

pick of the week



Abstract forms

Step into a world where colour becomes emotion and form pulses with rhythm. Echoes in Colour, brings together contemporary abstract artists from across India in a vivid exploration of texture, imagination and movement. The showcase features works by Abhijit Kumar Pathak, S Anand, Barati Shah, and more. *On view till November 5, the exhibition runs daily from 10am to 6.30pm at 123, Sterling Road, Nungambakkam.*



Speak boldly

Step into the spotlight at Oratoria 2025 – Talk Your Way to Singapore, the inter-school oratorical competition by Union Christian Matriculation Higher Secondary School. Open to students of Classes IX–XII, this year's edition introduces a debate segment and features prizes worth ₹90,000, including a return ticket to Singapore for the top orator. *On October 31, at the UCA Auditorium, Chetpet. More information on unionchristianschool.com*



Gut revolution

Beverage brand Misfits is shaking up India's beverage scene with a bold spin on fizz. Founded by brothers Aditya and Yash in Mumbai, the brand introduces the country's first prebiotic soda – crafted with plant-based ingredients, natural sweeteners, and zero preservatives. Backed by third-party lab reports, Misfits blends gut-friendly functionality with standout flavours like grape and mango, redefining what a soda can be. Shop at [drinkmisfits.com](#)



Wicked feast

When the night turns eerie and pumpkins glow, dinner takes a deliciously sinister turn. Haunted Harvest, the restaurant's Halloween feast, transforms comfort food into clever, creepy creations like toxic sludge in green slime, a broccoli and zucchini soup with squid, or drums of hell, spicy tangdi kebabs. *At Taj Coromandel's Anise, October 31, dinner, ₹3,250 (all-inclusive). For reservations, call 66002827 or 78248 62310.*

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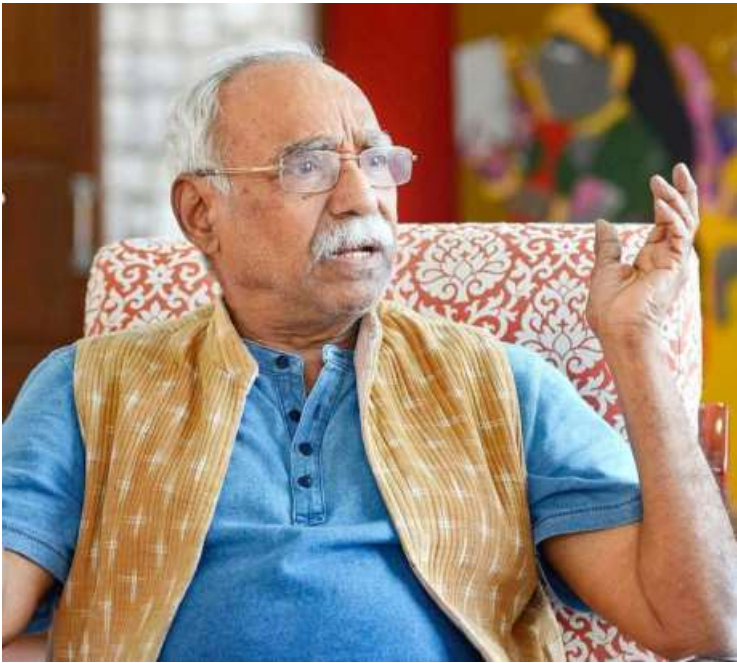
What connects the VIP lounge at Terminal 1 of Delhi Airport, Shangri La Hotel, the domestic arrivals section at Hyderabad's Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, and the Hyderabad International Convention Centre (HICC)? All feature a sculptural representation of a rustic Telangana woman by renowned artist Thota Vaikuntam.

These eight-foot resinated fibreglass heads, painted with automotive colours by the artist burst with exuberance – a red *bottu* (*bindi*) on a turmeric-smeared forehead, ornate jewellery on the nose and ears, elaborate hairstyles, and kohl-rimmed eyes that radiate vibrancy. The master artist does not sculpt himself; instead, a team of artists at a Delhi workshop brings his drawings to life in three dimension.

“The space transforms into a cultural hub with these painted heads. Each exhibit has subtle variations but remains instantly recognisable as the iconic ‘Telangana woman’ created by Vaikuntam,” says the artist's son, Raj Manohar Thota.

It is a quiet morning at Jayabheri Meadows, a gated community in Hyderabad. Dressed in a grey kurta and *lungi*, 83-year-old Vaikuntam sits on a rattan sofa. On a nearby table rest unfinished fibreglass sculptures – an eight-inch and a 12-inch Telangana man and woman. Pointing to them, Vaikuntam speaks of his central theme: the vivid portrayal of rural Telangana and its bustling life that has long defined his work. “I have never moved far from my people,” he says. “But there are also sculptures of Ganesha and the Dancing Shiva (Nataraja).”

Vaikuntam's signature paintings took a sculptural turn on a friend's advice. Immersed in the creative process, he worked closely with sculptors who translated his two-dimensional figures into three-dimensional forms. “Sometimes, the team doesn't understand the



The head-turner

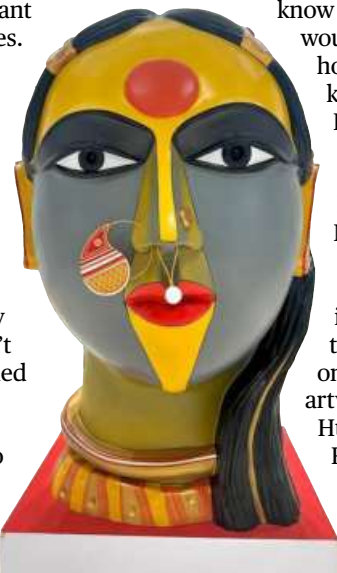
Master artist Thota Vaikuntam on reimagining his iconic paintings of Telangana women as fibreglass sculptures that are now displayed across India

traditional elements in my drawings,” he says. This year marked a new chapter in his artistic journey, with public art displays showcasing his muse – the rustic Telangana woman, reimagined as a sculptural head. “It was again a friend who suggested focussing on just the head,” he recalls. “I agreed. You can only look at a full figurative statue for so long. The face, however, leaves a lasting impact.”

