a great sense of responsibility to do it justice, and do the characters justice, because if there's one thing that Limerick seems to have it's characters. I'm trying to get Frank's approval by trying to get the approval of Limerick people. If we can do it in Limerick, we can do it anywhere quite frankly, because this is the motherland, where the story has come from. Broadway will seem like a walk in the park," he joked.

"The special thing about it is we're not trying to recreate something that happened in history. These characters were really there. We'll never know what they were really like, but we're trying to capture the essence of them."

As he walks around Limerick you get the sense that he's trying to take in a myriad of different realities, and all the overlapping dimensions of Frank's life, the memoir, the Limerick of today and his own role in presenting a new version of a famous work.

After Limerick, there has been talk on both sides of the Atlantic about where it could go next, but Adam is firmly concentrating on the Lime Tree production, which was been revised since Derby.

"I'd love for it to go forward. It's been such a long ambition of mine I'd hate for it to die out. I'd like for it to have a future life. I think we've done quite well to move it from Derby in November to Limerick this July,

and develop it along the way. I think it's moving in the right direction."

While there is great excitement in bringing the production here, he admits they are also "a bit terrified" of what the reaction will be like.

"It's hard to say what kind of reaction we'll get; we didn't know what kind of reaction we'd get in Derby either. There were people who weren't as crazy about it as others, but the general consensus was that people enjoyed it. We want that

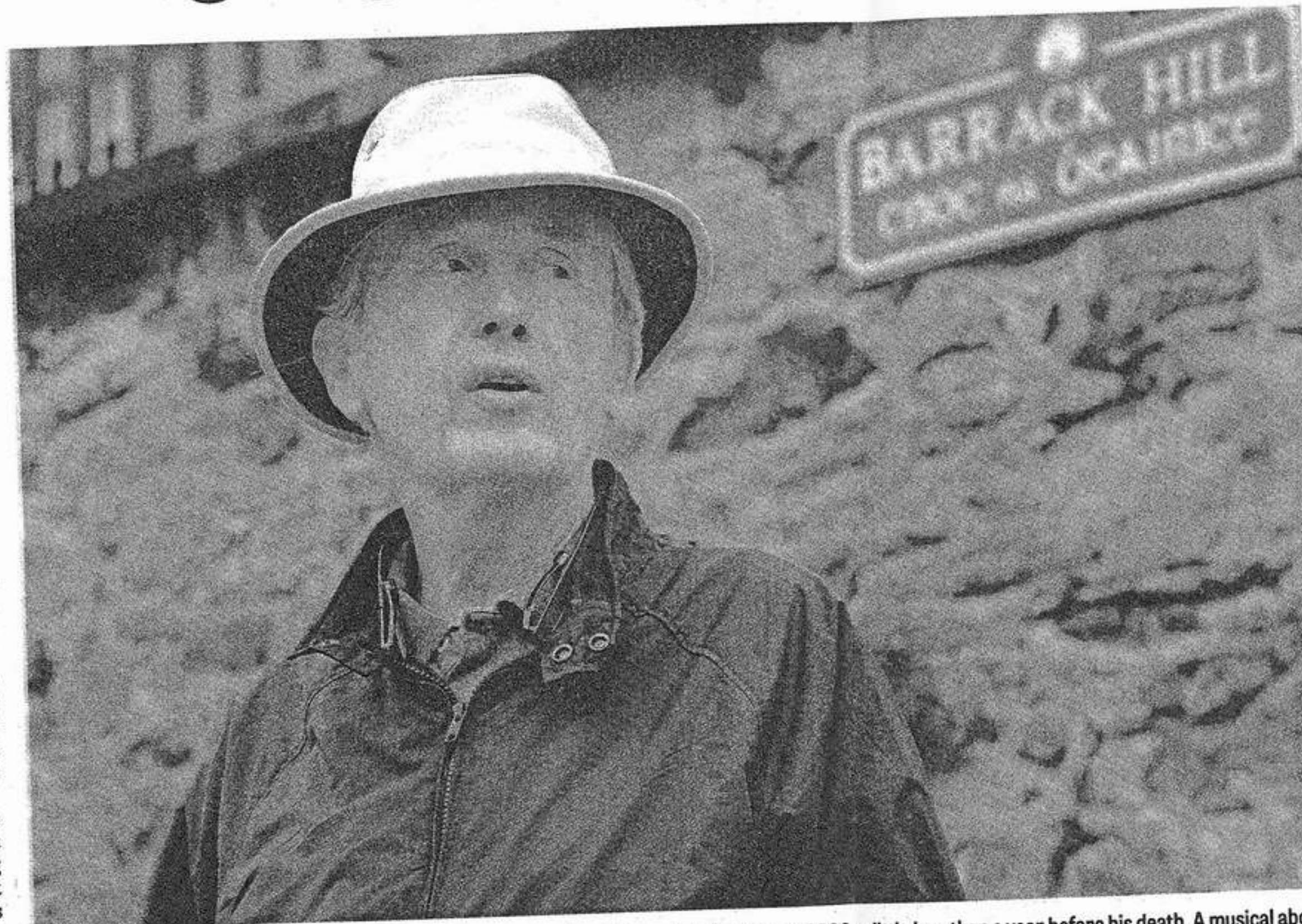
stamp of doing Limerick, and tackling the big beast."

Actress Sarah Ayrton, 28, said after much searching to find the right Angela, Frank's mother, she has delighted to be asked to play her, and given her age she'll be playing a "young Angela" when Frank was born and just before she came to Limerick from New York.

"I just wanted to be part of the show, so it was really unexpected to get the role. It's a great challenge. I'm quite nervous about playing Angela

"There's a great sense of responsibility to do it justice and do the characters justice"

Adam Howell
Musical composer



Reliving his youth: Frank McCourt pictured for the Limerick Leader at Barrack Hill in August 2008, a little less than a year before his death. A musical about his life will play at the Lime Tree Theatre from July 17-20. 'If we can do it in Limerick we can do it anywhere quite frankly,' says its creator. Picture: Owen South



Top: composer, Adam Howell with actress Sarah Ayrton, who plays Angela in the Limerick-bound stage musical, above. Picture: Adrian Butler



"I remember emailing him back, and saying 'Gosh, she has become real again'. You forget that these were real people when you read a book." She may not be able to smoke as much as Angela and sing at the same time, but Ellen McCourt said the songs in the play are "to die for".

Some of the props used in the film of *Angela's Ashes*, starring Emily Watson and Robert Carlyle, will also be used in the forthcoming performance. The red coat, which was worn by the actress in the 1999 film directed by Alan Parker, is also part of the museum's collection on Hartstone Street and will be worn on stage.

The timing will also be

poignant who those who knew Frank best - it will be the fourth anniversary of his passing this July 19. He died in New York in 2009, where he was born 78 years earlier.

Who would have thought it possible - an all-singing, all-dancing *Angela's Ashes* in Limerick? And who knows where it could go next.

Angela's Ashes: A Musical, produced by UnContained Arts and Theatre Works, runs in the Lime Tree theatre from Wednesday, July 17, to Saturday, July 20, at 8pm each night. Tickets on the opening night are priced at €15, and will be €23 thereafter. Call (061) 774774 to book.