

Cousins and family join 700 who attended première screenings of controversial film

'Ashes' a work of art, says film director

By Frank McNally

ALAN Parker didn't hide his impatience when asked about the opposition to *Angela's Ashes* led by Limerick bookseller and part-time radio presenter Gerry Hannon. "I'm a bit bored hearing it, to be honest," the film director told reporters in Dublin yesterday. *Angela's Ashes* was a work of art, he said, "one of the most beautiful books written in the past 20 years".

He respected the sensitivity of Limerick people in general and their possessiveness about the story, but "they were rather critical of my treatment of Eva Peron in Buenos Aires, and they were critical in Mississippi [of the film *Mississippi Burning*]."

Frank McCourt's book was a "work of art" which met Gore Vidal's definition of autobiography, being an "impression" of a life, rather than a memoir, he said. But it was very important that the McCourts themselves had liked the film.

Asked how his experience of filming compared with *The Commitments* (1990), Parker was more relaxed. "When I did *The Commitments*, I said it was the best time I'd ever had making a film. I got up every morning and looked forward to going to work." This was not true of his last film, *Evita*, but *Angela's Ashes* had been a similar experience to the *Commitments*, he added.

One of those people — Emily Watson, the British actress who plays the eponymous Angela —

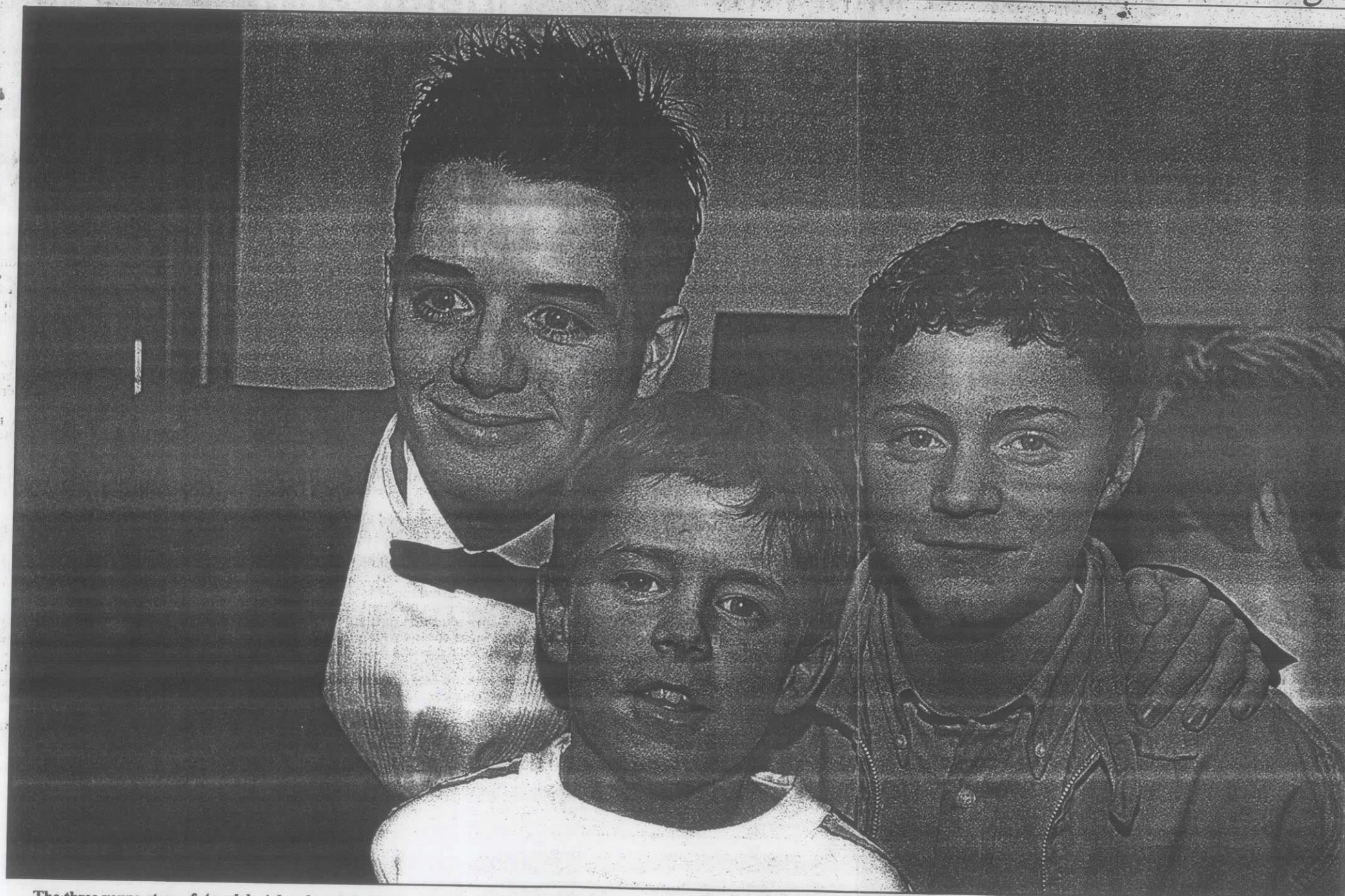
admitted it was a challenging role, given that her character was "clinically depressed." But it was a "complicated and subtle" film, and the language of the book was one of its attractions. "For an English girl, it feels like poetry ... you have a way of expressing yourself here that's naturally poetic, and we don't have that."