The Padma Shri awardee often travels to Delhi to collaborate with the sculptors. “Art lovers look at the work and say, *Yeh toh*

In the mid-1980s, Vaikuntam juggled his roles as an artist and an art teacher at Jawahar Bal Bhavan, often working 12-hour days

Vaikuntam ka head hai (This sculptural head is by Vaikuntam),” he laughs, his voice filled with childlike joy. Even as he embraces this new form of expression, his artistic voice has remained constant for over four decades. He has never felt repetitive with his chosen theme – instead, consistent practice has helped him refine nuances, carve his niche, and create a distinct identity. “Finding an identity in creative work isn't easy. I never imagined I'd find mine.” He admits this shift in perspective came to him late. “When my teacher KG Subramanyan once asked what



Thota Vaikuntam; (below) the sculpture at Delhi Airport. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

my identity was, I didn't know. I asked him how to find it,” he recalls. Subramanyan placed a flower pot on a table and told the class to observe it carefully. “He said, ‘Everyone will draw the same flower pot, but what makes your work different is your identity. Work hard to develop your own style – and once you find it, protect it.’” Born in Boorugapalli, Karimnagar district, in Telangana (then undivided Andhra Pradesh), Vaikuntam found his identity in his village and its people. “In our time, selling art in Hyderabad was unthinkable. There were no curators – we started from scratch,” he says. He credits the late Surya Prakash, his contemporary and close friend, for catalysing the city's art movement. “He organised exhibitions, camps, and workshops that brought momentum to art here.”

In the mid-1980s, Vaikuntam juggled his roles as an artist and an art teacher at Jawahar Bal Bhavan, often working 12-hour days. Despite his legacy, he says he never pushed his children to follow in his footsteps. Currently he is busy with his paper drawings.

As he reflects on his journey, a sense of fulfilment colours his words. “All I wished for was that people in Hyderabad would know me, that my art would grace their homes. But now I'm known in Mumbai, Delhi, even abroad. When former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao liberalised the economy in 1991, interest in art grew too. Those who once collected only artworks of MF Husain *saab* or SH Raza began looking at regional artists; it gave us a big push.”



When dudes go soft

Through stories of love, conflict, and redemption, a look at how these films capture the audience's attention

Sudhish Kamath

When Cameron Crowe first asked John Cusack to hold up the boom box in *Say Anything*, the actor was uncomfortable with the idea. He thought it would make him a wuss. It was only after much convincing that Cusack lifted the boom box on the last day of the shoot with an angry, defiant expression—and that was the take that made it to the movie, with Peter Gabriel's *In Your Eyes* underlining what is today an iconic moment in pop culture history.

Heroes traditionally have felt shy of playing soft. It's not alpha enough for their idea of a hero.

Maybe that's why Pradeep Ranganathan, despite his fair share of haters – which will only go up if he keeps up his poor-cousin variant of Dhanush, who himself is a poor-cousin variant of Rajinikanth, with mannerisms that are a copy of a copy – is still watchable.

But to his credit, Pradeep works despite all his cringiness, wannabeness, and lack of originality because he is not afraid to be vulnerable on screen. Every time a character in his movies slaps him or spits at him, we feel represented, because he plays the most despicable of incels – be it the sexist hypocrite who has more dirt on his phone than he judges his girlfriend for in *Love*



Today, or the obnoxious, cigarette-chain-smoking *Dragon*, or now, the *Dude* who gate-crashes his ex's wedding to know why she dumped him! If Rajinikanth is Superstar and Dhanush is self-proclaimed soup boy, Pradeep has made Supreme Soup Boy his brand. He's willing to play the scum – representing the worst of male behavior – to show that even they have a shot at redemption.

It's a step forward for Tamil hero types for sure, but all the progressiveness in *Dude* is, at best, surface-level, because Pradeep plays the softboi with aggressive male toxic energy – be it the snap of his fingers or a slap across the girl's face. The kind of softboi who feels entitled to an award or another heroine by the end for doing the bare minimum decent thing. The “donkey who does not know the smell of camphor,” or the slowboi.

Or maybe it's



Dead on arrival

Ayushmann Khurrana has made a career of playing the vulnerable softboi, and in Maddock's *Thamma*, which tries to expand its *Stree* franchise to include vampires, the vegetarian softboi is bitten, brought back to life by love, and becomes a post-human Betal. And just like that, the heroine with superpowers, Tadaka (played by Rashmika), is relegated to playing his supporting girlfriend in the second half

(Clockwise from far left) Stills from *Thamma*; *Bison*; and *Dude*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

26-year-old director Keerthiswaran's inexperience in handling tricky terrain. *Dude* is a frustrating film because it's great and full of promise for over half its runtime, as it keeps stacking up conflicts and themes, only to be undone by the weight of it all in the final act, when the film collapses in the last half-hour trying to tie up all loose ends. While it's commendable that the young storyteller does not want the girl to regress back to her childhood love, the story offers very little for us to see why she chooses the men she does.

The messiness of romance or honour killings cannot be tidied up neatly with a ribbon. If the idea was to show female agency, the film could have had her have a baby with one guy and end up with another. But this is still all too patriarchal, where an accidental pregnancy seals her choice of partner. This is a rom-com that needed the female perspective but is happy being the flawed *Dude* perspective on things.

because the makers – who started off with feminist themes in *Stree* – have regressed back to the Chosen One template in poor taste. There's no redeeming quality in the hero that makes us feel he deserves to be a superhero.

The writing is as detailed as Varun Dhawan's wardrobe in his post-*Bhediya* transformation cameos – barely enough to nonexistent to cover its back.

Considering we just saw a much superior *Lokah* in the same genre, this low-resolution script version is best skipped and caught on OTT if you are ever that bored.

The softboi fighter

Dhruv Vikram really comes of age in Mari Selvaraj's *Bison*, where an underdog softboi whose world singularly revolves around his love for kabaddi has to fight his way out of situations by avoiding violence – that's only second nature to the world he inhabits. A world where othering is a way of life and seeds of division are sown in the minds of the young through the language of violence.

This is a film where sport transcends differences and divides that are decades old, and all characters, no matter how evil, are shaded with humanity – except maybe the naysayer coach, the stand-in for the broken Indian sports system.

This is a film where the older girl (played by Anupama Parameswaran) decides who she wants, and the sister fights for the brother, while the men in the world are fighting with knives.

A film that truly makes us root for the softboi.

From the hottest shows to hidden gems, overlooked classics to guilty pleasures, FOMO Fix is a fortnightly compass through the chaos of content.



