

## ***The Legend of Suriyothai***

Directed by Chatri Chalerm Yukol

Words: Steve Anderson

What would an epic film trumpeting early American history, financed by George W. Bush, starring a favorite White House aid, and featuring the American military in all its glory look like? Oh, and the film would be directed by one of the Bush daughters...

It's a scary thought to be sure, but such a film would parallel the story behind the grand Thai epic, *The Legend of Suriyothai*, an extravagant history film that has become that country's box office king, beating out the likes of *Godzilla* and *Jurassic Park II* upon its release in 2001, and which is now making its way to American movie screens.

*The Legend of Suriyothai* was directed by 61-year-old Prince Chatri Chalerm Yukol (a.k.a. Than Mui), a member of the Thai royal family who studied at UCLA, and is now one of Thailand's most prolific and successful directors. M.L. Piyapas Bhirombhakdi, also a member of the royal family, portrays the film's heroine, Suriyothai with regal poise, in spite of having no previous acting experience. The production, which was originally planned in celebration of the Thai King's 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, was directly funded by the royal family and given unprecedented access to authentic locations and historical artifacts. The Queen even provided thousands of troops as extras for the film's astonishing battle scenes.

Beyond this startling making-of story are further pleasures that help call attention to radical cultural differences between the U.S and Thailand (formerly known as Siam). Just as it is impossible to equate Bush and the Thai Queen (or Than Mui and Bush's daughters) so too is it impossible to use Western values to gauge the film's merits.

*The Legend of Suriyothai* chronicles the life of a 16th century queen who quietly guides her husband through bouts of war, palace intrigue and power struggles within the royal court. The story spans some fifty years of Siamese history and digresses freely into numerous sub-plots which make for an incredibly rich and at times almost overwhelming portrait of the country's past.

Perhaps most memorable is the story of one of Suriyothai's female rivals, a ruthless usurper from the U-Thong dynasty who conspires with her lover to overthrow Suriyothai's family. The pair succeeds, poisoning, drowning, beheading and impaling their way to the throne, backed by a fiercely loyal army of pike-wielding amazons. The film's celebration of female power is initially refreshing, suggesting some nascent feminist impulse. Even the young Suriyothai presents a familiar picture of teen girl rebelliousness.

“Rules, rules, rules,” she mutters when her assistants try to keep her from running out to speak with her beloved cousin. “I’m sick of rules.” Later, cooped up inside in order to preserve her honor, she grouches, “I’m so, so, so bored.” This rendering of teenage ennui quickly gives way to the adult concerns of the young queen-to-be as the film resolutely spins its elaborate narrative around many variations on a single theme – sacrifice of self for country. And the feminist reading we in the West may be wont to project is repeatedly problematized. When Suriyothai and her husband finally take their revenge on the U-Thongs, their cause is more righteous, but their methods are equally savage.

Long overshadowed by the voluminous output of neighbors like India, Japan and Hong Kong, the Thai film industry has never achieved much international recognition. *Suriyothai* may prove to be the exception. The film enjoyed its U.S. premiere at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and received domestic release through Sony Pictures Classics as a “Francis Ford Coppola Presents.” Indeed, Coppola has lent more than his name to the film, which completed its post-production at American Zoetrope, and it is reported that Coppola personally oversaw the editing of the film down to a more palatable length, an undertaking for which he is indisputably qualified.

From *Birth of a Nation* to *Apocalypse Now*, historical epics have always been long on drama and short on facts. Although the film is based on actual events in Thai history, *Suriyothai* is regarded by some as a myth. The real difference between *Suriyothai* and a Hollywood historical epic is excruciatingly apparent early in the film when Princess Suriyothai advocates the beheading of a young boy who would otherwise represent a threat to the stability of the royal family. This devastating scene, in which a three-year-old boy is publicly executed while begging to go home to his mother, is the kind of thing that no western hero or heroine could ever be forgiven for. Yet, the internal logic of *Suriyothai* makes this horrific act seem like just one more instance of unpleasant, but necessary sacrifice within a world marked by political violence and instability.

The all-sacrificing heroine is a favorite trope of Asian cinema, where women’s bodies have long suffered as allegories for their beleaguered nations. In the end, the figure of Suriyothai is a complicated and contradictory historical and cinematic icon, and her gradual ascent to power is as long as her reign is brief.

When Suriyothai suits up for the film’s climactic battle, we know in advance that she is doomed, but the sheer spectacle of this final showdown, which mobilized more than 3500 extras and 160 elephants, merits rapt attention. As thousands of barefoot soldiers swarm like ants in a frenzy of carnage on the ground, above them, a surreal, slow-motion battle takes place among royalty atop lumbering pachyderms.

*Suriyothai*’s central tension between doing what’s right for the country versus what’s right for the individual plays itself out again and again. And it is the fact

that Suriyothai repeatedly chooses duty over personal happiness that may ultimately render the film fascinatingly inscrutable to audiences accustomed to Hollywood values and conventions. How are we to identify with a heroine who advocates child-killing; who foregoes being united with her one true love, and is finally ripped open by a battle-axe and plummets to the ground from her elephant?

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