The press conference also featured the three young actors who play Frank McCourt at different stages of his early life.

"Young Frank", nine-year-old Joe Breen, stole most of the attention, posing for the cameras in a Wexford jersey while standing in front of the film posters which are making his cherubic features famous.

Unfazed by the media frenzy, he admitted growing bored with the film, having seen it now five times. "After a while, it's just: there's me, there's me, there's me." He deftly declined comment when asked how much he'd been paid for the job, and he wasn't considering acting as a career. "A farmer — no, a vet," he said when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up.

Ciarán Owens (13), from Cavan, and Michael Legge (20) from Newry, play "middle" and "older" Frank, and kept their heads yesterday as their junior colleague upstaged them. Already appearing in *Ballykissangel*, Ciarán is a brother of Eamon, who played the title role in Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy*. But Eamon was still the big star in the family, and he (Ciarán) was no threat to him.



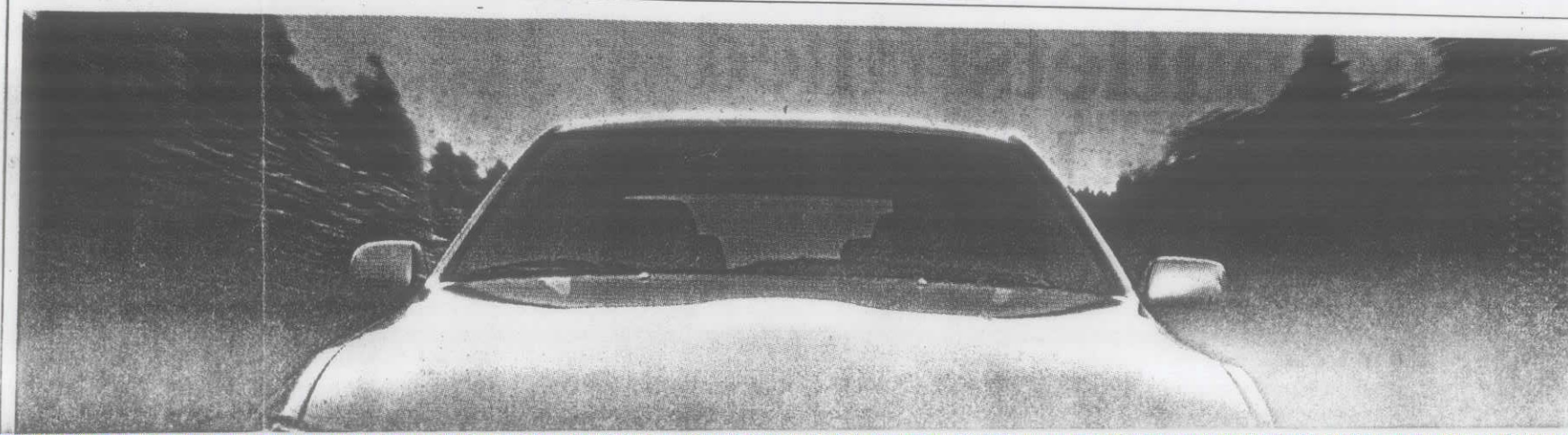
The three young stars of *Angela's Ashes*, from left, Michael Legge, Joe Breen and Ciaran Owens, at the première of the film at the Savoy Cinema, Dublin, last night: Photograph: Alan Betson

