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Suriya has now won his first ever national award in a film career spanning 25 years — a journey that has been nothing short of a rollercoaster ride for the Tamil actor. Flix Kollywood Tuesday, July 26, 2022 - 15:56 As Maara stands at the cusp of success, shedding tears of joy, overwhelmed with emotions that his dream is finally coming to life after a series of trials and tribulations, we hear the dialogue “jayichittom Maara” (“we have won Maara”) correspondingly playing in the background. It was this dialogue from the Sudha Kongara directorial Soorarai Pottru that was widely shared by fans online, close on the heels of the announcement earlier this week that actor Suriya has won the 68th National Film Award under the category of the ‘Best Actor’ for his performance in the same film. The fans’ response seemed fitting, for Suriya has now won his first ever national award in a film career spanning 25 years — a journey that has been nothing short of a rollercoaster ride for the actor. One of the most bankable stars of Tamil cinema, Suriya has delivered many memorable roles over time. Throughout his career, he has consistently explored uncharted waters within the commercial cinema landscape. Known for his versatility, the actor-producer has many jewels in his crown, which includes his performances in films like Vaaranam Aayiram, Soorarai Pottru, and Nandha among others, which have acquired a cult status among fans. Tracing the roots Although Suriya started his career working in a garment exports factory and turned down a role offered by director Vasanth in 1995, it was only a matter of time before he made his debut as a hero in 1997 in Nerukku Ner, a film that was also helmed by Vasanth and co-starred actor Vijay in the lead. It was upon popular Kollywood director Mani Ratnam’s insistence that the young man, who was all of 22, took up the role. The director also advised the latter to take up the stage name Suriya — a name Mani Ratnam has repeatedly used for his on-screen heroes in films — to avoid his name from clashing with actor Saravanan. Soon, he was signing films like Kaadhale Nimmadhi, Sandhippoma, Perivanna and Poveellam Kettuppar, which cast him as the dreamy romantic hero or the boy next door, and went on to become moderate successes. He then teamed up with Vijay again for the comedy drama Friends, a Pongal release in 2001. The movie, which was the remake of a Malayalam film by the same name and is now known for Vadivelu’s hilarious comedy sequences, was a success at the box office. Suriya also starred in Uyirile Kalanthathu, a film in a similar vein to his previous releases, except it was during the making of this film that Suriya met actor Raghuvaran, whom he would eventually come to consider his mentor. Raghuvaran is said to have given Suriya a timely wakeup call during the production of Uyirile Kalanthathu, persuading him to pick challenging roles at a time when the young hero was struggling to memorise long lines, and had a difficult time filming dance and fight scenes. Suriya had a breakthrough with Bala’s Nandha (2001), in which he played an ex-convict who fights to earn his mother’s love and trust, and has a difficult time adapting to his new social life following the completion of his jail term. Not only did Nandha shatter Suriya’s image as the urban romantic hero, but the eponymous protagonist of the film also did not fit into the mould of a quintessential Tamil cinema hero. Suriya, not much later, reunited with Bala to deliver another raw performance as Sakthi in Pithamagan (2003). There was no turning back after Nandha for the actor, who went on to choose roles that challenged him. ACP Ambuselvan IPS of Kaakha Kaakha (2003) still remains etched in fans’ memories, owing to Suriya’s solid performance as an intense cop as well as his impeccable on-screen chemistry with his wife, actor Jyotika. In Mounam Pesiyadhe (2002), he skillfully depicted the perfect anti-hero Gautham, sporting a rugged look with a beard, donning dark coloured shirts throughout the movie. In the film, he does not stalk or break into cheesy monologues or romantic songs to woo women. In fact, he goes to great lengths to talk couples out of pursuing their relationship, until his life takes an unprecedented turn. It was probably for Perazhagan (2004) that Suriya, perhaps for the first time, had to work extensively on his physicality to embody the role of a person living with a hunchback. Then came Michael, a fearless student leader in Mani Ratnam’s Aayutha Ezhuthu (2004) — the hyperlink film that narrates a story from three different perspectives. While by then fans were expecting the actors to continue picking experimental scripts, he shifted his focus to formula films, action-dramas, and commercial entertainers in the next phase of his career. Rough patch and trying times One would think they know Suriya as the romantic hero through films like Vaaranam Aayiram (2008) and Sillunu Oru Kaadhal (2006), but he is also the larger-than-life hero in actioners like Ayan (2009), Singam (2010), and Aaru (2005). He proved his finesse as an actor with the Gautham Menon directorial Vaaranam Aayiram, playing dual roles as Krishnan and Major K Suriya. When Suriya turns to drugs to mourn the loss of Meghna (Sameera Reddy), audiences grieve along with him. As Krishnan, he convincingly pulls off the young, old-school, romantic hero in the flashback sequences through the song ‘Mundhinam’, causing audiences too to swoon and glide blissfully to the breezy love story. Watch ‘Anjala’ from Vaaranam Aayiram: Watch ‘Mun Dhinam’ from