



“MY ANGEL, MY SOUL, MY OTHER SELF” PAST GLORIES/FUTURE REFLECTIONS

The last great literary/film venture from Columbia harkened all the way back to 1984 and Milos Forman **Amadeus** for its muse and inspiration. Under director Bernard Rose, **Immortal Beloved** (1994) became an intense and engaged detailing of the flawed and tragic life of composer Ludwig von Beethoven. Once again, more speculation than fact proved the order of the day in this bio-pic.

The crux of the film’s narrative derives from a mysterious letter found after Beethoven’s death, bequeathing all of his worldly possessions to an ‘immortal beloved.’ Although scholars and musicologists have yet to agree on the origins of this mystery woman, director/writer Rose chose to conduct my own research from original sources, letters, court transcripts, conversation books and most of all, Beethoven’s music. ***“I soon realized,”*** Rose would later write, ***“...that there is no imaginable way of conclusively proving such a thing as the recipient of an unaddressed letter a hundred and ninety years ago.”***

Not that that stopped Rose from trying. Buttressed by a formidable performance from chameleon character actor, Gary Oldman and a stellar screenplay which kept one guessing until the very end, **Immortal Beloved** emerged as a probable fiction – fairly accurate and wholly satisfying as epic entertainment, perhaps most efficiently summarized by film critic Roger Ebert as ***“...clearly...made by people who feel Beethoven directly in their hearts.”***

(Above: Gary Oldman as Beethoven – a powerful performance virtually overlooked at Oscar time. Right: will the real ‘immortal beloved’ please stand up. Top right: Valerie Golina as Guilietta Guicciardi. Middle: Miriam Margolyse as Nannette Streicherova. Bottom: Isabella Rossellini as Anna Marie Erdody. The first desired Beethoven, the second abhorred him; the third truly admired him.)





(Sense and Sensibility, principle cast, top row from left: Emma Thompson as Margaret Dashwood, the more practical of two sisters and the co-author of the screenplay, the original rights of course belonging to Jane Austen. Kate Winslet (Marianne Dashwood), Hugh Grant as Edward Ferrars, Margaret's unrequited love interest; Alan Rickman (Col. Christopher Brandon), quietly in love with Marianne from afar. Bottom row, left: John Willoughby (Greg Wise) takes Marianne under his arm. Though truly in love with her, his dalliances elsewhere will eventually lead to their breakup. Bottom right: Edward and Margaret share a tender kiss at Marianne's wedding to Col. Brandon. A film of immense poignancy and perfect pitch in all elements, it won Thompson the Golden Globe for Best Screenplay and Ang Lee Best Director. Oscars overlooked the film entirely.)

In April of 1995, awash in professional success, Emma Thompson embarked on her own literary adaptation; this time on Jane Austen's timeless novel, **Sense and Sensibility**. By then, she had toiled on the script for nearly a year, a tenure made more problematic by tensions in her already crumbling marriage to Kenneth Branagh. Investing herself in her work, Thompson and director Ang Lee (who had never read Austen until Columbia Pictures passed him a copy of Thompson's script), began the arduous task of whittling down her screenplay to a manageable size, making many continuity changes along the way.

The story concerns two sisters, Margaret (Thompson) and Marianne (Kate Winslet). The latter is predisposed to believing in the ethereal platitudes of love, while the former has a temperament that is greatly reserved. Margaret is drawn to Edward Ferrars (Hugh Grant), the son of a wealthy family. Edward will be disinherited by his scheming sister, Fanny (Harriet Walter) – married to Marianne and Margaret's brother, John (James Fleet) - if his romantic interests in Margaret persist. Meanwhile Fanny now occupies the estate that should have rightfully been divided between the two sisters.

Frequent inclement weather during the May shoot, and the rather rustic conditions while living abroad and obscurely in the countryside of Devon England, did much to dampen the clothing, though not the spirits, of both cast and crew. Amidst this minor chaos, a quiet infatuation had begun to develop on set between Emma Thompson and costar Greg Wise (cast as Marianne's suitor, John Willoughby). The 'soon-to-be' romance made for a more pleasant atmosphere – along with several 'wild' after hours parties that had everyone in stitches. By the time the film wrapped principle photography in July, Wise and Thompson had

become lovers. The two would eventually marry in 2003. Upon its release, **Sense and Sensibility** was yet the most successful of book to screen movie adaptations, instantly declared a masterpiece by the critics and affording Thompson the Golden Globe for her script.

