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Friday, October 17, 2008

McQueen wins plaudits for 'humanity'



Film

director Steve McQueen (centre) with actors Michael Fassbender (left) and Liam Cunningham at the premiere of Hunger in Belfast last night. The film deals with the 1981 hunger strikes and the last six weeks of the life of hunger striker Bobby Sands. Photograph: Aaron McCracken/Harrison Photography

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GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

'Hunger' premiere: award-winning film recalls final weeks of Bobby Sands

BELFAST WAS last night figuring how to come to cinematic terms with the 1981 hunger strikes. Being Belfast, the British and Irish premiere of the film *Hunger* about the last six weeks of the life of Bobby Sands generated controversy.

The red carpet was rolled out for director Steve McQueen and stars of the film such as Michael Fassbender, who plays the part of Sands, Liam Cunningham who as a priest plays what he called a "sphincter-tightening" 22-and-a-half-minute scene with Fassbender, and Stuart Graham, who plays one of the prison officers in the Maze/Long Kesh prison.

Unionist politicians such as DUP Minister Gregory Campbell and junior minister Jeffrey Donaldson have expressed serious reservations about the film, which was made in Belfast, suspecting that it might be an exercise in republican propaganda.

They weren't at the premiere in the Moviehouse on Belfast's Dublin Road but former Presbyterian moderator, the Rev John Dunlop, did turn up "because I was invited". He was a little uneasy. This is still a raw subject in Northern Ireland.

"People shouldn't forget that 50 people died over the period of the hunger strikes, 35 of them murdered by republicans and 32 of those murdered by the IRA," he said.

"I hope this isn't republican propaganda; I hope this is properly contextualised," he added before heading into the theatre.

Several republicans attended the premiere including Sinn Féin Assembly member Barry McElduff, and hunger striker Laurence McKeown, who would have been the 11th republican to die but for the fact that his mother insisted he should be fed after he fell into a coma, an act that hastened the end of the fast.

Also there was Sinn Féin MLA Raymond McCartney from Derry who spent 53 days on hunger strike in the first of the strikes in 1980 and knew Sands quite well. He was conscious of unionist concerns and had already debated the subject with Gregory Campbell.

"People should make their judgment after they see the film, not before it," he said. "If Steve McQueen makes a film in a particular way, go and watch it, and then come out with whatever criticism you have. Certainly I hope that my particular view of this period is reflected in the film, but if it's not then you can have a discussion about it afterwards," added Mr McCartney.

Film director, the former Turner Prize winner Steve McQueen, emphasised the exact same point, saying he was attempting to make a rounded, balanced film. "This is a story about human beings; this is about the prison officers and the prisoners; that is what I was interested in. This is about ordinary people who had to deal with extraordinary situations," he said.

Killarney native Fassbender as Sands, Belfast actor Stuart Graham as the prison officer Raymond, and Dublin actor Liam Cunningham as the prison chaplain, also stressed the "humanity" of the work which has won accolades and awards all over the world.

"The thing that came to fore was the humanity of the piece," said Cunningham. "I would not have been interested if it was going to take sides or if it was going to make heroes out of an incredibly difficult situation. I would urge people to go and see it, even people for whom the name Bobby Sands would raise hairs on the back of their necks. This is a very well-balanced film."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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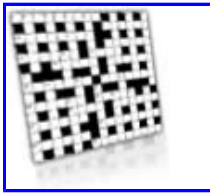
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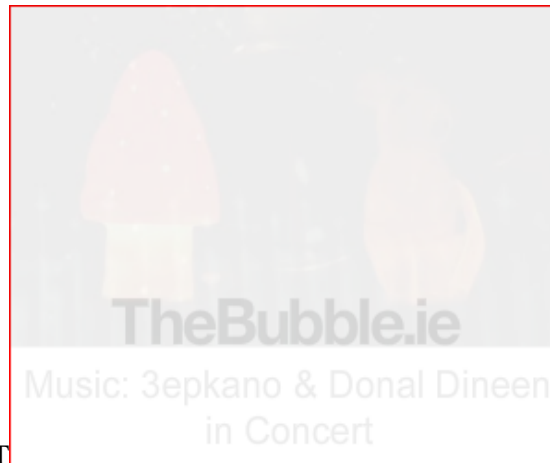
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