



Instapick

Artistic pulse: Dive into the world of Delhi Contemporary Art Week from August 31 to September 4 at Bikaner House. This annual event, featuring six galleries, celebrates South Asian art. Besides the six galleries, the event will include a group exhibition titled A Bold Step Sideways curated by Girish Shahane.



Talkingpoint

Jailhouse gems: Rare music and film collectibles, including Elvis Presley's gold rings, pill bottle, mic and a handwritten letter by Brian Wilson, will be auctioned this weekend. Kruse GWS Auctions' Artifacts of Hollywood & Music features nearly 400 lots. Top items are estimated to fetch \$35,000 to \$60,000.



A still from 'Love Next Door'



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Yeo-reum, the 28-year-old protagonist of the 2022 K-drama *Summer Strike*, decides to take a break from her toxic workplace and her equally toxic boyfriend and boards a bus to nowhere. She sticks her head out of the window, inhales the scent from a canopy of cherry blossom trees, and squeals in delight when she spots the sea. "From this moment on, I'm not doing anything. I'm going on a strike from life," she declares. Have you ever wanted to quit your job and move to the countryside? Sometimes, just be rid of worrying about where your career is heading, how non-existent your love life is, and escape the burnout and stress

Escape the chaos

In need of a break? Protagonists in these dramas show us how it is done

that seems to be all-consuming? Korean dramas, in the last few years, seem to have perfected this as a genre – healing dramas, that centre around protagonists desperately in need of a break from everything. Years ago, we revelled in Julia Roberts' travel escapades in *Eat Pray Love*. In her quest for a life of more meaning, we travelled with her to

Italy, India, and Bali, as she nourished her mind, body and soul. Closer home, in a yearning for freedom and some fresh air, three women of a household take off on an impromptu road trip in the Tamil web series *Sweet Kaaram Coffee*. In *Summer Strike*, however, escape is just a short bus ride away. Yeo-reum keeps it simple,

she picks a small town to settle in for the sole reason that it has a charming library. What better way than to nourish the heart and soul than through books, and a potential romantic interest in the form of a sweet librarian? In the currently airing *Love Next Door*, a weary, visibly exhausted Seok-ryu tells her glowering mother, who is angry about her quitting her job, that she is looking forward to turning off her alarm and sleeping. To escape the chaos and stress of the everyday in a big tech company abroad, she goes back home – to the familiarity of her overbearing parents, and a slow life. We follow her through the next few days – as she creates an unemployment schedule, lazes around, devours comic books, hangs out with her childhood friends, and makes herself delicious green onion pancakes.

Are decisions to take a break away from the chaos of reality easy? No, especially when your achievements are unfortunately the only source of pride and joy for your parents. This is the chief source of frustration for our female protagonist in *Doctor Slump* whose mother refuses to acknowledge her depression, burnout, and dire need for a break. Thankfully, these shows move on fast enough, and there is something truly heartwarming about watching the subsequent healing journeys unfold on screen – often in a place that is far removed from the cities we inhabit, and through days that are starkly different from the lives we lead. In *Hometown Cha Cha Cha*, our protagonist moves to a quaint seaside village after a massive career failure and while we don't see much of his journey on screen, we see the place, its people and its charms envelop the woman he loves. Escapist shows have been a much-loved part of binge-watching, over the last few years. And while these shows might seem aspirational, and even a little too idealistic, the scent of the cherry blossoms and a spray of sea water, even onscreen, is refreshing enough, and makes for a great healing break of an episode.

From The Hindu cinema team, a fortnightly column recommending films and shows tied to a mood, theme, or pop cultural event.

Pick of the week

Concerts, workshops, tours, and everything else you need to plan your social calendar. For events, contact us on weekend@thehindu.co.in



Pro timekeepers

Looking for a marathon companion? Check out **Breitling's** 500-piece limited edition Endurance Pro Ironman watch. Built for athletes, it features a lightweight titanium case. Shop on [Breitling.com](https://www.breitling.com) starting ₹3,67,400. For a classy timepiece, shop **Tudor's** Black Bay Blue Chrono boutique edition with a 41 mm stainless steel case. Shop at Tudor boutiques starting ₹4,94,800.



Court clash

Calling all badminton players. Decathlon is hosting its first-ever **Badminton Championship** at Marina Mall until September 8 for both amateur and seasoned players. Participants can compete for trophies, cash prizes, hydration kits, and certificates. Matches will be held over two weekends, from 10am to 10pm. Register on Decathlon Play's official website or just walk with your game face on!