A minor lull in the cycle of literary melodrama followed with Mel Gibson's Oscar-winning historical/fiction epic, **Braveheart** (1995) nicely filling in the gap. Based loosely on the myth and legends of William Wallace (Mel Gibson), the screenplay by Randall Wallace follows the bloody carnage between the English armies amassed by King Edward I (Patrick McGoohan) and the growing army of Scottish dissidents under Wallace's command. In the film, Wallace's supremacy on the battlefield infuriates Edward, but in point of fact, Wallace's great conflict was with the British crown and not necessarily its peoples who were divided amongst Scots, Welsh and British descent.

Despite bearing the same family name, screenwriter Randall Wallace had never even heard of William Wallace until a 1983 trip to Edinburgh, after which he became fascinated and bewitched by not only the legend of 'Scotland's greatest hero' but moreover by an almost complete lack of documented texts written on either the man or his accomplishments. Instead, Randall relied heavily on a little known 15th century poem by Henry the Minstrel as the basis for his enveloping historical/action yarn.

At best then, **Braveheart** is a liberal approximation of Wallace's life and times – a flowing, vibrant exercise in filmic fabrication from start to finish, touched off with the most superficial of information to go on. Nevertheless, upon its premiere **Braveheart** was embraced by the public and critics – riding the crest of public fascination for 'period pictures' all the way to its Best Picture Oscar.

(Top: Mel Gibson in full battle gear about to go head to head with the overpowering British forces of Edward Longshanks in **Braveheart** (1995). Gibson received 2 Oscars as Best Director and Best Actor. Right: Hamlet (Kenneth Branagh) clutches a fearful Ophelia (Kate Winslet) in Branagh's production of **Hamlet** (1996). The film had only a limited release in 70mm but was seen in its entirety thanks to Branagh's perseverance.)



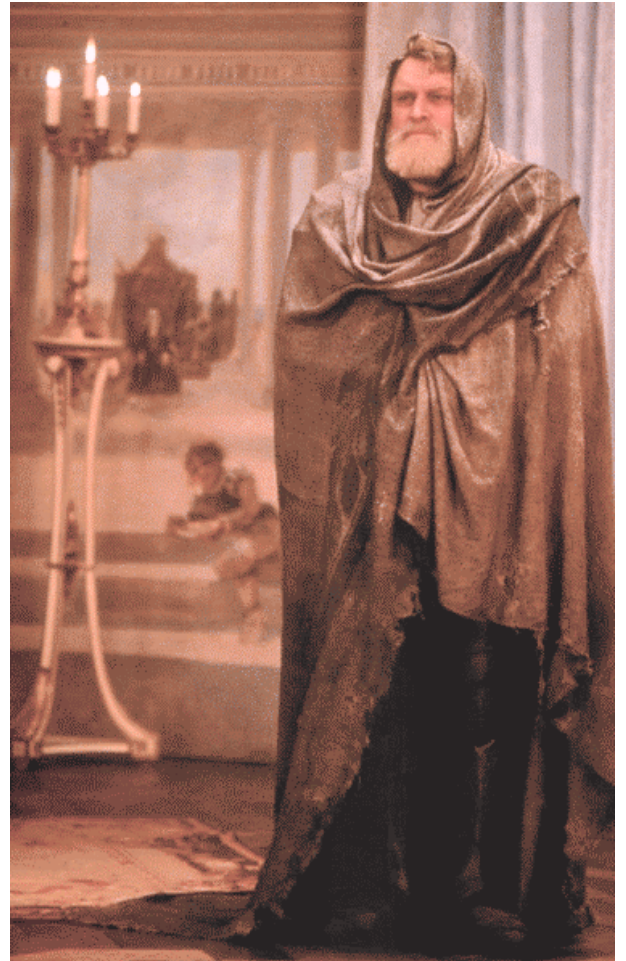


...AND ONE CLEAR CALL FOR THEE

Amidst the overwhelming critical and financial success of **Braveheart**, director Oliver Parker's rather turgid remake of **Othello** (1995) passed almost quietly unnoticed during the summer season. By all accounts the steam in Shakespeare's staying power at the box office had run its course – an assumption ignored by Kenneth Branagh and the front offices over at Castlerock Entertainment.

On January 3, 1996 rehearsals began inside mammoth sets built at England's Shepperton Studios on arguably Shakespeare's most celebrated drama in the English language – **Hamlet**. To date, none of the many other screen incarnations of this celebrated play – not even Laurence Olivier's Oscar winning 1948 film version - had dared to venture into a full textual adaptation. To many in the Hollywood community, the excursion seemed badly timed, due to the fact that Warner Bros. had resurrected this great Dane not five years before in a truncated (and badly maligned) film starring Mel Gibson in the title role. Were audiences ready for another **Hamlet** and so soon?