Scan the QR code to watch the video

Tracing the artist

Chunilal Dutta Gupta's showcase revisits his journey from advertorial sketches to iconic portraits

Priyamedha Dutta
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This month, the walls of Lalit Kala Akademi paid homage to Bengal: its Baul singers, the riverfold, and quiet rhythms of the countryside. This, courtesy of artist Chunilal Dutta Gupta's acrylic brushstrokes. But, long before the artist became associated with these iconic portraits of Baul musicians, and the quiet poetry of rural landscapes, a young Gupta would finish college, walk across Kolkata's Maidan, and sit on the ghats of the Ganga, sketchbook in hand, teaching himself the art of observation that paved the way for his artistic journey.

Born in Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh), Gupta migrated and joined his elder brother Makhan Lal Dutta Gupta in Calcutta in 1940 for his schooling. A move, that like many journeys of that time, was one filled with displacement and hope. He later studied at the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta, where the city's vibrant cultural scene shaped his artistic vocabulary. “My school was near Kalighat, called Kala Dhan. I would observe the people there, and they became a source of inspiration for many of my works.”

During the course, Gupta had to make the life-altering choice of whether to choose sculpture, fine arts, or commercial arts. Thinking of the financial aspect, Gupta took up commercial arts.

Graduating in 1953 with the first-rank was not just an academic milestone, but a doorway that led him to the world of advertising. He began his career at J Walter Thompson in Calcutta, a space brimming with creative energy, of illustrators and artists. Gupta, who had once sketched riverbanks and local folk, now found himself drawing products for clients and characters for campaigns. In Thompson, he met Charles Moorehouse, who gave him his first



An acrylic painting by Chunilal Dutta Gupta. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

project: “At that time, Horlicks had just come to the Indian market, and he wanted me to sketch the advertorial for it. He told me that he had seen my sketches, and impressed, he wanted me to work with them.”

Thereafter, he started working for newspapers like *Jugantar*, *Statesman*, and *Dainik Basumati*. In 1957, the artist was transferred to the agency's Madras branch – a move that would shape his life for decades. He found warmth in the city's artistic circles, forming friendships with artistic legends. “I met RK Swamy, who was the manager of JWT Madras, which later became Hindustan Thompson Associates. He was one of the people who supported me during my time in Madras,” he shares.

When Gupta retired in 1995, he returned to the easel as a full-time painter. His art blossomed into an exploration of themes deeply personal, resonating with a life lost in a different Bengal, and comprised scenes of rural life, fishing, and musicians.

At 96, Chunilal Dutta Gupta still begins some mornings by picking up a pencil. The advertising deadlines are gone, the riverbank is far, but his love for sketching lives on.

Kolkata's hip bar
Little Bit Sober
brings a slice of
the city's cocktail
culture to The
Park in Chennai,
with a bar
takeover

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What if you could sample Kolkata's Nahoum Bakery's heavenly fruit cake in Chennai... but in the form of a cocktail?

On Saturday, Chennai will play host to a small piece of Kolkata's cocktail culture, with a bar takeover by Little Bit Sober at The Park's Leather Bar. Gyan Ranjan Barik and Biki, two of Little Bit Sober's star bartenders, will be behind the bar here, to showcase and mix up cocktails from the Kolkata watering hole's new Friends of the Bar menu.

"We turned three in June this year, and Little Bit Sober has always been about building the culture of cocktails and supporting the community here in Kolkata," says Rudradipta Mukherjee, founder, Little Bit Sober. "We have been working with different brands and establishments; both the young and the legendary to showcase the best of Kolkata, and our Friends of the Bar menu is an ode to the culinary landscape of our city," he adds.

In the bustling, historic neighbourhood of Chowringhee in Kolkata, Little Bit Sober is housed in an old office building that is seemingly frozen in time, with a bright blue boat-shaped bar, checkered bar stools and pops of red on the walls.

In 2024, it was ranked 35 on the



City of joy and pours

Gyan Ranjan Barik and Biki from Little Bit Sober; and the cocktail Friday, 7PM?

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

top 50 entries in 30 Best Bars India, and has been slowly making its presence felt in the trending cocktail scene across the country. The cocktails often feature local ingredients ranging from *sandesh* to *nolen gur*.

The Friends of the Bar menu, which launched in Kolkata last month, features a tribute, not in ingredients, but in intent, to Kolkata icons which include Flurys, Nahoum, Craft Coffee, Fabelle and more.

There are also six negronis, a cocktail Rudradipta says has a lot of character and lends itself to a diverse slate, a legends section that features returning guest favourites, and a growing Zero Proof programme to ensure that the cocktail experience is inclusive.



The new menu, the team believes, is not just a themed one, but a citywide thank you note.

Four cocktails from this menu will be part of the takeover in Chennai. The One From The Patisserie has Dewar's blended whisky infused with flavours of Nahoum's Christmas cake, spiced

rum and almond milk. "Nahoum is legendary here and we wanted to bring out this flavour in one of our cocktails. Back at the bar in Kolkata, we have another cocktail inspired by the English breakfast at Flurys, complete with a tiny croissant as garnish," Rudradipta says.

The Chennai menu will also have My Little Secret, a vodka, spice mix, cucumber seltzer and watermelon blend, and The One With The Sorbet, which brings together Hibiscus Camino Blanco Tequila, goji berries, genmaicha cordial, chia seeds and passion fruit. The gin cocktail named Friday, 7pm? will have a blend of citrusy flavour with cranberry tart and lime, topped off with salted litchi foam.

In bright colours and with fun garnishes, Little Bit Sober's Chennai bar takeover menu has its Instagram aesthetic sorted.

From 7pm onwards on October 25 at The Leather Bar, The Park Chennai.

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Sudhish Kamath

October, 1995. I was 18, starting out as a film writer, when I first watched and reviewed Aditya Chopra’s *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* – or *DDLJ*, as people still call it 30 years later.

As a generation or two grew up with one of the most seminal films of Shah Rukh Khan’s filmography, our thoughts on the film too have evolved and changed with the times. So, a trip to Maratha Mandir, where *DDLJ* continues to play every day for the last 30 years (barring the pandemic shutdown) at its sole 11.30am show, was nothing short of time travel. For ₹50, you get a balcony seat – and yes, about 200 of those were occupied that day. It is common practice to let the audience fill the balcony so the auditorium looks full.

