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# 'King' and eye-popping pageantry

## ANNA AND THE KING

(PERIOD ROMANTIC ADVENTURE)

A 20th Century Fox release of a Fox 2000 Pictures presentation of a Lawrence Bender production. Produced by Lawrence Bender, Ed Elbert. Executive producer, Terence Chang. Co-producers, Jon Jashni, G. Mac Brown, Wink Mor-daunt, Julie Kirkham.

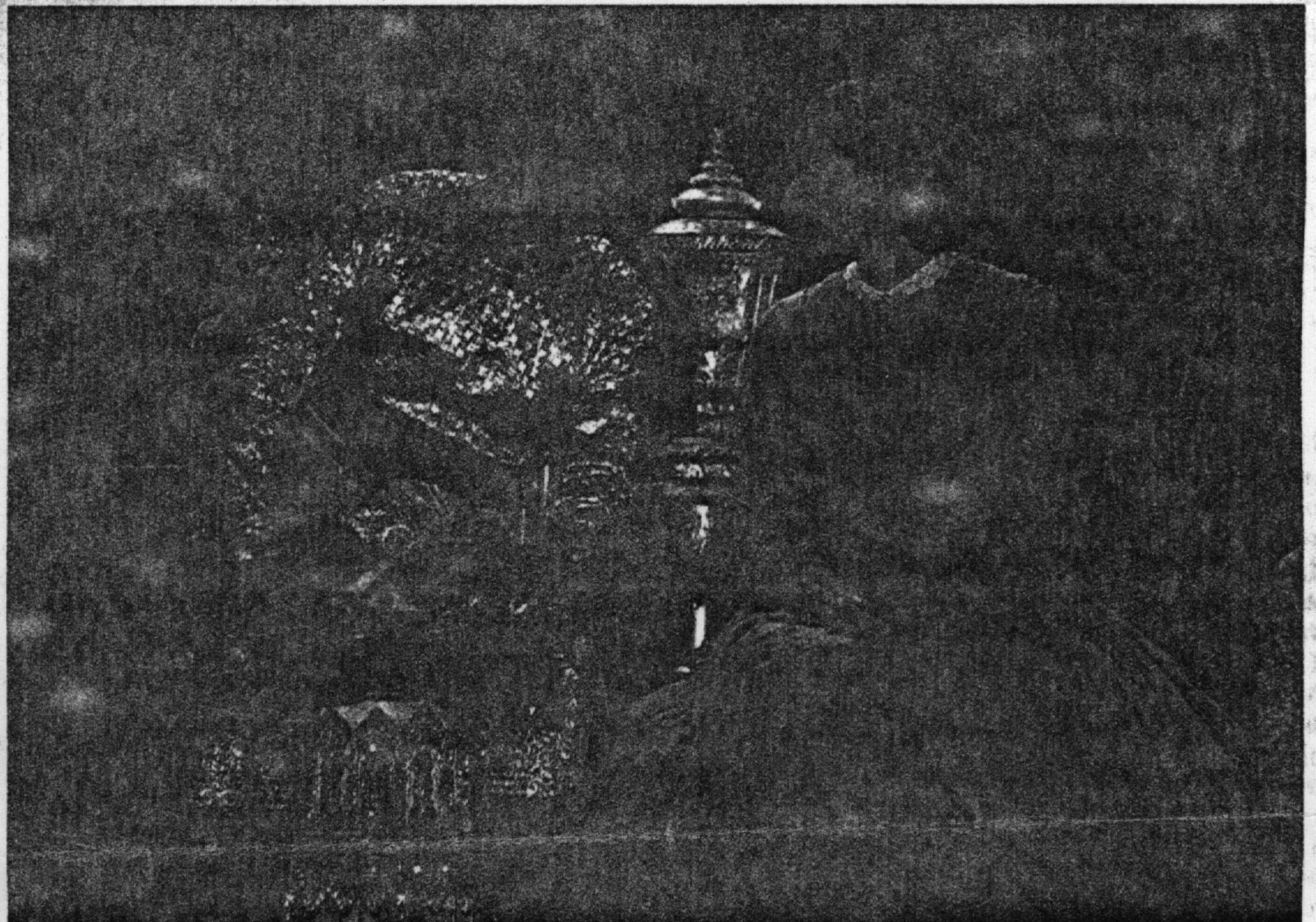
Directed by Andy Tennant. Screenplay, Steve Meerson, Peter Krikes, based upon the diaries of Anna Leonowens. Camera (Technicolor, Deluxe prints, Panavision widescreen), Caleb Deschanel; editor, Roger Bondelli; music, George Fenton; production designer, Luciana Arrighi; supervising art directors, Tom Nursey, Marc Fisichella, John Ralph; art director, Paul Ghirardani, "Lek" Chaiyan Chunsut-tiwat; set decorator, Ian Whittaker; costume designer, Jenny Beavan; sound (Dolby/SDDS), Brian Simmons; supervising sound editor, John A. Larsen; associate producer, Eric Angelson; assistant director, Scott Printz; visual effects supervisor/second unit director, Rich Thorne; second unit director, Jeff Balsmeyer; second unit camera, Steve Arnold; casting, Priscilla John. Reviewed at a sneak preview at the Egyptian, L.A., Nov. 27, 1999. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 147 MIN.