Branagh believed that they were and evidently was backed by Castlerock's committed \$18 million investment on the project. Updating the timeline to an undisclosed period in the early 20th century afforded Branagh the opportunity to reenact the play's most celebrated soliloquy '*To be or not to be...*' in front of a full length, double-sided mirror, thereby magnifying the distinct ennui already inherent in the character's emotional malaise.



Shot almost entirely at Shepperton, the production also took advantage of breathtaking Blenheim Palace for exteriors under less than perfect weather conditions. Near the end of principle photography, executive logic at Castlerock nervously encouraged Branagh to prune his film down and release two competing versions – the complete 4 hr. play/film in a limited road show engagement and an abridged general release print running just under 2 hrs. Branagh balked at this suggestion, and, after some minor wrangling had his way. Only the full length version was released to limited engagements but overwhelmingly positive reviews. In the intervening decade, the film’s reputation as the definitive **Hamlet** has only continued to grow.



During most of the first five years of the decade, Hollywood and British filmic interests had been hard at work establishing a resurrection of the literary/film sub-genre. This overwhelming attention to detail inherent in each production had by 1996 become standardized and, more often than not, exceeded audience expectations. However, in hindsight there seems to have been a definite shift in consistency immediately following Branagh’s adaptation of **Hamlet**. Whether or not Castlerock’s impending financial disaster and liquidation had anything to do with Hollywood’s sudden disinterest in making and remaking more great novels into films is debatable.



Certainly, the marketing campaign put forth by Buena Vista distributing for Douglas McGrath’s **Emma** (1996) – ‘If you loved *Clueless* (1995) you’ll love *Emma*!’ seemed more intent on providing a sufficient distance between the film and its Jane Austen roots, despite the fact that little likeness between **Clueless** and **Emma** existed.



McGrath’s screenplay for **Emma** is perhaps the least bound to Austen’s own evocative language, relying heavily on a more broad interpretation of the story, characters and dialogue. Set in 1800s England, the story concerns a meddlesome matchmaker, Emma Woodhouse (Gwyneth Paltrow) and her dedication to finding a suitable husband for wallflower, Harriet Smith (Toni Collette). The plan however goes predictably and comically awry.



(Preceding page, top left: Hamlet (Kenneth Branagh) bears witness to his mother, Gertrude (Julie Christie) marriage to his uncle, Claudius (Derek Jacobi). Right: the ghost (Brian Blessed) appears. This page, an all star cast takes its cue - from top left to right: Kate Winslet (Ophelia), Richard Briers (Polonius), Billy Crystal (grave digger), Robin Williams (Osric), Richard Attenborough (British Ambassador), Charlton Heston (Player King), Jack Lemmon (Marcellus), Rufus Sewell (Fortinbras), Gerard Depardieu (Reynaldo), Nicholas Farrell (Horatio), Sir John Gielgud (Priam), John Mills (Old Norway).





Miramax Films, who only a year later would be aggressively marketing **The English Patient** (1996) as a time-honored book to film adaptation were rather laissez faire in their marketing campaign on **Emma**. Despite enthusiastic reviews and respectable box office the film quietly came and went from circulation, with Gwyneth Paltrow's glowing performance as the heroine ironically overlooked at Oscar time.



Increasingly, the general tone in Hollywood after **Emma's** release began to shift its focus to faux incarnations of history and/or historical events; a trend begun with yet another recanting of the mythological Camelot – this time as **First Knight** (1995), and continuing on through to films like **Elizabeth** (1998) and **Shakespeare in Love** (1998).



Rather than tread over established literary lineage, particular preference was now being given to weighty history-fiction properties – films in which historic events and/or characters were borrowed (or in some cases, pilfered), greatly revised and inserted into plots concocted by screenwriters that had little – if anything – to do with actual event. James Cameron's **Titanic** (1997) is perhaps the most obvious in this latter trend and ilk, eschewing real life stories about passengers on the ill-fated luxury liner to instead graft a fictional account of tragic love story between two characters who in reality, were not even on board the ship when it sank.