Artful expressions

Discover the joy of art journaling on September 1, from 11.30am to 1.30pm at **Backyard, Adyar**. Dive into creative therapy with artist Bhanu Vivekanandan and transform emotions into art. The workshop includes unlimited journal supplies, beverages, and a journal kit. Open to ages 10+ with a registration fee of ₹1,299. To register, call 7397296868 or reach out to @._getbhanufied.



Secret tunes

Looking to explore new music and artists? This might be right up your alley! **Sofar Chennai** is back with another intimate secret concert on September 1 at 6.30pm. Get up close and personal with artistes and meet like-minded music fans at a cool local spot. Details about the artiste and venue will be announced 36 hours before the performance to only those attending. Book your tickets on sofarsounds.com at ₹650.



Cheesy affair

Cheese and chocolate pair well with wine. But in this unique pop-up, pair it with some fragrant tea at **Sowl, Chennai** on September 1, from 4pm to 5.30pm. This 90-minute immersive session has been designed by Namrata Sundaresan of Kase Cheese, chocolate expert Patricia Cosma and tea taster Dona Aideau. A seat at this event costs ₹2,500 and 25 slots are available.



Sparkle showcase

Kickstart your festive season shopping. **The Amethyst Room** is hosting an exclusive jewellery pop-up with designer Anu Merton on September 6 and 7 from 11am to 7.30pm. Expect a range of versatile pieces like earrings, neck pieces, bracelets and more, starting at ₹1,700, blending traditional Indian craftsmanship with modern aesthetics. For inquiries, call 044 43042099.



Trendy threads

Brighten your wardrobe with shopping. **Virgio's August Pop** fall collection. Inspired by fall tones and vivid pop colours, this collection features styles like bubble hems, volumized sleeves, and multipurpose pockets. Shop on virgio.com starting ₹1,290. For more whimsy, shop the **ONLY** x Mickey ungendered capsule collection featuring retro Mickey prints. Available now on only.in starting ₹1,999.

Anisha Menezes

To be honest, Johnnie Walker Blue Label Elusive Umami is best savoured neat. After a dollop of caviar. Launched last weekend at the Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai, the Scotch, which has been curated by the brand's first female master blender Emma Walker and Chef Kei Kobayashi, features delicate but unmistakable savoury notes.

Talking about the idea of finding umami in whisky, Emma explains, "Chef Kei and I met in June 2022 at chef's restaurant – Restaurant Kei – in Paris. The initial challenge was to bring together our expertise in whisky making and creative gastronomy. We handpicked whiskies like they were ingredients – from salty, smoky notes to savoury and meaty flavours. Sipping and nosing, we went back and forth making sure we knew the ingredients but leaving space for recommendations and commentary based on our expertise." Select casks from inland and coastal distilleries were handpicked for their unique umami profile. The whisky at 43% ABV (amount of alcohol per volume of the spirit) is a juxtaposition of sweet and savoury on the nose, with hints of fresh green apples balancing salt brine. At the launch, Ruchira Jaitly, chief marketing officer, Diageo India, says the spirit speaks to a new Scotch audience, "Earlier there was more conservative, closed enjoyment. Now it is more inclusive, accommodating, catering to a young, affluent and

A savoury scotch

As Johnnie Walker Blue Label Elusive Umami hits the Indian market, with only 2,000 bottles, the brand's first female master blender Emma Walker talks about its inception, notes and ingredients

(Left) Master blender Emma Walker; (below) Johnnie Walker Blue Label Elusive Umami. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



adventurous audience that wants to savour rare Scotch with friends, instead of saving it only for big occasions." There are just 2,000 bottles of the umami-rich Scotch available in India (price on request). The spirit, "is luscious, with notes of apple and white peach first," says Emma. Notes of mandarins, blood oranges and red berries add a complexity, with a lingering finish of sweet wood spice, a touch of smoked meat, warming salt and pepper with a long, sweet fruit finish. The master blender adds, "We worked to create a whisky that transported you to a forest

Earlier there was more conservative, closed enjoyment. Now it is more inclusive, accommodating, catering to a young, affluent and adventurous audience

RUCHIRA JAITLEY,
CMO, Diageo India

at dawn, when the air of the night slowly transitions to the warmth of the day, reflecting Chef Kei's memories of walking amongst the stunning Japanese mountains in Nagano in the early morning." The event saw attendees taken on a journey of discovery through five senses by Chef Dharshan Munidasa, Japanese Cuisine Goodwill Ambassador, calibrating each course to accentuate the spirit. With courses themed Wind/Kaze, Earth/Tsuchi and Water/Mizu, layers of umami were presented in broths, mushroom and ramen, the dessert course featuring a Shibuya-style French toast with a Johnnie Walker Blue Label Elusive Umami atomizer. "Certain condiments can pull out the umami, like salt makes watermelons sweeter, and carrots, tomato and cheese bring out stronger flavours that are hidden below the surface. Stock from poultry, when added to crustaceans, extract umami from the shell-yielding notes of charcoal yet sweet, smoky and mellow," states Dharshan.

