

With slums scarce and babies underfoot, filmmakers struggle to re-create Frank McCourt's memoir. BY MALCOLM JONES

New Fire From the 'Ashes'

FRANK MCCOURT CASTS A QUIZZICAL eye over the slums of his youth. Or rather, a more-than-reasonable facsimile thereof. The "slum" is a movie set for the film version of "Angela's Ashes," McCourt's best-selling memoir of his "miserable Irish Catholic childhood" in Limerick in the '30s and '40s. Ironically, Ireland is so prosperous these days that when the filmmakers searched for a slum like the one McCourt grew up in, they couldn't find one standing in Limerick—or anywhere else in Ireland. So they wound up building their own on a vacant Dublin lot. Now, on a wet December morning, workmen are painting the gray walls even grayer and roughing up the concrete. What are they doing, McCourt asks a foreman. They're "distressing" the buildings, he's told, in an effort to age them. "They're *distressing* them," he chuckles. "Christ almighty, this is a book about a slum, and look at what's going on. There's an industry built around it."

But while McCourt is plainly disquieted, he is not surprised. Since the publication of his memoir in 1996, he has been besieged by such ironies. First off, his tender account of childhood poverty has sold millions (2.3 million copies in the United States) and made millions (\$1 million for the film rights alone). The book won a Pulitzer Prize and lifted McCourt from the pleasant life of a retired high-school English teacher to the klieg-lit summits of celebrity. Or at least the mid-altitude peaks where literary celebrities graze. He's

always in demand as a speaker and an interviewee because he's witty, articulate and he's got the perfect Irish brogue: lyrical but penetrable. "60 Minutes" has hauled him back to Ireland twice for a March profile. Somehow, amid all this hubbub he has managed to nearly finish his sequel to "Angela," "Tis," a memoir of his adult years in America. The first excerpt appears in this week's New Yorker.

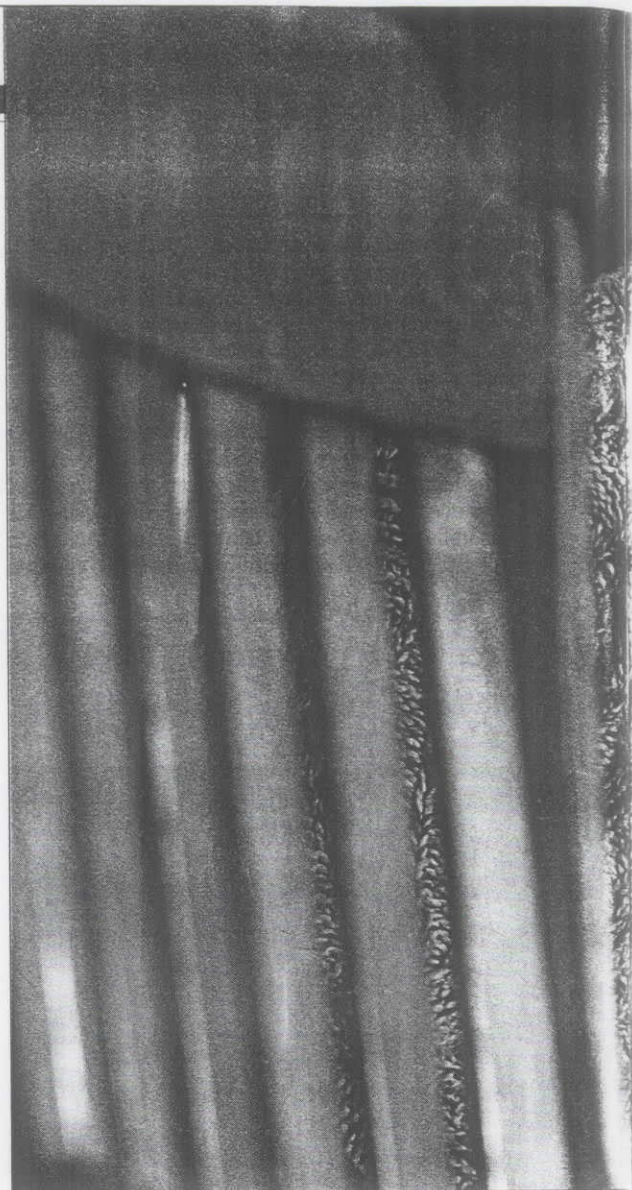
Unfortunately, as McCourt, like any celebrity, becomes known for being known, the substance of his marvelous book slips farther and farther out of mind. The movie will reacquaint us with McCourt's beguiling story of his long-suffering mother, his alcoholic father and the horrific poverty that claimed the lives of three of his six siblings. Directed by Alan Parker and starring Academy Award nominee Emily Watson, the uncompleted film is not due for release until next fall. But when even the sets pack a wallop, you figure the signs are good. "After two and a half years of traveling around in connection with this book," says McCourt on the set, "walking down this lane brings it all back to life more than anything."