(Top left: Ralph Fiennes as Count Laszlo de Almásy and (right) Kristin Scott Thomas as Catharine Clifton in *The English Patient* 1996. Left: Gwyneth Paltrow in *Emma* 1996. Cate Blanchett in her Oscar-winning role as Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth* 1998. Bottom: getting that sinking feeling all over again as the *Titanic* sets sail. Although director James Cameron had a full scale mock up of the ship built from one angle at Baja California, long shots like this of the ship sailing were created digitally.)



(Above: Leonardo DiCaprio and Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Man in the Iron Mask* 1998. Though clever use of the tried and true split/screen process effectively allowed the actor to appear as both the King and his twin brother, DiCaprio's take on both was remarkably too similar to be wholly believed.



Left: Mabel Chiltern (Minnie Driver) wins the hand of her long suffering 'ideal husband' Lord Arthur Goring – a confirmed bachelor in the last reel of *An Ideal Husband* 1999.

Middle left: social blackmailer Laura Cheveley (Julianne Moore). Puritan socialite, Lady Gertrude Chiltern (Cate Blanchett).

Bottom: Mabel and Arthur observe the marital conflict of Gertrude and her husband, Sir Robert (Jeremy Northam) from a distance.)



For the rest, literary adaptations fell out of favor almost at an instant, with final exceptions to the rule coming in just under the wire to round out the decade on glorious high notes.

The first of these was Randall Wallace's inspired revision of Alexander Dumas' **The Man in the Iron Mask** (1998), a film of immense scope and visual flare, made slightly awkward by the casting of Leonardo DiCaprio in the dual role of Louis XIV and his twin brother Phillippe.



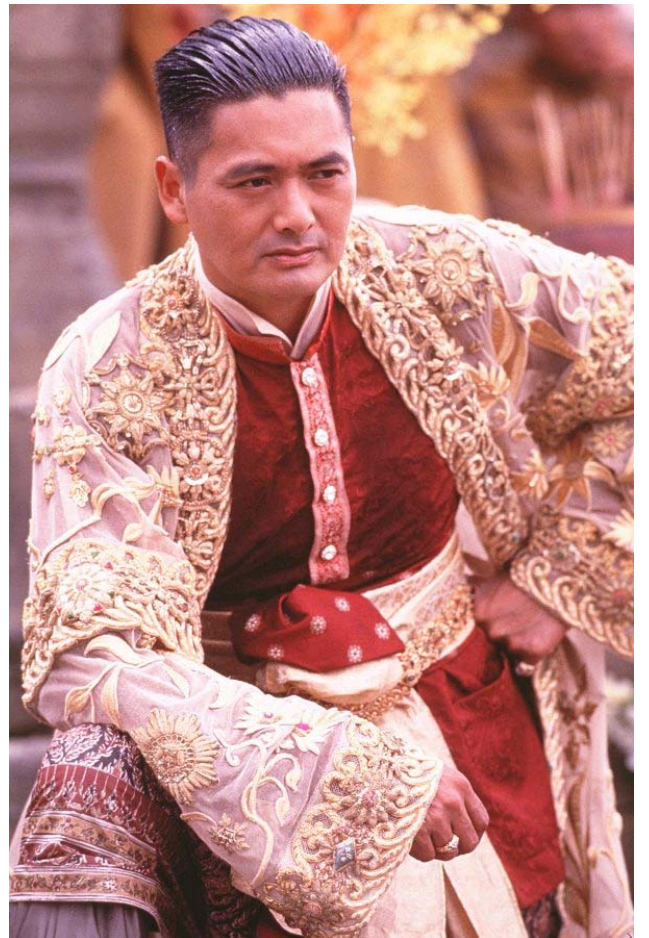
Despite toiling on various film and television projects for nearly two decades, DiCaprio's most satisfying achievements to date had come in two films with a cult following; **What's Eating Gilbert Grape** (1993) and **The Basketball Diaries** (1995).

Yet, his star had retained only a modest luster immediately following these films, a stalemate lifted upon the release of Cameron's epic soap opera **Titanic** (1997) – the most expensive and successful movie ever made.



(Above: a forlorn Puck (Stanley Tucci) and brooding King Oberon (Rupert Everett) plot against the mere mortals in Michael Hoffman's lavish and ethereal *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1999. Right: portraits of Jodie Foster and Chow Yun Fat as Anna Leonowens and King Mongkut of Siam in Andy Tennant's *Anna and The King of Siam* 1999. The film proved to be a compelling melodrama, borrowing slightly in narrative structure from both the 1947 Fox movie costarring Rex Harrison and Irene Dunne. The opulence of period sets was vaguely reminiscent of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* (1956).