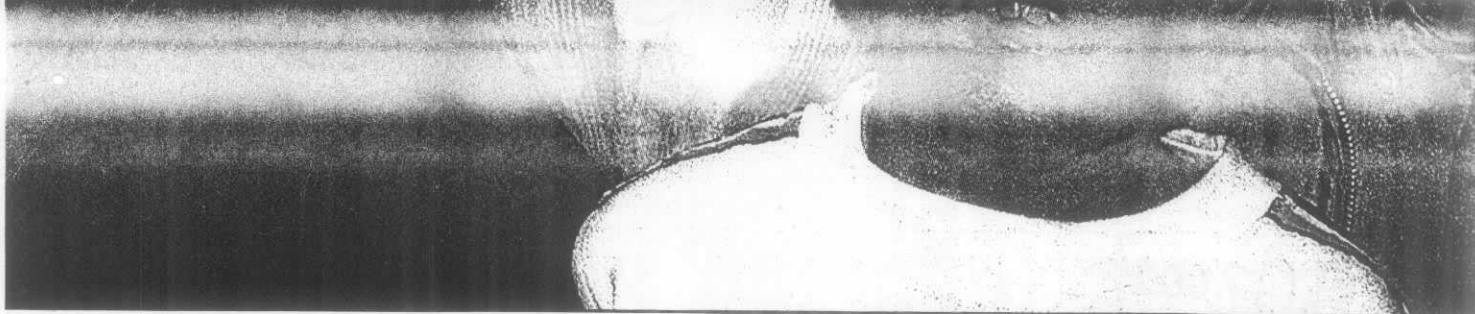
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McCourt's city as divided on the film as the book

LIMERICK audiences appeared largely in favour of *Angela's Ashes* at the film premiere in the city last night, applauding politely after it was shown on two of the screens at the Omniplex Cinema complex.

After the showing the city's mayor, Councillor Jack Bourke, described it as a "brilliant" film but the chairman of Limerick County Council, Councillor Michael O'Kelly, said it was exaggerated. He disagreed particularly with the depiction of the St Vincent de Paul Society and the clergy in the film.

Ms Sylvia McCloskey, from Barrack Hill, close to the area where *Angela's Ashes* is set, said it was a well-made film which accurately portrayed the book. But Mr Brian McNamara felt there were not enough local accents to be heard. "They were all Cork or Dublin" he said. He added that he thought the film made Irish people look "amadanish".

Mr Vincent Purcell, from Crecora, Co Limerick, said it was an excellent film whose depiction of Limerick in the '40s could be

There was polite applause when 'Angela's Ashes' was screened in Limerick last night, writes Éibhir Mulqueen

of any town in Ireland.

"It did a better job of Limerick than *Strumpet City* did of Dublin," was the verdict of Mr Tommy Hughes, a Dubliner living in Limerick.

The two screenings of the film in Limerick front of more than 700 people in the cinema complex is expected to raise £14,000 for Focus Ireland.

A statement from Frank McCourt was read to the audience, explaining his absence from the Limerick and Dublin premières. He is presently doing a promotional tour for his latest book, *Tis*. McCourt said he was

saddened not to be at the premiere "especially because I know Alan Parker put his whole soul into the film".

Among those who attended the Limerick screenings were two cousins of Mr McCourt's, Mr Patrick Sheehan and Mr Tommy Sheehan, and friends from the Limerick lanes, Mr Billy Campbell and Mr Gerry Lillis.