Hollywood has done a frighteningly expert job of re-creating the physical horrors of the period, right down to the visceral picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus hanging on the wall of McCourt's grandmother's claustrophobic kitchen. But not even a \$25 million budget can buy the simple mag-

ic created by the child's voice—Mccourt's voice—that carries a reader through the book. "It struck a chord in a lot of people," says director Parker, who does admit that the grimness of his theme is not for everyone. "And whatever that magical ingredient is, you can only hope it's in the film as well. But the book is our bible. I tell everyone, 'When in doubt, read the book.'"

But Parker hasn't had a lot of time for such philosophizing. On this shoot, the director of "Evita" and "The Commitments" has spent most of his time wrangling with the small army of child actors. "I've got a young Frank, a middle Frank and an older Frank," he grumbles. "And three different Malachys, three Michaels, three Alphys. And lots of babies, who are very difficult because they figure very much in the action and there's no such thing as directing them." Emily Watson, who plays Angela McCourt, wearily concurs. "It is a bit like 'Sesame Street' around here," she says, firing up a cigarette. "Angela smoked 40 Woodbines a day," she says with a grin. "So even doing an interview, I'm rehearsing away."

Everyone defers to Parker as keeper of



Frank McCourt file.



'An abundance of emotions':
McCourt says old memories kept him away from the set

the McCourt faith. But Watson, as the mother, is the movie's heart and soul. The 32-year-old actress has lately cornered the market on women-at-the-end-of-their-rope roles, and she was always first choice of the film's producers, who didn't want a star-crowded marquee to detract from the story. Last month Watson ("Breaking the Waves") received her second Oscar nomination for best actress, this time for her work in "Hilary and Jackie." But Angela is her most distraught character yet. "Angela's not a lot of fun," she says, smiling. And the material is so powerful it's bewildering. "You get to the end of the day, and Alan says, 'That was great work.' But something's nagging at the back of your mind. Something awful happened. And then you think, oh yeah, my baby died. It's very confusing, really."

It's just like an actor, you'll say, to mix up a role with reality, but spend time on one of Parker's sets, and you'll do no better. In Arklow, a coastal village south of Dublin, the filmmakers have taken over an abandoned nunnery. The halls are unheated and damp, and everyone stands around bundled up in coats,

scarves and wool hats. "This is our poshest set," deadpans Parker. Over his shoulder, you can see the actor Robert Carlyle as McCourt's father and Joe Breen as young Frank standing before an official, begging in vain for a military pension. "We're not handing out money to support the Guinness family," they're told. The father's sense of humiliation in front of his small son is like a stench in the room. No matter how many times they shoot the scene, the emotional pitch of the moment never drops a whit. The more you watch, the more you cringe.

The one person conspicuously absent for most of the three months of shooting was McCourt himself. He stayed away for all but a few days of the filming, because he found it too intensely real. "It's not just one emotion you have," he said. "It's an abundance of emotions tumbling in. There's sadness and nostalgia and wonder and a feeling of removal. I'm jolted into the past and jolted forward into my very successful present. It'd be neat if I could have just one emotion, but I don't." McCourt says that based on the little he's seen, this movie "isn't like my life. It is my life." Who's going to argue with him? ■

'Angela's' Entourage

A progress report on some American best sellers making the risky leap to the big screen.



'Snow Falling on Cedars': Ethan Hawke will star in "Shine" director Scott Hicks's adaptation of the novel. Shooting is finished, but the release date has been pushed back—and back—until fall '99.

'Cold Mountain': Anthony Minghella ("The English Patient") will write and direct this Civil War story after finishing "The Talented Mr. Ripley."

'The Perfect Storm': Wolfgang Petersen ("Air Force One") is a disaster pro. Next, disaster at sea: Sebastian Junger's account of a tiny ship, tossed.

'Memoirs of a Geisha': Steven Spielberg will direct, but the project's on hold until he and Tom Cruise finish "Minority Report." Martha Graham dancer Rika Okamoto leads an all-Japanese cast.



Memory lane: Ciaran Owens as Frank the elder strolling with Watson

TOP TO BOTTOM: STAN GODLEWSKI—GAMMA-LIAISON, BILL KAVE, NO CREDIT (4)