Perhaps wary of DiCaprio's limitations in costume drama (in **Titanic**, for example he is never anything but utterly and fatally contemporary amidst the rest of his vintage trappings), director Wallace chose to surround his star with stellar support provided by Jeremy Irons, John Malkovich, Gabriel Byrne and Gerard Depardieu – all ably assimilated into his costume epic as the loyal Musketeers. Wallace further masked DiCaprio's shortcomings with a nimble screenplay that moved through the back story involving the Musketeers and their involvement in palace intrigues. Indeed, the tragic romance between Louis XIV and Christine (Judith Godrèche) is the most undermined and underwhelming of the film's narrative threads. In the final analysis, **The Man In The Iron Mask** was a big hit for its distributor, United Artists, ironically because DiCaprio's fame carried over from **Titanic**.



The second to last offering to round out the decade was Oliver Parker's remake of **An Ideal Husband** (1999) based on the scathingly sexual comedy by Oscar Wilde. A social satire with most of its obvious titillation relatively tame by today's standards, the story concerns successful politico, Sir Robert Chiltern (Jeremy Northam) whose marital fidelity to wife Gertrude (Cate Blanchett) is put into question with the arrival of the scandalous Mrs. Laura Cheveley (Julianne Moore). More an exercise in manners, the filmic incarnation remained faithful to Wilde and to the sub-genre of literary/films.



(NOT Shakespeare!: Above: “Have her then...” Queen Elizabeth I (Dame Judy Dench) tells Lord Wessex (Colin Firth) about his intended bride, Lady Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow), “But you’re a fool. She’s been plucked since I saw her last and not by you. It takes a woman to know it.”

Left: recreating the climactic death scene for Romeo and Juliet. Joseph Fiennes – brother of Ralph – plays the Bard of Stratford on Avon to whom Lady Viola becomes his muse.

Below: Proprietor of the Rose Theater, Hugh Fennyman (Tom Wilkinson) attempts to coerce his rental fee from terrified stage producer, Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush).

Bottom: Fiennes, gazing longingly into the distance as he envisions Viola’s journey with her husband to the Americas. Working from a script that was more a patchwork of clichés and half truths about William Shakespeare, director John Madden managed to infuse something vaguely resembling authenticity into an otherwise wholly fictional romantic comedy.

Despite its lack of history, Shakespeare in Love went on to win the Best Picture Oscar of the year. If nothing else, it has inspired renewed interest in Shakespeare’s plays.)

Possibly the error is in the film’s modest success remains in its brisk plotting. The film itself only runs a scant 98 minutes.

Wilde’s words are far more appreciated when contemplated in their written form, primarily because his wit takes time to properly digest, something the constant bantering of the film’s protagonists and ever-changing tableau behind their sordid characters leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, the film remains a quiet and unassuming diversion, worthy of a second glance on home video.





(Above: *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), based on the popular character created by author Johnston McCulley.

Alejandro Murietta (Antonio Banderas) and his man servant (Anthony Hopkins) arrive at the home of Don Rafael Montero (Stuart Wilson) for a dangerous game of cat and mouse.

The servant is actually Don Diego de la Vega/Zorro, once the hero of the Spanish peoples of California. Imprisoned by Montero, who has also reared Diego's daughter, Elena (Catherine Zeta-Jones) as his own, Diego has trained Alejandro to become the new Zorro.

Top right: Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Onegasone (Dennis Banks) pay their final respects high on a mountain at the end of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). Based on James Fenimore Cooper's novel by the same name, the film was an engrossing epic directed by Michael Mann.

Right: Zorro (Anthony Hopkins) proclaims victory over Don Montero's forces at the start of *The Mask of Zorro*. Originally, Hopkins had his misgivings about starring as the aged hero, moreover because of a reoccurring back injury than apprehensions about the role itself.

Middle: Zorro (Banderas) prepares to exact his pound of flesh on Captain Harrison Love (Matt Letscher) in the climactic showdown. Love is responsible for the beheading of Murietta's brother, Joaquin (Victor Rivers).

Bottom: British and French forces meet on the field of battle in *The Last of the Mohicans*.)

The last of the lush and lavish Shakespearean adaptations to emerge from the decade was Michael Hoffman's **A Midsummer Night's Dream** (1999); arguably the most sophisticated incarnation of this celebrated play ever put on film. It starred Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania and muscled up Rupert Everett as her King Oberon. Populated with an all star assemblage that included Calista Flockhart, Christian Bale, Kevin Kline and Stanley Tucci as Puck; the film moves along nimbly enough through its time-honored artifice and





(Faking a good mystery thriller, above left: Mary McEachran (Kelly MacDonald) meets the self-professed 'perfect servant', Mrs. Wilson (Helen Mirren) and (right) the imperfect upstairs maid, Elsie (Emily Watson) in Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001). The original screenplay by Julian Fellowes is a throwback to the 'old English' murder mystery so famously extolled in the past by authors like Agatha Christie, though not based on any book.