The festive bag

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Kickstart your shopping spree for the upcoming festive season. Chamiers is hosting a pop-up that brings together two brands: Aavaran and Devi. Alka Sharma, founder of Udaipur-based Aavaran – known for hand block-printed garments, home furnishings and accessories – is excited about her return to customer-centric events. "After Covid, we were doing more of business-to-business (B2B) projects, and we realised we were losing our identity. After a long hiatus we are getting back to B2C sales, and we are happy about it," says Alka, 46, "We will be bringing a mixed bag to the pop-up, a mix of old and new collections." Visitors can look forward to apparel (upwards of ₹2,500) such as shirts and *kurtas* for men, and dresses, saris, stoles, and *kurtis* for women. The brand's forte, says Alka, is their work in natural dyes. Apparel aside, Aavaran will also showcase its range of home decor such as mats, dhurries, bedsheets, table linen, and toys. To pair Aavaran's garments with the right accessories, Devika Arora, 48, will be bringing her collection (upwards of ₹2,800) of statement rings, neckpieces, and bracelets. At Devi, her Jaipur-based brand, she says the focus is on working with natural gemstones set in sterling silver. "This year, I will bring a mix of traditional pieces to cater to the upcoming festive season, and also contemporary ones that go well with the younger clientele. Now, the Indian design aesthetic is leaning towards contemporary designs," says Devika. **Until August 31 at The Amethyst Room, 106, Chamiers Road, RA Puram. From 11am to 7.30pm**





Dogs and more
@ Artagasm

The art merchandise store helmed by illustrator and graphic designer Vasudevan A, had a slew of launches for Madras Day — T-shirts themed on MS Dhoni, Chennai's map; coasters with auto rickshaws; a poster inspired by actor Rajinikanth's movie *Mannan*, among others. "With our designs for Madras Day, we wanted to capture through our illustrations the essence of Madras and its chaos and beauty: from tea kadais and crowded buses to temples and beaches," says Vasudevan,32. "We also enjoy movies, especially Tamil cinema," he adds, speaking of the brand's posters, coasters, and T-shirts with abstract, illustrated references to Tamil movies. But the highlight is the Mutts of Madras series inspired by the "lively and super friendly strays we see on the streets of Madras". Comprising postcards, T-shirts, tumbler bottles and tote bags, the series, says Vasudevan, took shape as the brand advocates the 'adopt don't shop' policy. "We have four mongrels and eight cats, and we try to capture the mutts as they are: cute, friendly and adorable, to encourage more people to take care of their streeties even if they can't adopt one." Upwards of ₹249 on [artagasm.com](#)

Madras on your sleeve

To commemorate the city turning a year older, artists borrowed from its heritage structures and cultural icons



Nidhi Adlakha

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Dosa magnets
@ The Phoenix Company

At The Phoenix Company that has been around since the 1990s, sisters Upasika and Aditi Maithreya create and retail quirky Chennai-themed merchandise alongside apparel, decor, etc under their partner labels. "On our travels to other cities, we often wanted to collect fridge magnets or aesthetic postcards for our homes. Keeping that in mind, we wanted to offer products that people can take back as souvenirs and collectibles which will remind them of Chennai," says Aditi, who illustrates the products. The No Place Like Home... series, she says, "captures the elements that breathe life into our mundane routines". Be it the man selling colourful balloons on the beach,

women drawing *kolam*, or *thatha paati* taking a walk, illustrations from the series went into their notebooks, and a calendar. Popular offerings at the brand include their Madras-themed T-shirts, notebooks and art prints in With Love from Namma Chennai... and handmade miniature food fridge magnets of dosas, idlis and vadas. Speaking about how the latter came to be, Upasika says it was during the lockdown that she wanted to create rakhis with clay. "The most popular theme we agreed on was food, and decided to offer miniature food clay rakhis with magnets so that after Raksha Bandhan the magnets could be a lovely reminder of good times. After the festivities, we continued to get enquiries and so we launched a separate product line of miniature food magnets," she says, adding that their latest design features *thayir saadam* (curd rice).

Upwards of ₹150 on [thephoenixcompany.in](#)



Kollywood shots
@ Mahaxarts


"The city and its layered history is my muse in most of my personal projects," says city-based artist-illustrator Mahalakshmi Somasundar who launched Mahaxarts in 2021. "My fascination for Chennai started back in college. I studied Architecture and we had a course centred around the city, and I found myself dumb-struck learning the city I was raised in had so many layers of history," says the 25-year-old who illustrates Madras-themed art on merchandise such as posters, postcards, art prints, stickers, and more.

