

# I am just the little guy

He is a loyal triad gang member in the comedy *Run Papa Run*; a hapless cop in Johnnie To Kei-fung's noirish *PTU* in 2000; the nouveau riche mainlander in *Poker King*; a bodyguard in crime thriller *The Mission* and a loving father in the romantic comedy *Sound of Colours*. Lam Suet is the character actor par excellence, a "green leaf actor" in Cantonese. He has been cast in supporting roles in over 100 local movies, but has never been a leading man.

This man of many identities could be just any middle-aged man on the street. He wears a black sports jacket, jeans and black sneakers, the spare tyre around his midriff clearly visible under his over-sized white T-shirt. Dragging on a cigarette at the bus station where he arranged to meet *Varsity*, Lam jokes that we can ask whatever we want and warns us foul language may slip out of his mouth during the interview. The 45-year-old actor takes us through his journey from working as a porter at the Yau Ma Tei Wholesale Fruit Market to his nomination for Best Supporting Actor in the Hong Kong Film Awards.

After Lam had been working as a porter for two years, a chance meeting with the martial arts film master Lam Ching-ying led to an introduction into the world of film. In 1986, Lam Suet was hired as a production assistant, whose duty is to take care of the crews' needs, including buying meals and carrying props.

In the following decade, Lam tried different backstage jobs including prop making, lighting, film production and even shooting. "After learning almost the whole behind-the-scenes operation, I wanted to make try something new. I wanted to be an actor," he says.

Once he had resolved to be an actor, Lam started to observe actors' performances and imitate them during work breaks. Not only did he take the initiative to learn, but he also grasped the golden opportunity to act. "I begged (Johnnie) To Kei-fung again and again to give me a part in the movie. I annoyed him all the time," he says. Finally in 1999, director To gave him a part in the revenge drama *Where a Good Man Goes*, playing a police sergeant.

A year later, Lam was nominated for Best Supporting Actor at both the Hong Kong Film Awards and the Golden Horse Awards for his work as a weapons expert in *The Mission* and he won a Golden Bauhinia Award for his role in *PTU*. While it seems that Lam has enjoyed

great success as an actor, he says it has not always been easy adapting to the drastic changes in his life.

"I am a small potato! I couldn't believe what had happened right in front of me," he says of his first walk down the red carpet. "The whole thing was like a dream."

The first time Lam attended the annual Hong Kong Film Award ceremony, he put on a tuxedo, and arrived at a venue in Tsim Sha Tsui at 5 p.m. sharp. There was hardly anyone around. Worried that he had gone to the wrong place, Lam phoned his company to make sure he had not mixed up the venue and time. But his colleague told him no one would be on time and celebrities usually arrived at 5:30 p.m. or even later.

As crowds of celebrities congregated in Tsim Sha Shui, he felt even more nervous. He dared not eat any of the food being offered because he was afraid of getting his clothes dirty. The people around him wondered who this man was. Once he explained he had come for the awards, they seemed surprised. Some had never heard of his name. Who would have thought that an unknown production assistant could be a nominated actor?

Rolls Royces were arranged to take the nominees to the Hong Kong Coliseum in Hung Hom. "It was like a carriage ... I was sitting in the first Rolls-Royce of the fleet," says Lam.

After getting out from the car, he had no idea of where to go, where to stand for the media to take photos or where to sign on the board. Everything was so new to him.

His legs were shaking when he finally stepped on the red carpet. He had so many conflicting emotions. In the past, he was a voluntary worker, helping to lay down the red carpet, now he was stepping on it as an actor. In the end, Lam walked down the red carpet with Elaine Jin Yanling, who was one of the nominees in the Best Supporting Actress



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category. When he saw his name “Lam Suet” on a label on a chair, he had to pinch himself; “this is impossible,” he thought. At the time, he was still working as a production assistant in Johnnie To’s romantic comedy *Needing You*.

Unlike the other nominees, Lam crossed his fingers and hoped his name would not be announced. It turned out Di Lung won Best Supporting Actor in 2000. Lam smiles as he remembers. “I felt so relieved and thrilled that I didn’t get the award,” says Lam, who believed he did not measure up to the other nominated actors and so should not get the award. “I did not know what acting was at that time,” he says. “Everything I had was given by (Johnnie) To. It was not my work.”

At the very beginning of his acting career, some regarded Lam as To’s pawn, which made him feel frustrated. But he did not deny the label outright because he had not yet fully grasped what acting was about.

In the past, he had thought acting was superficial and that actors simply imitated other characters. Later, he realised there was much more to it - actors have to consider many things, such as their positions in front of the camera and how to express characters’ feelings in a natural manner.

Even as Lam’s fame started to grow, he still could not let go of his past. He might be an actor but deep in his heart, he was still a production assistant. Every time the production assistants handed him a glass of water or got him a chair, he would feel embarrassed. Sometimes he even refused their help and did things himself.

This uneasiness was such an impediment to his effectiveness as an actor that To gave him a tongue-lashing about his inappropriate behaviour.

“‘You don’t know what you are doing’, To shouted at me. ‘You are an actor, not a production assistant!’ ”

Lam says To had yelled at him for doing other people’s jobs instead of focusing on his own job as an actor. He

had said that if Lam had time to spare, he should have been thinking about how he played his part instead of moving chairs around. Now that he recognises the duty of an actor, Lam is glad to receive production assistants’ help.

## “Lam Suet is a mess. He has no future and no big dream.”

Not only has Lam overcome his awkwardness, but he also aims to be a professional who can carry out directors’ requests. During the shoot of the 2009 revenge thriller *Vengeance*, Lam was asked to plunge from a two-storey building “I was prepared to be admitted to a hospital. So were the staff. Before the shoot, they arranged a car to take me to hospital,” Lam says. “But I am a professional, so I accept what directors tell me to do.” He has been suffering from aches and pains in his knees and ankles since then.

With more than 100 movies under his belt, Lam’s compulsion to act is diminishing but what keeps him going is his desire for appreciation from the audience.

Asked to evaluate himself as an actor, he criticises himself mercilessly. “Lam Suet is a mess,” he says. “He has no future and no big dream. He feels stressed by being who he is. He is so worried about losing his job because he knows his place can be taken easily.”

Lam’s words betray the frustration of an actor who has never been in the leading role over the last 10 years. To escape from the reality of

his frustrations, he finds his own way out - giving 100 per cent to his acting. Sometimes he even finds it hard to pull himself out of character. “I wish I could be one of the characters forever. My birthday wish is to work every day,” Lam says.

Asked if he would accept being cast in supporting roles for the rest of his working life, he says: “I can’t take it. I will shoot my own story as a small potato in this glamorous industry. I want to share my own stories with the audience,” Lam says, calm yet determined. ▣