Not on the guest list was the now famous detractor of the *Angela's Ashes* phenomenon, Mr Gerry Hannan, a bookseller and part-time presenter on RLO [Radio Limerick One] 105.

Alleging that there are major inaccuracies in the memoir, Mr Hannan wants the book to be reclassified as fiction. But he will go to see the film.

In the meantime, he is busy doing interviews with the world media as the *bête noir* of Mr McCourt. "I think it has been a successful campaign because there are people out there now saying this [the book] is not 100 per cent accurate. That is the object of the exercise, so mission accomplished."

Author and lead actor miss 'Angela's Ashes' premiere

By Frank McNally

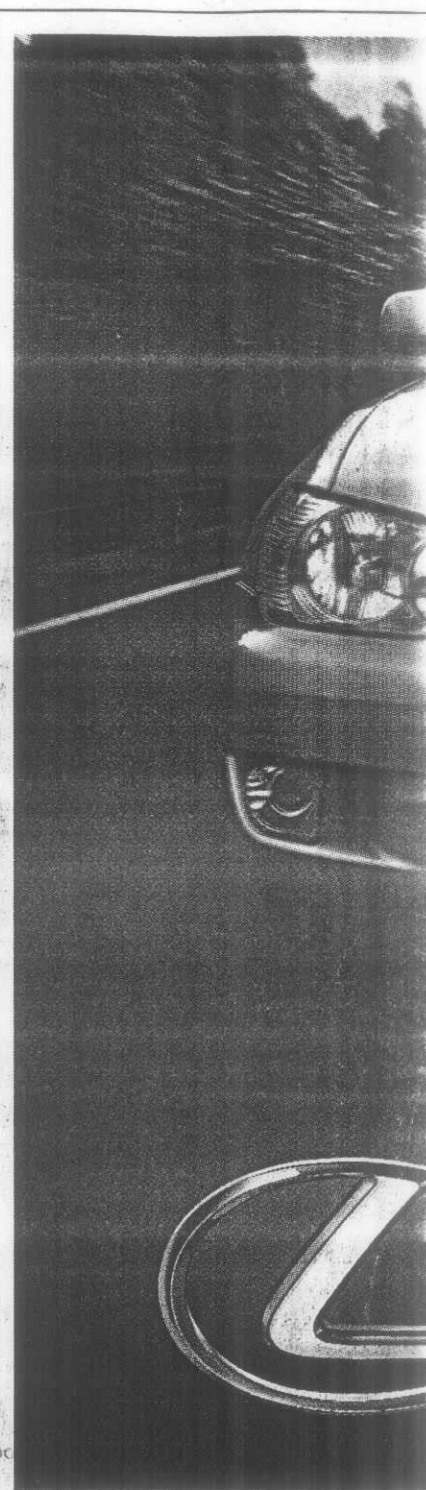
THREE of the four Corrs joined film director Alan Parker and the cast of *Angela's Ashes* when the film had its Irish premiere in Dublin last night. Cast members from Mr Parker's last Irish film, *The Commitments*, were also among the 700-strong audience for the premiere, most of whom paid £100 a head for the privilege. The proceeds of the event went to the Irish Youth Foundation.

Neither the author of *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt, nor the film's lead male star, Robert Carlyle, attended the showing at the Savoy cinema. However, the lead actress, Emily Watson, was joined by all three of the young actors who play McCourt in the film: Joe Breen (9), Ciarán Owens (13) and

Michael Legge (20).

The Government Chief Whip, Mr Séamus Brennan, and the US ambassador, Mr Michael J. Sullivan, were among the attendance, which also included film director Neil Jordan, the manager of U2, Paul McGuinness, and the managing director of Independent News and Media, Mr Gavin O'Reilly, with his wife, Alison Doody.

Brendan Gleeson, Colm Meaney and Pauline McLynn were among the many actors who attended. *Commitments* stars Andrew Strong, Robert Arkins and Maria Doyle-Kennedy were also there. The Corrs — minus drummer Caroline — provided the musical entertainment at a party in the Burlington Hotel last night which was expected to raise £100,000 for the Irish Youth Foundation.



Activists protest against use