

You had to laugh

He is a silver-screen legend and was by far the most prolific actor in show business in Thailand.

Lor Tok's entertainment persona became evident early in the 20th century with his film debut in 1933. He was honoured as a national actor and comic artist in 1995, and as a legendary entertainer in 2002 before his death at the age of 89.

Lor Tok was born as Sawong Subsamruay, the third of five children, in Ban Suan Klong in Bangkok Yai District, on April 1, 1915. His father cultivated fruit and coconuts. Lor Tok spent many childhood days climbing trees in his father's orchard and learning Thai musical instruments. He went to Wat Nuan Noradit School till Matichon 3, but eventually quit school to help his parents. When floods destroyed the orchard, Lor Tok became a pier boy, mooring ferry boats.

He also worked as a boatman on Pasi Charoen canal, as a trishaw driver at Nakhon Ratchasina, and as a professional boxer. He once spoke about how he was cheated by a trainer and earned no money from his boxing career.

His extraordinary journey was often by foot, such as when he decided to walk along a railway line from Nakhon Ratchasima to Bangkok. It took him three days to reach the capital.

At age 19, Lor Tok returned home and joined the Royal Thai Army just before World War II began. He fought in the Indochina War as an aircraftman in charge of operating a machine gun. He also fought at Aranyaprathet near the Cambodian border. When the war ended, he received the rank of corporal and a victory medal.

After the army, Lor Tok began giving performances, mostly comical shows with another stage personality, Jok Dokchan, a well-known comedian at the time. During his early twenties Lor Tok learned to be a comic. As a good-humoured man, he was willing to perform in front of audiences.

Lor Tok took part in many amateur shows. Audiences favoured his jokes and he was gaining popularity.

Vipasai Niyamabha reports on how a master of comedy inspired audiences with his witty portrayal of life



Lor Tok was no doubt a legendary entertainer. His acting skill was honed with time, and as life as he knew it was incorporated into his gags, he had people in stitches. He could relate to all kinds of people, and their acceptance gave Lor Tok the confidence to begin a new career – as a director and television host.

Few can hold a candle to Lor Tok. Many often mention him as an inspiration.

He shot to fame at a time when television and films were yet to hit the market due to their high costs. Avid theatre buffs still talk about Lor Tok's role in a play titled "Klai Glua Kin Dang", meaning "Near good salt, eat bad salt". It was after this splendid performance that a senior actor named him Lor Tok.

With an unassuming personality, the short, dark-skinned, comical man with black hair would hardly be regarded as a

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teenage girl's poster boy, but it was his love of life that won the heart of the most beautiful actress of the time, Somjit. She was the winner of several beauty contests, and later became a starlet in her own right in the famous Chantaropas drama troupe. She fell in love with Lor Tok and often referred to him as an intelligent and truthful man. They tied the knot and had three children together, then lived together until her death.

In the post-war era Thai audiences became familiar with Lor Tok as a leading Thai comic. This period was also when fellow actors such as Chusri Meesommon and Sompong Pongmitr shot to fame. The box-office boom replaced stage plays. Lor Tok was not far behind – his film "Wan Chakayan" (1933), earned him Bt5. More films followed such as "Panan", "Yod Phi", "Hong Fah", "Phra Apaimanee" and "Roy Khan", which earned him wide approval.

In all, Lor Tok appeared in more than 1,000 films, many of them with the superstars of the time, including Mitr Chaipancha, Phetchara Chaowaraj, Sombat Methanee and Aranya Namyong.

He was a popular face on television as well and appeared in many shows such as "Nateethong" and "Traduduang" on Channel 7. Television audiences of the early 1980s knew him as a co-host with Thammarat Naksuriya of the popular show "Nateethong". Then, with the support of fellow comic actors, luminaries such as Chusri, Sompong, Gog Heng and Thong Tham, Lor Tok started his own troupe called Tok Boom. Audiences tuned in to see his comical show every Sunday afternoon.

In 1969 he formed his own film production company Tok Boom Parpayon, and directed a film "Luk Kuey", starring Mitr Chaibancha and Phetchara Chowarat. Lor Tok received satisfactory success as a filmmaker, but it did not earn him as much recognition as his acting.

Lor Tok received high accolades for his excellent performance in many films. He won the Thai Tuktathong film awards twice – one for his role in "Go Hub", where he played the role of a Chinese merchant, and the other for "Luang Ta", when he played the part of a respectable monk. He also won the Suphannahong award for his best-actor role in the musical film "Ngern, Ngern Ngern"; he was also revered as a national artist in performing arts.

He always taught newcomers to respect their audiences. He often said that love and devotion for your job is the key to success. ■