Vaaranam Aayiram: Adding to Kollywood’s long list of cop movies, Suriya had also essayed the role of Duraisingham in Singam (2010), whose punchlines remain popular among fans to this date. Although these films failed to have garnered glowing critical reception, as was the case with some of his previous releases, some of them emerged successful at the box office. Suriya hit a rough patch when he signed films like 7aum Arivu (2011), Maattraan (2012), Aadhavan (2009), Anjaan (2014), and Pasanga 2 (2015). Though the actor had already done a variety of movies enough to avoid being typecast besides delivering good performances, he was criticised for not working with upcoming filmmakers, unlike his contemporaries such as Ajith and Vijay. This decade had also seen the emergence of a new crop of filmmakers like Adile, Lokesh Kanagaraj, Pa Ranjith, Karthick Naren, Karthik Subbaraj and Sudha Kongara among many others, who were stepping away from formulaic concoctions by introducing their own styles of filmmaking, while still placing it within the larger context of mainstream cinema. In the meantime, Suriya had also appeared in a number of other films including science fiction drama 24 (2016), Singam 2 and 3 (2013 and 2017 respectively) as part of the franchise, NGK (2019), Thaanaa Serndha Koottam (2018), and Kaappaan (2019). While some of them opened to good box office numbers, they failed to win critical acclaim. Soaring high: Success in recent years Over the past couple of years, Suriya has gone through a reinvention of sorts. This is evident from the interviews he had given to the media ahead of the release of Soorarai Pottru, in which he had explained how he had to break out of the Singam zone and get rid of any complacency he had picked along the way while preparing for Soorarai Pottru. Interestingly, both Suriya and Jyotika have said in their interviews that over the years, their approach towards acting and choice of films have changed significantly. When asked about the same, Suriya said in an interview with India Today, “Your thought processes change after marriage, or when you welcome a daughter into your life. You evolve accordingly, based on which you decide what films you want to do, which audiences you want to cater to, what kind of appreciation is important to you, and what you value more. After being in the industry for 20 years, you want to raise the bar. We need to intellectually connect with the audience, so we can grow collectively. If I give them the same boring films, they get bored. I think it is a responsibility to introduce new things through our films,” he said. Maara in Soorarai Pottru is ambitious, determined, and vulnerable all at once. Inspired from the memoir Simply Fly: A Decan Odyssey, based on the life of GR Gopinath, the film also required the actor to undergo an intensive body transformation to play the younger version of his character briefly. Besides the roadblocks he hit as an actor were the hurdles he had to face as the producer of the film. He was among the few actor-producers in the industry who had decided to go the OTT (over-the-top) way. When Soorarai Pottru, a movie that was made for the big screens, landed on OTT, it faced resistance from stakeholders in the Tamil Nadu theatre landscape. However, the film garnered praises from audiences and critics alike post release, going on to become one of the most popular films of 2020. Read: How Fahadh and Suriya have emerged as major OTT players in south cinema Following the success of Soorarai Pottru, Suriya once again surprised fans with the Gnanavel directorial Jai Bhim (2021). In the film he played Chandru, a lawyer who saves the day with his well-reasoned arguments in the court instead of larger-than-life action sequences, where the hero rises to the occasion as a typical saviour. Jai Bhim, which had also been released on Amazon Prime Video like his previous outing, had grabbed eyeballs at the 94th Academy Awards this year, after a making video of the film started streaming on the official Oscars YouTube channel. Suriya’s latest Etharkkum Thunindhavan (2022), co-starring Priyanka Arul Mohan, had opened to mixed responses. However, the actor followed this up with Lokesh Kanagaraj’s Vikram, where he managed to steal the thunder with a brief cameo role, in spite of the presence of three of the biggest stars of south cinema in full-length roles in the film. It is hard to point a finger at why and how his cameo as Rolex, a drug lord, became the success that it is. Was it the fact that Rolex’s ruthlessness, which is made explicit in a scene where he chops off a man’s head, stands in stark contrast to the grey characters he has played earlier, whose antagonism is driven by a moral or ethical conundrum? Or was it that Suriya’s fans just could not wait to watch him as a powerful character on the big screens once again, albeit in a cameo role? One probably has to wait and see to know what the actor has in store for his fans and beneficiaries. As of now, Suriya has his hands full with upcoming projects like Vetrimaan’s Vaadivaasal, M Muthaiah’s Viruman, and Bala’s Vanangaan. Meanwhile, it has also been announced that Suriya has become the first south Indian actor to be invited to the Oscars committee, with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences releasing the list of 397 artists invited to the Academy’s Class of 2022 in June. In addition, Suriya is also making his entry into Bollywood as a producer, with the Hindi remake of Soorarai Pottru. It would seem that 2022 is set to be an eventful year for Suriya.

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