Maratha Mandir itself feels frozen in time – a relic from 1958 near Mumbai Central renovated recently with fresh lighting, where my film critic friend observed that some patrons drop by less for the nostalgia and more for the air-conditioning. The place, with its cheap tickets doubles up as a kind of informal waiting room – people chatting on phones, occasionally glancing up at the screen annoying regular fans who have made trips across the city or country for their bucket list.

Love letter to patriarchy
“This is London... Nobody knows me except for the pigeons,” the film begins with the voiceover of the patriarch (Amrish Puri), who misses his Punjab and longs to fly back home. “Roti paanv ki janjeer ban gayi hai” (Bread has shackled my feet), he laments, feeding the pigeons. The almost full balcony on the day after Deepavali erupted into applause when the opening credits introduced Shah Rukh Khan as Raj and Kajol as Simran – as if the makers knew how these characters would become

Going home to DDLJ

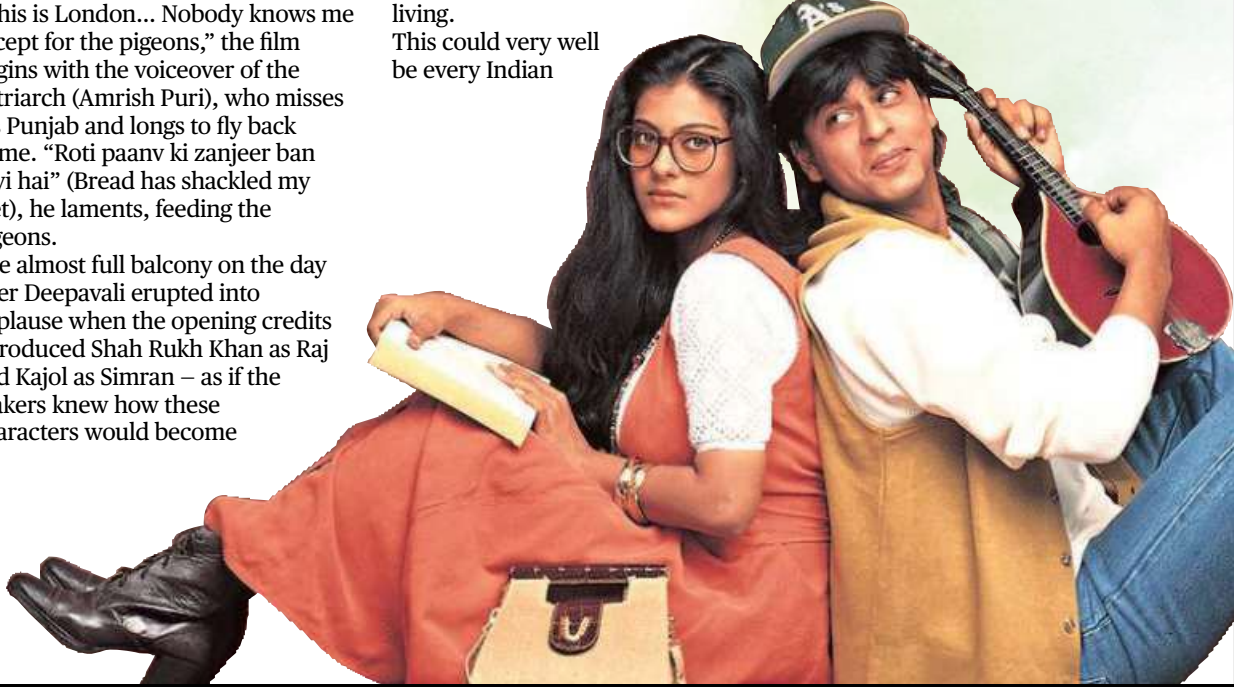
As Aditya Chopra’s *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* clocks three decades, we watch it at Mumbai’s iconic Maratha Mandir, joining fans as they cheer favourite scenes

household names.

While debut director Aditya Chopra’s generation saw it as a desi *Before Sunrise* (1995), featuring Raj and Simran falling in love on a Eurail route, father Yash Chopra’s generation saw it as a tale of two NRI fathers played by traditional Amrish Puri and liberal Anupam Kher. One believes the daughter should get used to her tears and pick herself up, or in the words of the mother played by Farida Jalal, “had no right to dream”. And the other wants his son to go live his youth as well if he feels he has missed out on it – a youth that flew by as he tried to make a living. This could very well be every Indian

parent in the 1990s – with different rules for sons and daughters – but here was a film that was going to start an important conversation and inspire generations of filmmakers to subvert it.

Karan Johar, who plays the hero’s best friend in *DDLJ*, went on to produce the *Dulhaniya* franchise with Varun Dhawan and Alia Bhatt, where the girl called the shots and the boy had to develop a spine. Luv Ranjan went one step further by showing the ugly side of what really happens in an arranged marriage setup, even if the boy is IIT/IIM



(Clockwise from left) Snapshots from Maratha Mandir; and stills from the film. INDRANIL MUKHERJEE AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Chutki sees DDLJ with her mom, 30 years later

Pooja Ruparel, who charmed audiences as 12-year-old Chutki in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, is now an actor and stand-up comic. She celebrated 30 years of the film by watching it with her mother at Maratha Mandir

How does it feel that it’s still playing?

Pooja Ruparel: Surreal... sad, and yet grateful beyond words. It was the first time I went to Maratha Mandir in 30 years. I had always planned to go, especially with my mum, but never made it – so this time, I bought a ticket for her and went to watch *DDLJ*.

It was surreal to see people coming from Ahmedabad and Rajkot every year. Their continued love for this piece of cinema, made 30 years ago, is almost like a religion – but one of love. The songs communicate the emotion, and the actors are like messiahs delivering the message.

It was also sad in ways I cannot put into words, because the ones I do it all for – my parents – weren’t there physically. Yet, I feel their presence and pride all the time. To share it then with the raw lifeblood of this phenomenon, the die-hard fans, felt like something I will never cease to be grateful for.

Thoughts when you watched it now.

Pooja Ruparel: Seeing it now, 30 years older, I find it it more beautiful than I remembered it to be. It’s nuanced, so well written and conceived. The characters are rich, and so many themes are handled delicately. I love SRK’s comic timing – it deserves more credit. His character transitions so authentically. Kajol is so natural and believable as Simran; she really wins your heart. I also love all the cameos from luminous actors – they bring so much flavour to the film.

