



Publication: The Straits Times Life!

Date: Dec 2 2007

Headline: Mark this trail



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Comedian Mark Lee's museum tours are in hot demand, and his next one is for taxi drivers and their families

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YOU could call it a culture shock. Mark Lee, one of Singapore's friendliest Ah Beng comedians for years, is going to talk about museums.

No, this isn't some new, local film called Culture No Enough.

The 39-year-old actor is playing the real-life role of a museum guide.

His employer, the National Heritage Board (NHB), the statutory board in charge of museums here, drew mixed reactions when it announced its decision last month.

He is the face of Explore Singapore!, a campaign lasting almost two months until the end of the year, which has fun events aimed at drawing more people into museums and libraries.

The Chinese-language press and The New Paper ran stories on people's perceptions of the unabashedly low-brow face fronting a high-brow brand. Some applauded NHB's brave move but others scoffed at Lee's seeming lack of credentials.

Controversial or not, all 160 slots for his free tour of the National Museum yesterday were booked a month in advance.

To cope with the surge in interest, the NHB lined up another tour of the same museum on Christmas Day and all 160 places have been taken up again.

Another tour next Friday - this time of an ongoing exhibition, The Big Picture Show at Singapore Art Museum (SAM) - caters to 10 taxi drivers and their families who have been selected by SMRT.

This is because the NHB hopes to introduce museums to cabbies, who will in turn recommend these places to their tourist passengers.

Other drivers will get free entry, without the tour. Some 1,000 goodie bags will also be handed out by Lee.

Speaking to LifeStyle at Olio Dome cafe at the art museum last week, the youthful-looking actor, dressed in a graffiti-ed hoodie and faded jeans, was realistic about the stir he has caused.

He said: "The more talk, the better. Even if it's negative feedback, there is discussion about museums."

In fact, even he was shocked when the NHB approached him for the job.

"To put it nicely, I'm very heartlander. To put it not so nicely, I'm a *chao* Ah Beng," he deadpanned. The Hokkien word *chao* means smelly.

"I don't want my image to spoil museum's five-star image."

But he was persuaded by the NHB's chief executive Michael Koh who wanted the broader community to go to museums.

Said Mr Koh: "Mark hasn't been to a museum for a long time, and he admits it readily. He's a local, lovable icon with great appeal. We're saying 'Come discover the museum. If Mark can enjoy it, so can you.'"

Indeed, Lee slipped into the museum ambassador role during this interview without missing a beat. He said: "Culture is not just for the high-class, it should belong to everybody."

He would not say how much he is paid but added that he is not given more for the extra tour.

As preparation, he was taken around the National Museum and SAM by their staff - the first time he set foot in a museum in 20 years.

He didn't take notes but he remembers the interesting items on which he can riff.

On his days off from his busy schedule shooting the new season of Police And Thief, a Channel 5 comedy series in which he



PAY ATTENTION: Lee (top and above, with cabbie Victor Woo) says he'll scold people who don't pay attention to what he says during the museum tours.

plays a reformed gangster, he visits the museum galleries by himself to know more about the exhibits.

The National Museum's photography gallery is his favourite place, for its effective way of "using old photos to tell a story", but it was a teacup with 555 branded on it in the food gallery that intrigued him.

"When you see 555, what do you think of? The cigarettes and the notebooks with the brand. But I didn't know that there was a 555 brand of coffee powder," he said.

For his tours, he will use the relaxed, informal hosting style that he uses in TV variety shows. It will also be interactive and the audience will be asked questions as they go along.

But don't interrupt his talk or you will be reprimanded.

"I don't mind if people come just to see me, but if they don't pay attention to what I say, I'll scold. Their talking may affect other people," he said.

LifeStyle was treated to a few gems during an informal walk through SAM's The Big Picture Show with him.

Pointing to a neon-coloured painting, Tanpa Narasi by Indonesian artist Entang Wharso, he said with a grimace: "This is really like the 18 levels of hell."

He was particularly impressed by the social realist work Unfinished Painting Of The Present by Filipino artist Edgar (Egag) Talusan Fernandez. "It's a well-thought out painting, showing the people's hopes for the nation."

Then there is China-born Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian's Day And Night. Lee tutted with admiration at the artist's ability to create 3D illusions with Chinese ink on paper.

"You think there are air bubbles under the paper and you want to smooth them out. But the wrinkles are just an illusion."

Finally, at Untitled (Under The Banyan Tree) by China-born painter He Kongde, he stopped to point out that all the artists' faces in the painting were painted precisely, while the onlookers' were blurry.

Lee added: "A guide told me this. But it's really obvious anyway."

One can quite certainly say that a fun and lively tour is guaranteed for those lucky enough to tag along with him.

Is he doing anything extra to prepare for it?

He said: "No. It's like a live show, no rehearsals."

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ART CRITIC: Lee says the Tanpa Narasi painting (top) is really like the 18 levels of hell while Untitled (Under The Banyan Tree) has the faces in different styles.

PHOTOS: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM