

By JAN LEE

MEET Danny Yeo, fondly known as Singapore's "Squid Game uncle". He appears as a contestant on the Netflix new reality series *Squid Game: The Challenge*.

The 74-year-old retiree is the only Singaporean on the 10-episode show that premiered on its first half on Nov 22.

Produced by British production companies Studio Lambert and The Garden, it features 456 contestants who play games in the hope of being the last person standing to take home a cash prize of US\$4.56mil (RM21mil).

Yeo, who does freelance acting, says: "I saw the casting calls in one of those Facebook groups where actors go to look for jobs, around June 2022. It said 'Squid Game: The Challenge' but it had no criteria, no age or race or gender specifications, so I thought I'd just try."

He sent in a one-minute video of himself, but given the global scale of the production and a cash prize Netflix says is the largest in reality television history, he had no expectations of getting a callback.

When he received a phone call from an unknown number starting with +44 – the United Kingdom's country code – he rejected it. It was only when he received a text message from the production house that he picked up the call.

Despite knowing he was likely going to be one of the oldest players, Yeo – who began watching *Squid Game* only after he applied for the show – had no qualms vying for a spot.

After rounds of interviews on the phone and calls over video, a health check-up in Singapore and a psychiatric evaluation conducted virtually, he was confirmed as a player in December 2022, beating some 81,000 applicants.

He was flown to London to film the show in January, becoming player No.164.

He was under strict confidentiality clauses – he was not even supposed to tell his wife and three children why he was going to London alone.

He even had his mobile phone confiscated for more than a week while he took part in the production, to prevent photo-taking.

Unfortunately, Yeo's *Squid Game: The Challenge* journey was brief. There was a blink-and-miss-it sighting of him in the background, but he was among the 259 contestants eliminated in the first game of Red Light, Green Light, which sparked real-life controversy.

The game, played in an airplane hangar, calls for contestants to run towards a finish line where a giant robot doll stands, but they have to stop and freeze every time the doll stops singing and turns her



Yeo, 74, is possibly one of the oldest contestants on the highly anticipated reality show, *Squid Game: The Challenge*. – Photos: The Straits Times

# Squid Game uncle

How a Singaporean retiree landed a spot in the controversial reality show, *Squid Game: The Challenge*.



Yeo says the conditions during the shoot were definitely unfavourable, especially for the elderly.

head around. Any motion detected will lead to elimination.

In January and February, players were anonymously quoted in British tabloid *The Sun* and American publications *Rolling Stone* and *Variety* complaining about the "inhumane" conditions and treatment of players.

They alleged that the game dragged on for nine hours in freezing temperatures to the detriment of their health. Some also alleged that it was rigged, unfairly favouring players who were influencers.

In a joint media statement, Netflix, Studio Lambert and The Garden had said: "Any suggestion that the competition is rigged or claims of serious harm to players are simply untrue."

Although he does not know if the game was rigged, Yeo recalls: "The conditions were definitely

unfavourable, especially for the elderly.

"The game was supposed to last only a few hours after lunch, but it dragged on until around 10pm.

"At first, we were asked to hold our poses for only five or 10 minutes, which is already challenging enough because it was around 0°C.

"But as the game went on, we were asked to hold our poses for 20 or 30 minutes, which is obviously a big disadvantage for the elderly.

"I never reached the finish line. I was eliminated around the fourth red light."

He suspects the game was made tougher as the number of contestants needed to be whittled down fast.

"I think the producers probably had a plan to eliminate half the contestants from Red Light, Green Light, but the players turned out to be too resilient and were not so easily ousted, so they needed to ramp up the difficulty."

While Yeo wishes he could have stayed in the running a bit longer, he still thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"Some contestants are still really sore about losing, but I'm just proud that I was selected out of so many applicants. I obviously never expected to win. I'm just happy I lived to tell a story." – The Straits Times/Asia News Network



In *Squid Game: The Challenge*, 456 contestants play games in the hope of being the last person standing to take home a cash prize of US\$4.56mil. – Handout