

WIN THE DAY

Acclaimed Singaporean filmmaker *Wee Li Lin* on coming up tops.

When I was a kid, I was astonishingly mediocre: poor in my studies; not great in sports; socially in the middle pack, so-so in drama (I was always the butler). Oh, I was a bit more than so-so in art – this led to an award when I was in secondary four, but since no one told me I was getting one, I didn't even turn up to receive it. When I was in junior college, a teacher pointed around the class determining who would make it and who wouldn't. I was one that wouldn't. And it wasn't a very big class.

Hence, I dreamt for less lofty stuff: to be inspired and to lead a meaningful life filled with greater adventure and joy. What I didn't expect was to stumble upon filmmaking and feeling for the first time, I was doing something really RIGHT.

During Christmas in 1996, just after returning from the US, I penned my first short film screenplay *Norman On The Air*. It was a quasi-autobiographical tale about a loser-ish young man who felt stifled living at home and professed (fake) romantic feelings for a radio DJ who hosted a love chat show.

Norman was my first real short film (with dialogue and not starring my roommates). I was happy writing it, happy making it and happy finishing it. But when it was all done, I felt embarrassed to show it; I felt it wasn't good enough. I felt I wasn't good enough. I couldn't let anyone watch it, let alone submit it to a notable platform like the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF).

After some persuasion from my mum (who had her friends act in it and her brother lend me his house to film in), I relented. But we agreed to keep expectations low so I wouldn't be disappointed. Imagine our shock when a letter arrived to tell me that my short film had made it to the finals. Several weeks later there was a screening of the finalist films at the Goethe Institute. When it was my *Norman*'s turn, I couldn't sit in; I stood outside the screening

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room and just pressed my ear to the door. Were people laughing at the right points? Were they reacting at all? I was so terrified that I couldn't hear a d*** thing (I was told people laughed).

A few more weeks passed and I learnt that I'd won something, and that I had to attend the awards ceremony. This was more than I could handle. That night at the 1997 Silver Screen Awards I was presented with a Best Director trophy. Eric Khoo handed me the award and told me I had talent; industry people complimented me; my dad stood up and applauded when my name was announced. Finally, my folks could whitewash all those years of apologising to my teachers for poor grades and unpromising conduct. It felt like a wedding – I was marrying a new beginning. Yay!

I launched my so-called 'career'. More awards followed, and instead of bad comments on report cards, I was described as 'talented' and a 'trailblazer'. My cup runneth over. It was all so surreal, very affirming but to a large extent also very addictive. If I kept winning, I was closer to being normal, I could even be (gulp!) successful and cool?!

Two feature films, marriage and a masters later, I still look back with pride at that pure unadulterated passion of making *Norman*. I also realised that those less lofty stuff I aspired to are really much harder to come by. Every award gave me confidence and encouragement but even if I hadn't received any, my desire to communicate and share my stories would never wane. I knew it when I was 19 at my first filmmaking class and I know it today at 39. Even if I am destined to be like Norman and may have to settle for lesser, I can at least say this to myself: I'm not afraid of not winning. I'm far more afraid of not creating.

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