Chutki post-Raj and Simran?

Pooja Ruparel: Chutki would probably love the way her *didi* travelled the world and became a stand-up comic. She shows all the makings of one in the film, and her tagline would have to be “come fall in love again and again”. Chutki would probably come home each year with someone new – in contrast to her sister – and Bauji would lose all his hair keeping up with how much she’s making them grow and change in their golden years! Hahaha.



educated. Themes of marital rape in *Akaash Vani* disturbed audiences as many walked out of halls halfway. More recently, Aryan Khan in *The Bads of Bollywood* roasts the hypocrisy of the patriarchy in his love letter to his father. The true test of a film is to see when the audience claps hardest 30 years later. Of course, they still clap for Shah Rukh Khan in his shorts, running with that oval rugby ball in the rain, or when Kajol gets drunk and starts dancing to ‘Zara Sa Hoom Loon Main’ – but the biggest cheers in the first half came for Shah Rukh bursting into ‘Ruk Ja O Dil Deewane’ – storytelling via choreography by Farah Khan – the chemistry that later created *Main Hoon Na*, *Om Shanti Om* and *Happy New Year*. The other songs were by Saroj Khan. So yeah, the times were changing.

The most unexpected applause was towards the end of ‘Ho Gaya Hai Tuijho’ when Simran waves at an imaginary Raj, and again when, outside House No. 13, Raj finds out Simran and family have left London – but then he finds the Swiss cowbell, bringing in the whistles at intermission. The beauty of the film is how well it contrasts and balances the two sides of Indians – Indians on their bohemian European holiday and Indians at weddings – the modern and the traditional. And the ugly side of *DDLJ* – the last 15 minutes – still feels as cringe as it did 30 years ago. Simran is not the father’s ‘amanat’ to give away, and doing the basic decent thing a father ought to do, considering a daughter’s happiness, should not be the generous, applause-worthy gesture it’s treated as. Yet “Ja Simran... jee le apni zindagi” still gets the audience cheering. Maybe we think so little of traditional minds that we want to applaud acts of basic decency. Yes, times have changed, romance has changed – but as the liberal father tells his son: “Mohabbat ka naam aaj bhi mohabbat hai.” Never mind situationships, love is still called love, indeed.

When romance met red flags

Back in 1995, Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol’s *DDLJ* romance was seen as rebellious, chic, and sexy. But when the youngest writer on our team finally watched it, he hated every minute – and is now at war with the rest of us. Whose side are you on?

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury
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Thirty years. That’s how long this cinematic relic has been held aloft as the holy grail of Bollywood romance. It took every fibre of my mortal being to survive its three hours, but for the sake of cinema history (and at the risk of being ceremonially excommunicated and lynched by *filmi* loyalists), I’ll try to keep things short, civilised, and only moderately heretical.

Shah Rukh Khan’s turn as the patron saint of subtle red flags has long been celebrated as the archetypal romantic hero. He radiates a boyish charm that is supposedly meant to soften his smug expat bro energy. Kajol meanwhile, seems to embody the docile virtues expected of “good

Indian women” in diaspora stories. Simran’s sudden gullibility is so ridiculous because she falls in love the second this man-child says “sorry” for joking about assaulting her while she’s unconscious.

If Raj’s reverent heart-eyes at the pious object of his affections praying in a Swiss church weren’t already grating, his daytime fantasies of carrying his newly sanctified bride in a red lehenga down a church aisle during the later, ‘Tujhe Dekha Toh’ sequence, made that subtext embarrassingly loud. His persistent ‘courtship’ relies on a series of humiliating flirtations followed by an apology as a reset button. This conceited template for romantic license is one that Indian cinema seems to have absorbed and emulated for years to come. From my limited understanding, earlier screen romances indulged in unabashed



melodrama. Yet while *DDLJ* proclaimed itself some sort of radical vanguard of “modern love”, it still reinforced the same gendered dynamics of obedience through glossy non-resident privilege. Then we hit India, where apparently escaping arranged-marriage purgatory is off the table because Raj insists on Bauji’s “permission”. Here, the lyrics of ‘Mehndi Laga Ke Rakhna’ and the Karva Chauth sequence only further sanctify female

sacrifice as devotional instinct. And the climactic slapstick smackdown quite literally stages Simran as the prize to be released only after the patriarch concedes ownership. The film attempts at challenging this internalised misogyny through performative nods and juxtapositions with the Western idea of modernity, but it’s ultimately devoid of any meaningful structural critique. Three hours of Shah Rukh’s unrelenting nonsense, seemed to



Stills from the film. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

have finally fried poor Amrish Puri’s brains along with my own. Somehow at the end of it all, I’m supposed to rejoice over Simran escaping a gun-slinging Punjabi *launda*, only to land in the arms of a marginally less intolerable, entitled London brat. There are some flickers of half-baked observations on first-generation immigrant disillusionment that exist almost in spite of the romance. But the hypocrisy of *DDLJ* is that its flimsy virtue signalling towards progressiveness ultimately bends

the knee to the very authority it pretends to defy. People defend this film as a “product of its time.” Absolutely not. “Its time” was 1995, not the Stone Age. Fond nostalgia and “good-ol’ fashioned fun” can’t shield this from scrutiny. For the life of me, I cannot fathom what makes this film so beloved. Maybe my generation will just never get it. Or maybe I’m just too sane. Call me a snobbish, fun-sucking hater if you must, but assessing this film through a contemporary lens only exposes its vaunted ‘legacy’ being venerated for achieving less than the bare minimum. So, *ja DDLJ ja*. I hope we never cross paths again. Happy 30th, I guess.

Telugu

A messy drama about tangled relationships



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In an early scene from *Telusu Kada*, chef-restaurateur Varun (Siddhu Jonnalagadda) berates his staff for failing to meet his exacting standards. His friend and moral compass (Harsha Chemmudu) reminds him to see things more practically: for Varun, a loner, the restaurant is his world; for his staff, it is just a job.

In another moment, Varun reprimands the domestic staff at his residence when things are not spotless. His obsession with order and the luxurious spaces he inhabits mask the chaos of his personal life, particularly his complicated relationships with Raaga (Srinidhi Shetty) and Anjali (Raashii Khanna).

Costume designer-turned-director Neerraja Kona, making her writing and directorial debut, steers clear of easy sentimentality. *Telusu Kada* is far from a feel-good romance – the red flags are visible from the start, signalling a story that is bound to divide opinion. However, the visual finesse cannot compensate for the gaps in writing.