For #36DaysOfType in 2021, the artist produced a series of illustrations on heritage buildings across the city starting from A to Z. This series was later developed into a poster called the Madras Alphabet, which showcases structures such as the erstwhile Jeypore Palace (once home to Amethyst Cafe) and Electric Theatre (present Chennai's Philatelic Bureau), says Mahalakshmi, who has been gathering information about the city's buildings for about two years.

Other products include the Madras in Movies postcard series that has illustrated stills from Tamil cinema with historically salient buildings and landmarks such as Ramalayam Palace of the Travancore royal family of Kerala (seen in *Muthu*) in the frame. "The more I studied about Chennai, the more I was able to identify heritage structures as the hidden element in movie frames/scenes. The idea is to bring the places in the background to the fore and share stories and facts about them," says Mahalakshmi, who is now working on a calendar based on the city.

Upwards of ₹35, @[mahaxarts](#) on Instagram


Cream Cheese. Dream Cheese.



With a smooth consistency and mild flavour, the invention of cream cheese can be traced back to American dairymen. Indulgently creamy and deliciously rich, Amul Cream Cheese has carved its niche in the culinary world as a versatile ingredient. Be it for breakfast or dessert, it is a kitchen staple that is perfect for modern and traditional dishes.

The creamy texture of cream cheese makes it easy to spread thus making it a perfect match for bagels and toast. It is also a key ingredient for baked goods, especially cheesecakes, cookies and pastries and can also be used to thicken sauces and add richness to soups.

Whether enjoyed in its classic form or as part of a creative recipe, cream cheese continues to be a culinary delight for food enthusiasts everywhere. Use it in diverse ways to elevate your dishes and indulge your taste buds.



Boñ Appetit!

*CONSUMER CONNECT INITIATIVE





Photo first
@ From The Lens Of MK

For Muthu Kumanar Subramanian, an IT professional who hails from Thoothukudi, joining Postcrossing (a postcard exchange project) during the lockdown gave his art meaning. "I moved to Chennai in 2017, and the city is special to me.. it made me an extrovert," says Muthu, who has been pursuing art and photography as hobbies from his school days.

Encouraged by his friends from the Postcrossing community, he turned his art into postcards and badges themed on the city for Madras Day last year. "It was the first time my art was on sale, and I received a good response." This year, Muthu has launched a poster comprising his photographs of iconic landmarks such as Ripon Building, LIC, among others, a postcard shaped as the Chennai Central Railway Station, and badges.

Upwards of ₹50, @[fromthelensof_mk](#) on Instagram

Stole the show

Embroiderer Annie Titus Mammen launches her first line of embellished pashmina stoles



Soma Basu

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Annie Titus Mammen prefers to maintain a low profile. To the extent that the fashion designer from Chennai launched her first-ever Instagram page tambour.1985 just about three months ago.

At a recent event in Delhi where she showcased her first personal collection of exquisitely decorated pashmina stoles in collaboration with event consultant Kajoli Sahgal, Annie says, "These are my first products that I can really call my own; something I could control from start to finish. The 53 stoles she displayed wowed the visitors who were privy to her day-long show in the capital and many were bought instantaneously.

Skilfully blending tradition with modernity, Annie says, she chose to paint and embroider on pashmina stoles because she finds the Indian market saturated with embroidered saris and dresses. "Also, stoles are light-weight, very utilitarian and easy to drape for all age groups,"

says the designer whose product line sells only at Evoluzione in Chennai.

There is colour, texture and flow in Annie's stoles. Her creations are not loud or blingy but she uses subtle and elegant colours to connect boundaries between Nature, environment, art and philosophy. With extensive use of hand-sewn bees, insects, animals, birds, flowers, trees and words, Annie's visually attractive designs are both sophisticated and playful.

Annie has done Schiaparelli bridal wear and specifically recalls

Snapshots from the event in New Delhi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

a gown with 2,500 embroidered flowers of 14 types done with French knots and needles. She was also associated with Jean Francois Lesage's projects for the king of Thailand that included redoing the royal guest chambers for hosting Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

"For all the creative work I do, I never get to see, feel or touch the final product. My core work is exporting my embroideries for bridal wear and haute couture; the clients are all private, mostly veiled in secrecy," she says and adds, "it has been a satisfying journey for me to get my work into the world and connect with the right people to unlock exciting new projects."

