

27/02/1999

All abuzz over `Anna'

T. Thant

AS the production crew for Anna And The King worked around the clock to recreate 1862 Bangkok in Penang, its sense of urgency only heightened the curiosity and excitement among locals.

It's not every day that a Hollywood studio, 20th Century Fox, films a big-budget movie here, featuring big names like Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat.

Foster and Chow will appear in Anna And The King, loosely based on Margaret Landon's 1944 bestseller, Anna And The King Of Siam.

The 1958 musical, The King And I, which starred Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, was also based on Landon's book.

Back in Penang, thatch-roofed huts and an old wharf have been set up at Swettenham Pier to depict a 19th-century port. Also, a clipper has been remodelled here.

Logs have been piled up at the port for a scene where elephants will move them. About 10 elephants have been brought in from Thailand and kept under tight security at Coronation Camp in Jalan Kebun Bunga.

An ornate structure that depicts a palace entrance is situated at the cordoned-off Lebuah Armenian.

Meanwhile, a large tent has been set up on the Esplanade grounds for the local extras' wardrobe testing. This has also drawn crowds, some merely to "lend support" to those who have been shortlisted for roles.

The film's casting crew worked through the Chinese New Year to sort out appointment dates for the extras to attend wardrobe fittings and finalising their roles.

Terrance Moses, a casting crew member, said each extra was being briefed on his final selection and role. Acting dates for them were also discussed.

A whopping 6,982 people auditioned for the roles of 1,300 extras.

Farang Films Ltd local assistant director Mahathir Tahir said: "We really appreciate the support but hope that those not shortlisted will understand our predicament and bear with us."

Many Penang folk have been trying to catch a glimpse of Foster and Chow, but to no avail.

Although the two have been here for about a week now, their whereabouts are unknown to the public.

A woman manning the production office at the Sheraton Penang Hotel's office complex, introduced as an executive director of 20th Century Fox, was curt with the local media, ordering them to keep out.

However, there will be more excitement when filming starts tomorrow. The movie's shooting schedule, which is expected to last 13 weeks, is slated to end here on March 9, and will continue in Perak after that.

Foster plays an English tutor, Anna Leonowens, in the court of King Rama IV, or King Mongkut (Chow).

The movie was supposed to have been shot in Thailand but the country's National Film Board two months ago rejected Fox's application to shoot the film there. It said the script did not show enough respect to the much-revered Thai monarch.

"It is due to the good gesture of our Government that it can be filmed here," said Tan Kim Hye, 57, a pensioner, whose 28-year-old son is an extra.

The shooting here will cover Swettenham Pier, the municipal council