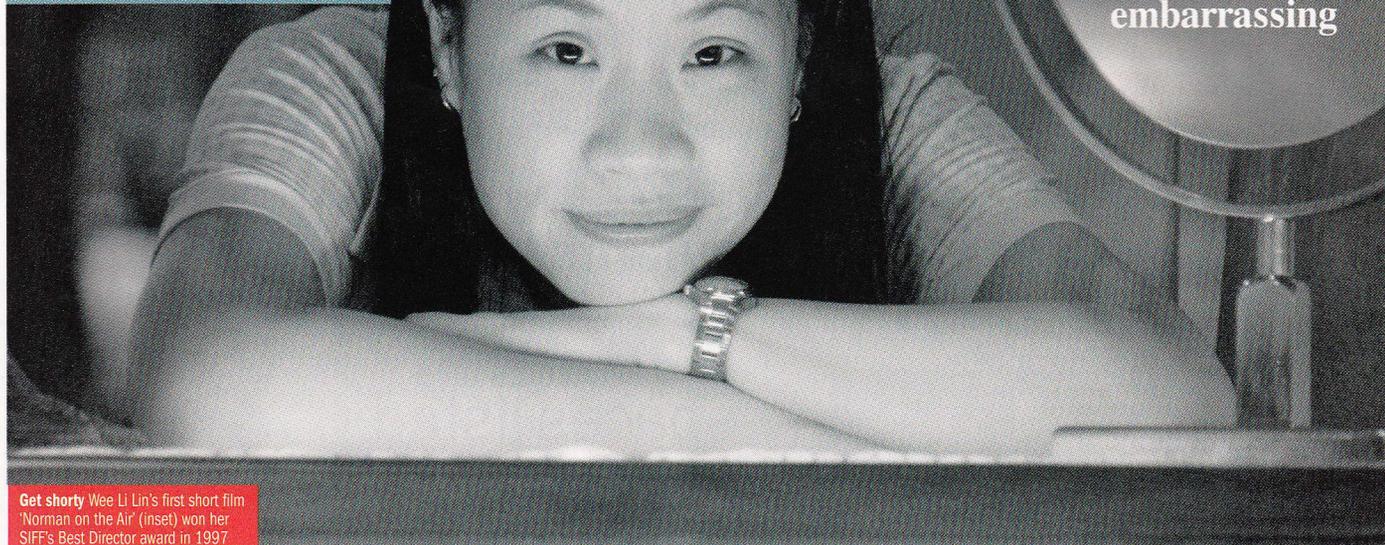


Film



Get shorty Wee Li Lin's first short film 'Norman on the Air' (inset) won her SIFF's Best Director award in 1997

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I made 'Norman' in 1996 and that was still the time of Betacams. It's almost like a time capsule, it's so embarrassing

Not just a wee thing

Wee Li Lin is Singapore's top female film director. With the release of a DVD compiling her early shorts, she tells **Berwin Song** about how it all happened

There aren't many female filmmakers in Singapore – and even fewer who have two feature films to their name. Actually, make that just one: 38-year-old Wee Li Lin, the director of *Gone Shopping* (2007) and *Forever* (2011).

As Wee tells it, her directing career began on a whim. While attending Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, she spent a semester at New York University's Tisch School, where she learned some filmmaking basics in its Sight and Sound programme. After graduating with a liberal arts degree in 1996, Wee returned home to Singapore and took a job as a 'grunt' at MediaCorp. After a few months, she vowed to make one short film every year 'just to keep the creative fire going'. She soon came up with a character named Norman, and developed a story around him that led to the creation of her first short film 'Norman on the Air', which she completed in 1997.

Despite initially considering the film an embarrassment, Wee was persuaded by her family to submit it to the organisers of the Singapore International Film Festival, where she received the Best Director award. Suitably encouraged, Wee continued making short films and eventually

saw her 2005 short 'Autograph Book' become the first Singapore-made production selected for New York's Tribeca Film Festival.

This month, a compilation of Wee's early short films, *A Wee Thing*, is being released on DVD through Objectifs Films. We find out more from the director.

What prompted this DVD collection?

Well, the idea really came from Yuni [Hadi, a partner at Objectifs]. I think the idea came up about two years ago. Yuni said she wanted to curate all my short films from the '90s and I was sort of like, 'Do you think people will really want to buy a collection of my early films?' So she gets all the credit for this. All my short films are represented under Objectifs, so they get them out for festivals and screenings. Also, when some of my films started to get some notice, Yuni started commissioning me to do some shorts for The

Substation in 2002, which resulted in 'Homemaker' and 'All My Presents' [both included on *A Wee Thing*].

Is there a thematic thread connecting these shorts?

They're always about a character. I'm interested in character studies so all my films are about the characters, even my feature-length films. That's how I start making a film, by developing a character and then creating a story around the character.

What do you think of the films now, particularly 'Norman on the Air'?

Oh god, so embarrassing! It's so low budget. I made 'Norman' in 1996 and that was still

the time of Betacams [an '80s video camera]. It's almost like a time capsule.

After I made the film, I was so embarrassed. I told my mother I didn't want to show it to anyone. It just looked so cheap.

But my mother just said, 'Well, you've made it already, why don't you just try showing it?' So I turned it in to the Singapore Film Festival and then it was such a surprise to win Best Director! So I really owe a lot to my family for giving me the encouragement back then.

Now, of course, I love it. It's my first film. But it was really a love-hate relationship. When I wrote it, I loved it. But then when I shot it, it was so

low budget and I didn't really know what to make of it when I was editing it. During the first screening at the festival, I was so embarrassed that I couldn't even stay in the theatre. I ran outside and put my ear to the door to see if people were laughing at me. You're really putting yourself out there when you show your films, and for me, 'Norman' was quite a personal story. But before I knew it, I won the award. That was really the first thing I had ever won in my life.

So would you say 'Norman' is the film that's most special to you?

Yeah. That was really the one film that I did completely for myself. Winning an award is a real rush. I think it was a little bit of a loss of innocence. I didn't really have that much anxiety about the film when I made it, but after winning the award, everything changed. I sometimes wish I could just go back to that feeling. After that, there's a feeling that there's someone out there that you have to answer to. You get a little more competitive. Now with my films, I think more about things like casting. And with my feature films, you have all these commercial concerns. So I don't think I'll ever get that first feeling back – just making a film completely for myself – but at least I have 'Norman'.

Wee Li Lin speaks at the launch of *A Wee Thing* at Books Kinokuniya (#03-09/10/15 Ngee Ann City, 391 Orchard Rd; 6737 5021) on **23 Jun** at 2pm. See www.objectifs.com.sg for more info. For a longer version of this interview, see www.timeoutsingapore.com/film.