Given Siddhu’s earlier films where his characters have faced heartbreak, some of the dialogues echo familiar territory. Harsha’s character adds relief, often voicing

what the audience might be thinking. When he questions why Siddhu’s characters are always caught between women and why he must witness it, the self-awareness draws a smile.

Without giving too much away, the drama centres on the idea of family and parenthood. Things do not go as planned, and Varun’s lack of clear communication makes matters worse. His reaction to his partner’s medical situation stems from self-pity rather than empathy. By the film’s end, his backstory explains his

Telusu Kada

Director: Neerraja Kona

Cast: Siddhu Jonnalagadda, Raashii Khanna, Srinidhi Shetty, Harsha Chemudu

Storyline: When a couple’s parenthood dreams come crashing down, help comes from an unexpected angle. But it brings chaos than hope.

emotional turbulence – a man masking fear with machismo.

For a story built around three characters, the writing feels thin. Under the guise of cinematic liberty, *Telusu Kada* overlooks basic sensitivity, especially while addressing surrogacy. The narrative remains surface-level in its portrayal of the women and their circumstances.

The focus stays on the male protagonist. Varun’s contradictions are written in detail, and his dialogues, at times bordering on misogynistic, draw applause but expose the film’s uneven gaze

Telusu Kada brushes past the emotional complexity it sets up. It critiques Varun’s alpha-male traits yet the women are shortchanged – one burdened by guilt for not wanting motherhood, another forced to compromise in marriage.

Telusu Kada raises pivotl questions but stops short of answering them with the honesty it promises.

Telusu Kada is currently running in theatres



Mari Selvaraj’s extraordinary film

Mari’s most commercially conventional film yet is a politically razor-sharp and tonally strong social sports drama that hits the bullseye every step of the way

Tamil

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“I have to constantly leap over the many fences they keep placing in my path, and I don’t know how far I should run to reach a place without any fences,” says Kittaan, the young protagonist of *Bison Kaalamaadan*. Tired of the many communalist obstacles that keep him from his dream to become a national kabaddi champion, Kittaan runs, and runs and runs some more, through many stretches of the film, almost self-immolating his mind, body and soul. Later, when the aforementioned dialogue recurs, a different character utters it to call attention to the struggles that many boys like Kittaan face, but the word ‘far’ is replaced by ‘high’ – because for many like Kittaan, freedom from social shackles comes not by running afar or running away but only by tearing through the roofs of oppression. This dialogue perfectly encapsulates what master filmmaker Mari Selvaraj discusses in his fifth film, *Bison Kaalamaadan*. It’s a politically sharp and tonally strong drama that is also his most commercially conventional work yet.

Following up on his masterpiece *Vaazhai*, Mari creates a vicious world where hatred is sown so deep in the hearts that even a casual brush between two unassuming people can spark a violent upheaval – he showcases this unflinchingly in a nightmarish scene where a man commits a blood-curdling act of sacrilege aboard a town bus. This is one of the many excellently written scenes in *Bison*, as it tells you so much about why Kittaan’s (Dhruv Vikram) father (Pasupathy) advises him against his Kabaddi dreams in a land like theirs. But it also subtly says something about how even a sacred custom can develop morbid meanings. Which fascinatingly, also applies to the violence we find lurking behind Kittaan’s eyes, and the violence propagated by two caste groups – Pandiarajan (Ameer Sultan) and Kandasamy (Lal) – with a long-standing feud between them. The violence, from

Bison Kaalamaadan

Director: Mari Selvaraj

Cast: Dhruv Vikram, Pasupathy, Lal, Ameer Sultan, Rajisha Vijayan and Anupama Parameswaran

Storyline: With the social reality of his times throwing one obstacle after another, a young boy perseveres to become a national kabaddi champion

these divisive groups, is fuelled by hatred, while for Kittaan, it becomes a means to survive and a right to defend himself.

Inspired by the story of Indian Kabaddi champion and Arjuna-awardee Manathi Ganesan, *Bison* tells the tale of the innumerable perils that fall upon a young boy who dared to look beyond what was deemed his ‘worth.’ There are concentric layers of battles to be won, the first of which begins at home, as he needs to convince his ever-protective father to let him play

Kittaan then has to take on the problem on his street: his father’s feud with a relative is creating new conflicts. This is tricky, since the latter’s sister Rani (Anupama Parameswaran needed more space make a mark) bears feelings for Kittaan (it boldly breaks the notion that it’s taboo for a young man and an older woman to fall in love). Beyond that, Kittaan has to bear the weight of the hatred deep-rooted in his town, and then of the bias for the state he represents in the Indian team, and so on.

But make no mistake, Mari’s narrative doesn’t follow that sequence. In fact, the film begins non-linearly to show Kittaan, now a player in the national team, sidelined from playing a key match against arch-rivals Pakistan, where Mari makes a point about the futility of all enmity, including India-Pakistan, at the Asian Games in Japan, 1994.

In yet another showcase of fluency in his storytelling language, Mari also gradually finds the rhythm to imbue his visual form with the surreal ideas in text, like imageries depicting the local deity Kaalamaadan and a sacred goat, or how a shot of two marsh fish in a cage is intercut with Kittaan and Rani lying entwined in a swamp. Very few modern Tamil filmmakers celebrate the natural state of their worlds so earnestly, and the many breathtaking montages and drone shots throughout the film earn praise of their own. But interestingly enough, *Bison* also beats *Karnan* as Mari’s most mainstream film. We even get an elaborate gangster drama arc, featuring the two caste leaders in a war for power, and the filmmaker does shock you with how unrestrained he is in showing the macabre unleashed.

In some instances, the picture gets a tad too unsettling as knives plunge

through bodies and pieces of flesh lie scattered on the floor in a pool of blood. But Mari’s cinematic violence only speaks of the futility of it all, and the message comes through loud and clear. Both Lal and Ameer’s gangster characters are two sides of the same coin, stuck with their necks too deep in the rot, and that you begin to even empathise with them only makes it harder when you see them tear each other apart. What Lal shows through a noble act, Ameer says outright – that what started as a fight for equality has turned into a vengeance-fuelled thirst for power.

Mari’s profound political statement slaps a question on the terrorising faces of the oppressors, but also asks those from the oppressed sects to introspect whether the fight is still about equality or for domination.

