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Anna and the King

Dir. Andy Tennant. 1999. PG-13.

147mins. Jodie Foster, Chow Yun-Fat.

Did notorious perfectionist Jodie Foster suck on lemons for her role in the lavish epic *Anna and the King*, based on the diaries of 19th-century governess Anna Leonowens? It's hard to imagine how else she kept her lips puckered up tighter than a cat's behind for the better part of two and a half hours.

English widow Anna (Foster), a genteel early feminist, is hired to teach the ways of the West to the many wives and children of forward-thinking King Mongkut (Chow). At first, the barbaric splendor of Siam discomfits the prim and proper Anna (hence the lips), and the king is insulted by her casually imperious assumption that he and his country are uncivilized. But each comes to appreciate the other (a hint of romance is kept firmly in check) and then to see the subtleties of their disparate ways of life.

Although this fourth filmed version of the tale (counting last year's animated debacle) doesn't go so far as to debunk Leonowens's account of her time in Siam—there's considerable doubt among historians about her famous diaries' veracity—it does try to address certain underlying 19th-century attitudes that just don't wash in today's world. Pursed-lip service is paid to cultural relativity, exposing the boorishness of British imperialists, the evils of foreign economic oppression and the



SIAM WOMAN Foster is the liberated expat schoolteacher Anna.

nuances of Buddhist thinking, and Chow Yun-Fat's King is neither an inscrutable brute nor an ebullient ass à la Yul Brynner. And at least the Asian characters are played by Asian actors: It's really tough to see past Rex Harrison, Linda Darnell and Gale Sondergaard playing "Oriental" in the 1946 *Anna and the King of Siam* (at least the musical *The King and I* has pure romantic fantasy on its side). The latest version is all beautiful—if oddly without grandeur, given the obvious financial expenditure—and though filled with good intentions, the film is ultimately rather dull. (Opens Fri 17; see Index for venues.)—Maitland McDonagh

Time Out New York, 12/16-30/99, p. 161

DECEMBER 16-30, 1999 **161**