TRICHY KALYANA BIRIYANI

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(Clockwise from right)
Poster of the second season
of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*; Charlie
Vickers as Annatar/Sauron;
and Charlie Vickers and
Charles Edwards. SPECIAL
ARRANGEMENT AND
TWITTER/THE LORD OF THE
RINGS ON PRIME



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What would JRR Tolkien have made of modern Singapore? The island city-state, with its feats of urban greenification, would have certainly struck the dreamer of Middle-earth. He would have also paused, one imagines, below those tall, scraggly ‘supertrees’ that loom in the bayfront area – but do not of course walk, unlike the Ents of Tolkien’s imaginings. Such thoughts flickered through my mind on a recent trip to the garden city, while covering the premiere of the second season of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, streaming episodically on Prime Video.

Between frequent detours to Chinatown and other food-and-culture hubs across the city, we catch up with the show’s cast and crew. The first season, released in 2022 and culled from Tolkien’s appendices in his epic novel, confidently stacked up multiple dramatic pieces. But now the Jenga tower sways precariously, and all eyes are on Sauron (Charlie Vickers). Initially introduced as a castaway named Halbrand, the supposed king of the Southlands, his revelation as the uber-villain of epic high fantasy left observers reeling. It lurches the show into a darker,

twistier terrain.

“In the new season, we see Sauron going to Eregion to meet Celebrimbor (Charles Edwards), who is the Leonardo da Vinci of the elves,” says showrunner JD Payne, who has created the series with Patrick McKay.

“We get to watch him seduce, manipulate and ultimately gaslight Celebrimbor. That process of driving someone to insanity in order to get them to do what you want...that’s where a good thriller really lives.”

There were hints, in the first season, of a complex dynamic brewing between Sauron and the elven-smith Celebrimbor. It is a relationship built on flattery, egoism, and toxic co-dependency. As with Halbrand, the guise he donned to manipulate the elven warrior Galadriel (Morfydd Clark), the dark lord assumes a new form before Celebrimbor; that of Annatar (The Lord of the Gifts), an angelic emissary, or so he says, of the divine Valar. He is the Steve Jobs of the Second Age, stopping at nothing before the ultimate ring – the One Ring – is forged.

Payne expands on rooting the new season in character psychology. “We have all known, whether in romantic relationships or friendships or work relationships, someone who has that tendency where they can use you without any remorse,” he says. “As we

Rings a bell?

The sophomore season of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* brings on Sauron — not the skull-helmeted demi-god of the film trilogy, but a complex schemer and manipulator

In the new season, we see Sauron going to Eregion to meet Celebrimbor (Charles Edwards), who is the Leonardo da Vinci of the elves

JD PAYNE
Showrunner



push,” says Charles. It is also the first instance when, in earnest, we get to glimpse a more earthbound side to Sauron – not the outsized, skull-helmeted demi-god of the film trilogy, but a complex schemer and shape-shifter. All he wants, really, is to bend and organise Middle-earth to his will. Is OCD-ing (at such an extreme) all that evil? “I want to bring the level of complexity to Sauron that Tolkien wrote about,” Charlie says. “It’s not a tokenistic portrayal where he’s made to appear three-dimensional just for the sake of it. Tolkien was very detailed about how, in this age, Sauron wanted to heal and re-order Middle-earth. For me, the whole character comes from that side of his personality.”

I ask them what a Sauron-Celebrimbor spin-off would look like. This prompts a brainwave that shaves my interview time by half. “Maybe we can be neighbours in a small village in the Southlands, with a pub nearby,” Charles ventures animatedly. “Right, but you will be very wealthy, Celebrimbor, with a large house and a garden,” Charlie shoots back. “Maybe I can be your gardener. We can call it The Gardens of Power.”