Dhruv Vikram impresses as Kittaan. It’s a performance that requires him to hide an ember behind his eyes, and the actor moulds steel to become an angry young man that angry young men can look up to. In moments when he gets to unleash some of that fire in his belly, the crowd is bound to erupt. Dhruv’s trained moves and brawny physique leave no room for doubt in essaying a professional Kabaddi player, and Mari too ensures that this is a sports drama at the end of it all. Kabaddi isn’t a sport that easily lends itself to a gratifying depiction in cinema since there aren’t many slow-motion-worthy moves palatable to the mass audiences. And yet, the choreography makes the games feel so real and present. It’s not every Friday that multiple genres blend this seamlessly, and *Bison* fuses elements of a sports drama, a biopic, a social actioner, and a gangster saga into a singular experience.

There are very few filmmaking voices that make you stand up and applaud for posing such artistic prowess and conviction, and Mari is inarguably the most original of modern Tamil greats. “When have they ever written our names so easily?” wonders a character in *Bison*. His fifth directorial is another proof that Mari Selvaraj has long immortalised his name as a rare game-changer.

Bison Kaalamaadan is currently running in theatres

Pradeep Ranganathan’s goofiness powers this Gen-Z love tale

Tamil

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Comparisons can be frustrating. If you are Pradeep Ranganathan or Sai Abhyankkar, it can be all the more frustrating.

The young actor has been compared with another senior star, probably because his expressions and body language remind you of the star in his younger days. The young musician has been compared with another musical rockstar, probably because of the sound in his music and overall personality.

These two characters get together in *Dude* to dish out a fairly engaging romantic comedy.

Dude opens with the shot of a wedding hall, with the popular 1990 Rajinikanth track ‘Nooru Varusham’ playing in the background. A girl called Amudha is getting married, and Agan (Pradeep Ranganathan) is standing in queue to congratulate her.



She stares at him nervously. He stares back. What follows is a firecracker of a start with Pradeep doing things that are quite...*Pradeep-like*. His goofiness lights up the screen everytime he

arrives, and this opening stretch is a testament to his screen presence.

What he says to Amudha is inconsequential, because that opening scene serves but as an introduction into the main female

protagonist - Kayal (Mamitha Baiju). Rich and privileged - she is the daughter of a wealthy minister (Sarath Kumar) - Kayal is as integral to the story as Agan is.

And so, we get a tour inside the hearts of Agan and Kayal, who are relatives by birth and friends from childhood. They have been best buddies and see each other almost every day - in fact, Kayal is also part of the ‘surprise party’ business run by Agan. But somewhere, friendship blossoms into love... and you know where *Dude* is headed.

Any film about the tribulations of the heart is bound to *drag* a little - and that Dude does, majorly in the second half, when, at one point of time, we wish the leads would make up their minds about each other. But that’s not to take away even a bit from their performances. While Pradeep scores not only in the humour part but also in the emotional sequences, Mamitha displays a range of expressions, especially when she is caught in a tug-of-war like situation during a wedding. Their chemistry is what makes *Dude* tick.

Where *Dude* misses out unlike Pradeep’s previous hit, *Dragon*, directed by Ashwath Marimuthu, or even *Love Today*, is its writing of the characters other than the protagonists. Sarath Kumar’s arc has promise initially, but a crucial detail reveal and subsequent change of heart during an extreme circumstance seems all too convenient and sudden. The dip into the emotional quotient in the second half, too, is a tad jarring for an otherwise lively film.

Cinematographer Niketh Bommi’s

Dude

Director: Keerthishwaran

Cast: Pradeep Ranganathan, Mamitha Baiju, Sarath Kumar, Hridhu Haroon, Rohini

Storyline: Impulsive decisions ruin the lives of two best friends. Can they reconcile?

frames keep up with the lead’s oscillating minds, filling most sequences with colourful props, going well with the film’s intention to target Gen-Z members among the audience. The camerawork in the popular ‘Oorum Blood’ track is a nice ode to live locations in modern-day Chennai, something that Tamil cinema usually steers clear of, considering practical complications and curious crowds. Sai Abhyankkar - the man behind the music - delivers tunes that naturally fit the milieu and situations; his ‘Oorum Blood’ tracks (the film version and the unplugged version) are massive earworms.

Like him or not, *Dude* does mark Pradeep Ranganathan’s arrival on the big stage. He might have recently refuted being the chosen one to direct the proposed Rajinikanth-Kamal Haasan biggie, and that might just be a blessing in disguise for his future as an actor and star. Are we all screaming ‘Doooodo’ yet?

Dude is currently running in theatres



Good Fortune

Director: Aziz Ansari

Cast: Keanu Reeves, Aziz Ansari, Seth Rogen, Keke Palmer, Sandra Oh

Storyline: An angel is fired after his good intentions result in a body swap

Aziz Ansari-Seth Rogen body-swap zinger

English

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What a divine comedy this is! Set in the City of Angels, Los Angeles, *Good Fortune* tells the adventures of a slightly bumbling angel, Gabriel (Keanu Reeves). At a meeting of angels, Gabriel, who is responsible for watching over texting drivers, feels he is not doing meaningful work, especially after he hears another angel, Azrael (Stephen McKinley Henderson), saving yet another soul by showing them the way. He asks his boss, Martha (Sandra Oh), to give him more responsibility, but Martha tells him to concentrate on his work. On earth, Arj (Aziz Ansari), a documentary editor, is struggling to make ends meet, working various jobs

and sleeping in his car, while hiding the bleak reality of his life from his father. In his job at a hardware store, he meets Elena (Keke Palmer), who wants to fight for better working conditions. As a gig worker, he meets Jeff, a tech bro, who agrees to a trial week of Arj as his assistant after Arj tidies Jeff's garage. Arj's duties include finding a shaman and setting up a disco floor for Jeff's 40th birthday bash. A series of unfortunate events cause Arj to lose his job and when his car is towed away as he dozes off at a Denny's, it seems Arj has definitely hit rock bottom. That is when Gabriel thinks of making things better. He wants to show Arj that life will not be any better with money and body swaps Arj and Jeff. He fails spectacularly, as most of Arj's troubles are easily solved with Jeff's money. Martha takes off Gabriel's wings for interfering and sends him to earth as a human. Jeff is in for a shock living like the plebs while Gabriel is quite pleased to be human falling in

love with dancing, tacos and milkshakes even as he washes piles of dishes and watches baby elephants online. The only way for Gabriel to get his wings back is if Arj willingly switches back to his life. All three learn important life lessons – from money not solving all problems (it does smoothen the way) to the hardships of the gig economy (it is so easy to draw parallels with our app-driven lives greased by delivery people run to the bone). The cast riff off each other, sparking all sorts of good energy – from Reeves grooving to some secret music in his celestial head and Oh's rarified wisdom, to Rogen's horrified discovery of how the rest of the world lives. Ansari, who has written and directed *Good Fortune*, has been quoted as saying he wanted to “write about things that everyone is dealing with that no one is talking about” and he does so with style in the charming film filled with good humour and feelings, where the jokes and observations land consistently. Last thought – is Arj a play on Raj?