Anna ..... Jodie Foster  
King Mongkut ..... Chow Yun-Fat  
Tuptim ..... Bai Ling  
Louis ..... Tom Felton  
The Kralahome ..... Syed Alwi  
General Alak ..... Randall Duk Kim  
Prince Chowfa ..... Lim Kay Siu  
Princess Fa-Ying ..... Melissa Campbell  
Lady Thiang ..... Deanna Yusoff

By EMANUEL LEVY

**J**odie Foster makes a valiant effort at bringing a contemporary edge to the role of 19th-century schoolteacher Anna Leonowens in "Anna and the King," the third major screen version of the popular tale. But her performance is contained in a schmaltzy, ultra-elaborate, overly long production, all too consciously conceived as old-fashioned family entertainment. Critics will squabble over this hodgepodge of a movie, which defuses several of the story's racial, sexual and political tensions, but pic's flaws and undemanding nature will work in its favor at the box office. This Fox Christmas release should score high with large audiences, and may turn out to be one of the most commercially successful films of the holiday season.

The most notable element of this production is its large cast of Asian actors, beginning with the effective Hong Kong action star Chow Yun-Fat as King Mongkut. The role was played by the seriously miscast Rex Harrison in the 1946 B&W drama "Anna and the King of Siam," and, 10 years later, in the screen version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "The King



**GETTING TO KNOW YOU:** In their third bigscreen incarnation, Anna Leonowens and the King of Siam are played by Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat. The film is directed by Andy Tennant.

and I," by Yul Brynner, in his Oscar-winning and most iconic performance.

Foster, too, is well cast, bringing to the role of the young widow and governess a different interpretation from those by the graceful Irene Dunne and the ladylike Deborah Kerr. Her Anna is a more

and, perhaps least successfully, an effort to evoke the allure of the Forbidden City in "The Last Emperor."

Framed by a brief voiceover narration from the King's eldest son, tale begins with the arrival of Anna (Foster) and her son Louis (Tom Felton) in 1862 Siam. The young British widow, whose husband died as an of-

and concubines and no fewer than 58 children, whom she is meant to educate in a "scientific" way, one that will help place Siam among countries of the modern world.

As co-scripted by Steve Meerson and Peter Krikes, this version brings humor to the surface, particularly regarding issues of love and sexuality, as when Louis asks his mom why the King has so many wives. But explicit as these themes are, they are posited from a child's point of view, in a precious manner, hence neutralizing their potential provocation.

The validity of Anna's diaries has long been contested by historians, and the new script not only takes liberties, but also calculatingly reps naive filmmaking that recalls Hollywood of yesteryear. In its dramatically weak and leisurely paced moments, which are plentiful, pic comes across as cute, particularly in the interaction among the children, and moralistic, with life lessons duly absorbed by both lead characters.

Anna's prejudices against the King, who suffers from a reputation as a barbarian, are matched by the ruler's misconceptions about the West in general and women in particular. Upon arrival, Anna is addressed as "sir" because women in Siam are stigmatized as inferior. Nonetheless, she insists on getting her own house outside the palace.

Predictably, affection develops between Anna and the King, who realize how deceptive appearances

Turn to next page

## Watching this sentimental but undeniably gratifying diversion is like leafing through a catalog of popular Hollywood adventures of the last four decades.

stubborn and critical woman than either of the previous screen incarnations.

It's too bad that, with the exception of animated movies, the concept of family film entertainment hardly exists anymore in America. Each element of this large-scale production, from its lush visuals, widescreen format and PG-13 rating to its middlebrow sensibility and positioning of children at the center, is designed to soothe and gratify everyone in a manner of '50s and '60s big-budget epics.

Indeed, watching Andy Tennant's mishmash of a movie is like leafing through a catalog of Hollywood's popular adventures of the last four decades, with ideas and images borrowed from "King Solomon's Mines," "The Robe," "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness," "The Bridge on the River Kwai," "Doctor Zhivago," "Out of Africa"

ficer, has traveled thousands of miles from India to an exotic country largely unknown to the Western world. Assisted by a Siamese primer, which superficially details the region's history and customs, she is bound for culture collision. Indeed, as in the previous renditions, the essence of the story is the dichotomy between East and West.

While impatiently waiting for the King to see her, Anna wanders around the city, which gives helmer and the technical crew an opportunity to engage in pageantry, recording in the manner of an extravagant anthropological essay the "bizarre" mores of the place. Viewers are treated to sweeping vistas of the crowded marketplace, exteriors and interiors of the grand palace, boat rides and picnics by the river, costume balls and festive banquets.

Unbeknownst to Anna, the King's family consists of numerous wives



# ANNA AND THE KING

*Continued from previous page*

and first impressions can be. Anna discovers that Mongkut is a visionary leader, astute politician and humanist. For his part, the King recognizes that Anna has shined a light not only on him and his offspring, but also on the monarchy itself, interfering when a slave runs away from her owner and demanding justice when a concubine is accused of treason.

It takes 45 minutes for Anna and the King to exchange their first "meaningful" look. Thereon, romantic interludes are periodically inserted, with at least three nocturnal occasions in which the duo dance cheek-to-cheek. Undiscriminating viewers will relish the more explicit romantic angle. Both previous versions were structured around a "mystery" — will Anna stay or will she leave Siam? — a question that hardly matters in this simplistic account.



**CULTURE CLASH:** *Bai Ling plays one of Mongkut's concubines in "Anna and the King."*

Foster moves gracefully in period costumes and commands the screen charismatically; her stab at a Victorian accent is respectable, if not perfect. She enjoys strong chemistry with Chow, who, in his first non-action role in an American movie, impresses with his handsome presence and dignified stillness, avoiding the campy buffoonery that defined Brynner's performance.

Tennant, who last directed "Ever After," the Cinderella story set in 16th-century France, gives pic a similarly luxuriant treatment, with overwhelming landscapes, massive battles and parades of elephants. Caleb Deschanel's widescreen lensing in Malaysia (standing in for Thailand) is eye-popping. Luciana Arrighi's lavish design, Jenny Beavan's sumptuous costumes and George Fenton's melodic score contribute to an extremely sentimental but undeniably gratifying diversion.