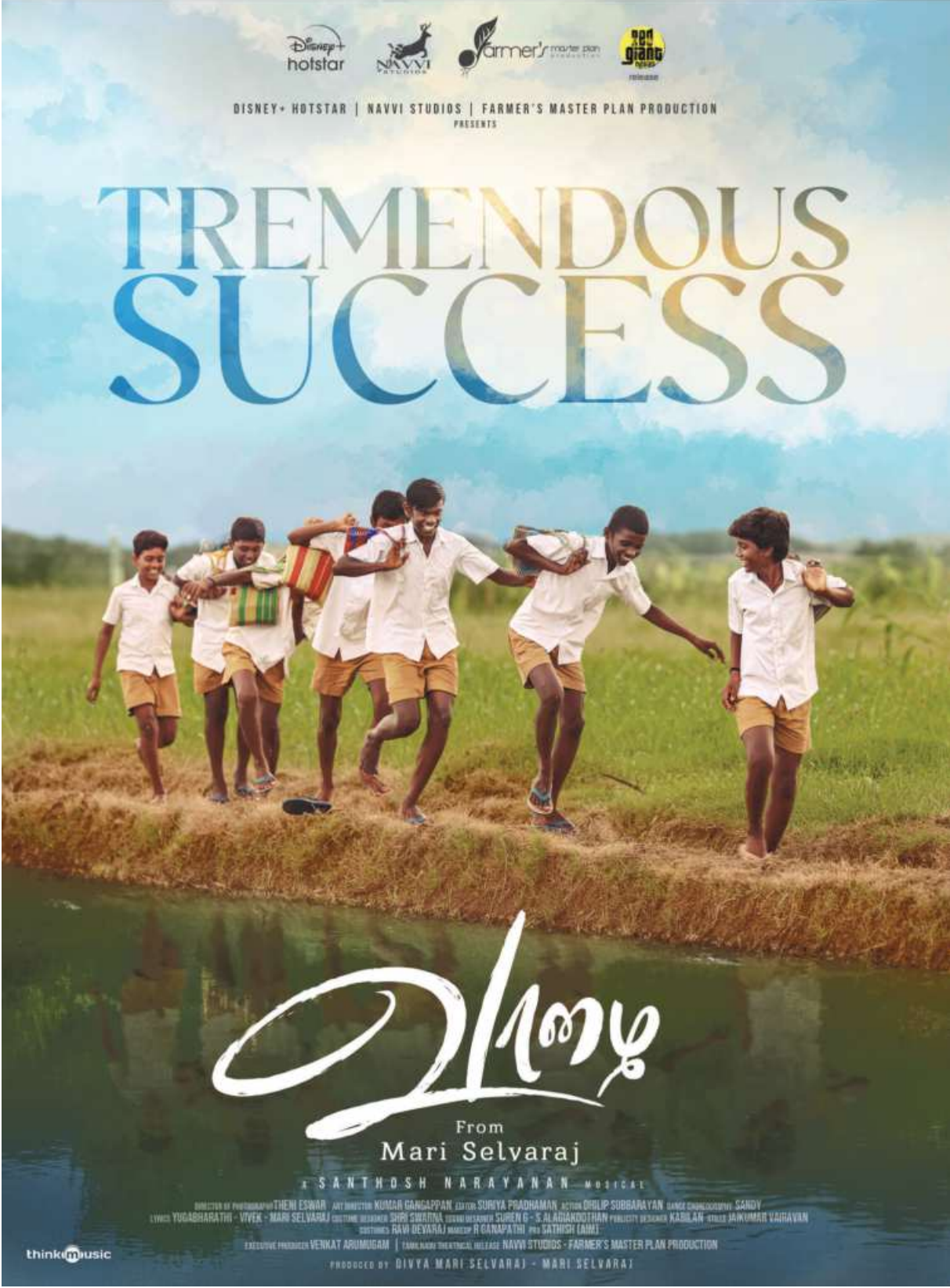
The writer was in Singapore on the invitation of Amazon Prime Video.

The first three episodes of The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power Season 2 are streaming on Prime Video.

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Malayalam

Lacks writing to complement its experimentation



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Barring some glorious exceptions, an utter pointlessness marks zillion vlogs that get uploaded online every day. Often documented for the viewing pleasure of the public are the mundane details from the daily lives of the vloggers. But, some of them do spring surprises for those patient enough to sit through the uneventful visuals.

In his debut directorial, film editor Saiju Sreedharan uses the found footage of a vlogger couple (Vishak Nair and Gayathri Ashok) to tell a story which if told in the conventional form might not have much of a novelty. This being the format, the film has its share of inconsequential sequences from their daily lives, but it at the same time gives one the feel of being a part of the risky adventures they embark on.

Right from the beginning, the film gives us a clue about their habit of prying on the lives of others. The couple also compulsively documents their intimate moments, quite a few of which does not have much to do with the narrative. While the first half of the film is made up of visuals from the man's camera, the latter half takes us through the same scenarios using visuals from the woman's camera, filling in the many gaps in her partner's visuals. The duo, with their cameras running, follows a mysterious woman (Manju Warriier) living in their apartment complex, inevitably landing in trouble.

Saiju, who has edited some of the best known films of the past decade including *Maheshinte Prathikaaram*, *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Virus*, leans heavily on the experimental element to take forward the narrative, which is not helped much by the sparse screenplay and thin material. With the central characters never letting go of the camera, even when they are in danger, there are a lot of visuals which convey the immediacy of the danger they are facing.

Some of the standout sequences include a close encounter with wild elephants and those inside a rusty old boat in the middle of the forest. The intricate sound design adds to the effect of these scenes; the songs from post-rock band Aswekeepsearching makes some pointless scenes worthwhile.