Left: Danielle de Barbarac (Drew Barrymore) pleads for the release of servants belonging to her house in Andy Tennant's *Ever After* (1998) a reworking of Charles Perrault's 1729 Cinderella fairytale.

Below: Brad Pitt is Tristan, the rogue son of the Ludlow clan in Edward Zwick's *Legends of the Fall* 1995. Based on Jim Harrison's novel, the film was an epic and bittersweet exploration of generational divide, suffrage and tragedy set against the stark backdrop of Montana after the Spanish American war.



Bottom: actress Kate Hudson poses in an alluring still for *The Four Feathers* (2002), a remake of the classic tale by A.E.W. Mason. Despite a winning cast that included the late Heath Ledger, the film was a rather stultified recanting of the story of three British soldiers rescued from certain death in the Sudan.)

hallowed ground. It treads lightly over the bard's more complex speeches and more often than not, proves satisfactory entertainment.

However, by far the most impressive and entertaining of the final flowerings in literary costume melodramas remains director Andy Tennant's ***Anna and the King*** (1999), a lavishly produced spectacle photographed entirely on location in Malaysia. The Thai government had originally agreed to at least consider 20th Century-Fox's request to film in the country where the original story takes place (present day Thailand was, at the time of the story, the province of Siam).

The Thai government has never embraced the stories put forth and published by Anna Leonowens – school teacher to the King of Siam's many children, or even those featured in the Margaret Landon's novel that lionized Leonowens as a figurehead exuding great authority over Siam's cultural/political change and its king.

In America however, the book has enjoyed an almost perennial success, chiefly from the continuous stage revivals of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical version: ***The King and I***. The film version of ***The King and I*** (1956) had made



Yul Brynner an international star. But its roots were firmly grounded in Fox's own **Anna and the King of Siam** (1946), starring Irene Dunne and Rex Harrison. It was renown British star, Gertrude Lawrence who had been responsible for bringing the '46 film and Landon's novel to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's attention; a contribution for which stage and screen lovers of the story ever since owe an eternal debt.

Director Tennant's version is perhaps the most authentically accurate of all filmic incarnations. The narrative closely adheres to the '46 film, while applying a subtext of political unrest and racism exuded by the British against the Siamese. Unlike the previous films, Tennant's employs legitimate Orientals where necessary, most notably in his casting of action star Chow Yun Fat as King Mongkut.

As portrayed by Jodie Foster, Anna Leonowens is not the divining force or even a catalyst for social change as she remains merely a window into the British mindset that is held close and in high regard by the King – allowing him the opportunity to formulate his own decisions and actions toward the political factions that would usurp his authority and render Siam a protectorate province.

In the final analysis, **Anna and the King** is superior film making, marking a valiant conclusion to the '90s fascination with costume dramas. In a decade rife with more quality film product in almost all genres than most in the last 40 years, the end of the 1990s documented a decided downturn in both Hollywood and the public's fascination with this sort of grand costumed entertainment. Though the trend briefly carried over in various transmutations during the early 2000's with films like Baz Luhrmann's psychedelic reincarnation of Bohemian France in **Moulin Rouge** (2001) and Robert Altman's tongue-in-cheek re-visitation on the old Sherlock Holmes-styled murder mysteries for **Gosford Park** (2001) the overwhelming quantity and underwhelming quality in contemporary cinema has once again reverted to quickly made and slickly marketed disposable entertainments.

Such was the case of most films at the start of the 1980s – big on promotion but decidedly small on production value – keenly aimed at the wallet, but less effectively focused on the heart or even staying power beyond the box office. Is today's disposable movie going experience merely the start of another cycle that will eventually return to the literary drama on screen as in years gone by and for years to come – or has vintage literature at last run its course at the movies? Perhaps, only time will tell.



(Top: Mercedes Iguanada (Dagmara Dominczyk) locked in Edmond Dantes' (James Caviezel) passionate embrace in director Kevin Reynolds' **The Count of Monte Cristo** (2002), based on Alexandre Dumas' classic novel. Bottom: Guy Pierce as the devilish plotter, Fernand Mondego from the same film.)