Good Fortune is currently running in theatres

Snippets



Disney sets two-part documentary on making the Avatar films

James Cameron's *Avatar* universe is getting its own behind-the-scenes spotlight. Disney+ has announced *Fire and Water: Making the Avatar Films*, a two-part documentary series premiering November 7 that explores the groundbreaking filmmaking process behind Cameron's sci-fi epics. Directed and produced by Thomas C Grane, the docuseries chronicles the making of *Avatar: The Way of Water* while offering early glimpses of the upcoming *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. Featuring never-before-seen footage and new interviews with Cameron, the late producer Jon Landau, and stars, the series promises a rare inside look at one of cinema's most technically ambitious franchises.



Iranian filmmaker Nasser Taghvai passes away at 84

Acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Nasser Taghvai passed away at the age of 84, his wife confirmed on October 14. Taghvai's wife, actor Marzieh Vafamehr, announced the news on social media handles, writing, “Nasser Taghvai, an artist who chose the difficulty of living freely, has earned his liberation.” Born on July 13, 1941, in Abadan, Taghvai began his artistic journey as a story writer and documentary filmmaker. He made his debut in 1972 with *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*, an adaptation of Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi's story 'Nameless Anxieties.' The film earned Taghvai global critical acclaim.



Michael Fassbender to lead Netflix's Kennedy drama series

Netflix has greenlit *Kennedy*, an eight-episode drama series chronicling the rise of America's most storied political dynasty. Academy Award-nominated actor Michael Fassbender is set to headline the series as Joseph Kennedy Sr., the ambitious patriarch whose influence shaped generations of the Kennedy family. The show, produced by Chernin Entertainment, is adapted from Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Fredrik Logevall's book *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917–1956*. According to the series synopsis, *Kennedy* will delve into “the intimate lives, loves, rivalries, and tragedies” that shaped the family's legacy.



Glittering performances

Debora Cahn's public and personal drama is a perfect Deepavali treat, with outrageous plot twists, everyone throwing hissy fits, exquisite insults, or longing looks, while countries teeter on the brink of war

Streaming

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Sure, *The Diplomat* plays fast and loose with the real work diplomats do, but then *Mad Men* was not really about marketing. *The West Wing* and *Homeland* veteran Debora Cahn's political thriller, while focusing on the US Ambassador to the UK, Kate Wyler (Keri Russell), is also about her contentious relationship with her political superstar husband, Hal (Rufus Sewell), and behind-the-scenes machinations, driven as much by policy as passion. Season 2 ended with the death of US President Bill Rayburn (Michael McKean) while on the phone with Hal, who was revealing Vice President Grace Penn's (Allison Janney) wicked deeds. Season 3 opens with the UK mission scrambling to find a suitable setting for Grace to take the oath as President. Is the US Embassy in London on American soil? Should the oath-taking be in the lobby with or in front of the massive artwork of the Constitution? Then there is the question of who will administer the oath. A US judge is in London for a wedding and could administer the oath, but he has not

The Diplomat Season 3

Creator: Debora Cahn

Cast: Keri Russell, Rufus Sewell, David Gyasi, Ali Ahn, Rory Kinnear, Ato Essandoh

Episodes: 8

Storyline: A new President means new alliances while old loves and sins jostle for space

brought his robes on holiday, so it is time to trawl the “Harry Potter” stores. The hunt for a good-looking Bible, “adult size and written by Jesus,” ends when the British Prime Minister, Nicol Trowbridge (Rory Kinnear), brings the Gutenberg Bible, no less. When Grace offers Hal the position of Vice President, there is another seismic shift in the Wyler dynamics. Will Kate continue as Ambassador in Britain, or will she resign to be full-time Second Lady? Will they have a public marriage and a private separation? Grace's husband, Todd (Bradley Whitford), learns the pleasures and pinpricks of being the First Gentleman of the United States. CIA station chief Eidra Park (Ali Ahn) is in trouble as a person in a CIA safe house dies by suicide. She is not convinced Deputy Chief of Mission of the US embassy Stuart Heyford (Ato Essandoh), with whom she was in a relationship, can help. Truths about the shooting down of a British aircraft carrier, HMS *Courageous*, in the Persian Gulf, which resulted in the death of 41 sailors, surface, and a Russian submarine sinks 12 miles off the coast of England probably carrying a scary nuclear bomb. British spy, Callum Ellis (Aidan Turner), seems close to Kate, much to Hal's discomfort, while the UK Foreign Secretary, Austin Dennison (David Gyasi),

for whom Kate had a soft spot, gets married after a short courtship. The finale, “Schrodinger's Wife” (for Kate, who is a wife and not one), sees an awkward dinner at Chequers and fractious talks between Grace and Trowbridge over the Russian submarine and the shooting down of the HMS *Courageous*. Just as everything seems sorted, a major twist sets up a giant moral dilemma for Kate in Season 4, which has already been greenlit. *The Diplomat* zips by in a flurry of sharp dialogue. There is Hal describing the UK as a “Shrinking island kingdom that diddled its economy and rabble-roused its way to global irrelevance,” and Trowbridge saying the US is a “military-industrial complex papered over by a constitution.” Russell and Sewell are riveting as ever, while the rest provide able support. The clothes are lovely, Kate's trousers are to die for, as are Hal's more formal outfits. The houses are a dream, be it gracious old manor houses or the President's home in Long Island, complete with a heated pool. Hal, incidentally, does not stand for either Henry or Harold, and just as Kate is about to reveal what it stands for or whether that is his full name, another geo-political crisis explodes. Hopefully, we will find that out in Season 4.

The Diplomat is currently streaming on Netflix