Manju Warriier, who is introduced as a mysterious woman, remains so even in the end, because her character is quite under-written. She does not have a line of dialogue in the film, but we are not even sure whether she is mute or whether she chooses to communicate with handwritten notes. The revenge drama at the centre is plainly run-of-the mill, and would not have stood on its own.

With some better writing to complement its experimentation, *Footage*, one of the first feature films in the found footage genre in Malayalam, might have left a lasting impression.

Footage is currently running in theatres



A meticulously-crafted vision

Thanks to an impressive ensemble cast, PS Vinothraj's sophomore feature is even better than his debut *Koozhangal*

Tamil

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After what is the best scene of *Kottukkaali* when the film and its cast's emotions hit a crescendo, a passive Meena (a brilliant Anna Ben) climbs into an auto, waiting for her time to come. Her eyes brim with tears, like a dam operating at the brink of its capacity, but not a drop jumps out to soothe her thwacked cheeks; in her books, that would mean conceding defeat. This is one among several endearing moments in director PS Vinothraj's sophomore feature which is even better than his debut *Koozhangal* – India's entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 94th Academy Awards – showing us that all the critical acclaim that came his way was no flash in the pan.

In many ways, *Kottukkaali* shares multiple parallels with *Koozhangal*: both are, in a way, travel films, capturing the trials and tribulations of a family, and both films start bang in the thick of the action. Just like the travellers moving from one place to another, the story expands to share more details with us as the film progresses. In a long montage, we see Meena's family getting ready for a short trip; water bottles are filled, a scooter is rented and a man preps his auto for the long haul. As the family embarks on the journey, we learn that they believe Meena is 'under the spell' of her lover who we never meet. Said to be someone from an oppressed caste, this enrages the entire family, especially Pandi (an explosive Soori), whom she is betrothed to and this leads to her being dragged to a shaman to 'deal with it'.

Akin to *Koozhangal* again, there is blatant sexism and chauvinism distilled through generations of patriarchy and filtered through centuries of caste pride. But unlike the earlier film which took its time to deliver the core message, *Kottukkaali* is flagrant about what it wants to put out. What makes Vinothraj a voice to reckon with, just like his contemporaries like Pa Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, is how brilliantly he uses his prowess over cinematic language to write a story with which he evokes a myriad

Kottukkaali

Director: PS Vinothraj

Cast: Anna Ben, Soori, Poobalam Pragatheeswaran, Sai Abinaya

Storyline: Enraged that a girl is in love with a boy from an oppressed caste, her fiancé and family plan on taking her to a shaman to make her undergo a regressive ritual which they hope will "break the spell"



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emotions within us. Apart from the basics like the red rooster being a parallel to the red dress-sporting Meena – both want to escape and enjoy their freedom but are tied down to sacrifice themselves – Vinothraj lets you connect the dots and read between the lines. Neither does he want to provide a solution to the issue at hand, nor does he take cinematic liberties that would have pulled us out of this masterpiece garbed in reality.

While most of the films' first slides thank the makers' kins or the almighty, Vinothraj thanks Nature and his film shows you why. Apart from being a silent spectator to the happenings within Meena and Pandi's families, it provides wonderful metaphors for the filmmaker to drive home his crucial points. In a scene that is equal parts hilarious and heartening for us, a fierce bull blocks the road and the men have no luck going past him; finally, a young girl lures the bull out of the way with words of affirmation. Like the rooster and the bull, Meena is Nature personified, unwilling to yield to the demands of mortal men.

Vinothraj does a splendid job of explaining how this group of men and women, with their own problems to deal with, come together in the name of family to solve what they think is a bigger predicament. Right from one person dealing with an insect bite while relieving himself in the morning, to another coping with a runaway father, their personal problems sound insurmountable. But somehow, they all converge on the idea of having everything in their control and taking brute measures if things go haywire. The film accentuates this with a fantastic scene where the men flex their brawn to lift an auto. They are so naturally disruptive, that even to ring the temple bell, they would rather shake the very pole the bells are attached to.

But thanks to the writing, this fragmental display of masculine arrogance gets thwarted with ease as they are shown to be those who can't even control their bladders, start an auto, or deal with a fly in the eye; that is when the family's women rise to the occasion with comparatively amicable and saner approaches. But despite their voices being silenced by that of men whose rules dictate that a menstruating woman can't enter a temple premises, the women also

end up being the flag-bearers of regressive beliefs. Vinothraj even takes humorous digs at the men's crumbling egos as Nature does everything it can to delay their journey; there's a hilarious throwaway line on how a character attributes his friend's immense growth in life to the time his father shed his trousers.

The technical choices the makers have opted for also make *Kottukkaali* an experience to remember. With no background score, the camera work, at times, makes us one among the family members with its super-tight shots, or turns us into a mere spectator with its static shots as the characters whiz through the frames. I couldn't help but muster a chuckle when the film, produced by Sivakarthiskeyan, uses the 'Othaiyadi Pathayila' track from *Kanaa*, another film bankrolled by the actor, in a pivotal scene.

Apart from an intriguing plot accented by a terrific supporting cast, it is Anna Ben and Soori's career-best performances that elevate *Kottukkaali* into one of this year's best films. Both their characters have to carry the burden of resentment and exasperation, a product of multiple quarrels that would have unfolded before the film's happenings, which explains the wrath of Pandi and why Meena is *the* 'kottukkaali', the adamant one. With just one piece of dialogue in the entire film, Anna pulls off the steadfast nature and unwavering spirit of Meena admirably; Vinothraj shows how she always has a way of getting things to work, with a quick shot of her loose ring that's made to fit by looping a little thread through it. On the other side, Soori is anger personified as the black-shirted Pandi whose volatile nature comes to the fore for the smallest of things.

Without being pompous about its themes, *Kottukkaali* excels at showcasing a day in the life of a dysfunctional family doused with patriarchal norms. While the open-ended climax might feel divisive, it also opens a realm of possible outcomes that the filmmaker generously lets us pick one from. In an industry where directors suffer from the sophomore curse, Vinothraj delivers a more well-rounded second film, and proves that he's here to stay... and win.

Kottukkaali is currently running in theatres

Mari Selvaraj's profound, deeply aching bio-drama is a masterpiece

Tamil

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Burdened beyond his years, a tender-hearted boy from a world far removed from contemporary cinema discourse sits at his bench in school. With the naiveties of the age tussling inexplicable feelings he is suddenly brushed with, he takes out a pink, embroidered handkerchief from his pocket and takes a whiff. Akin to the presence of the person who gave it to him, the cotton too transports him to a world of comfort. The situation, what the cloth means to him in that scenario, and the relief he feels from it, sends him a cold shiver. In *Vaazhai*, we see a slow-motion close-up of his feet, letting go of the cold stone floor underneath, and clenching the wooden footrest under his desk. This is just one of the countless moments in the film that make you ponder if cinema could, after all,



make you feel the mud under your feet or the pangs of hunger on a sunny day. In his most personal work yet, director Mari Selvaraj displays exceptional control over his film language.

Through the three feature films and his written work, including *Marakkave Ninaikkiren*, Mari has attempted to ease himself of all the pain he had been carrying. *Vaazhai* is a tale inspired by a deep-seated trauma that had become the bedrock for who he has grown to become.

Everything in Mari's world of *Vaazhai* is meticulously-crafted from life, and at its centre is Mari himself, an inspired, fictionalised version – as Sivanaindhan a.k.a. a Sivanenjam (Ponvel), who lives in the village of Karunkulam with his sister Vembu (Dhivya Duraisamy) and mother (Janaki). When we first see this child, he wets his pants after a nightmare, fearing the worst. For any other child, anxious bells would ring at the thought of going to school every Monday; but this was a Friday night.

Sivanaindhan is petrified of the weekends, as he has to join fellow community members to carry heaps of plantain at a plantation, an assignment he would avoid even by impaling his foot with a thorn to get excused.

School is where he gets to be who he is: a child. So he scores A-grades with ease and indulges in shenanigans with Sekar (Raghul), Sivanaindhan's partner-in-crime. School is also where he can meet Poongodi (Nikhila Vimal), a teacher Sivanaindhan is smitten with. In her, he finds someone who accepts him for who he is, and sees a mother who does not punish him but rewards his honesty. To us, Poongodi reflects the larger society that is distanced beyond measure from the reality of Sivanaindhan.

The scenes featuring Sivanaindhan, Sekar and Poongodi are tender and endearing. Mari's writing shines as he pairs even this idea with a poignant counterpart in the film. In the very first scene, we see Sivanaindhan dance merrily at a funeral – death in the community means he need not go to the

plantation.

But *Vaazhai* isn't just a story about a childhood lost in duelling against the plantain heaps; it unfurls itself through the story of Kani (Kalaiyaranan), a communist who fights for the rights of the plantation workers against an exploitative boss and his lackeys. As this subplot evolves, Sivanaindhan becomes more than a boy stuck between two worlds, as he witnesses the agonising horrors of his reality.

Vaazhai is as measured a story gets to be told in modern-day mainstream cinema. From how the frames are

composed to how shots are juxtaposed, it's poetry in motion. With Theni Eswar's frames, Mari shows us his mesmerising world with humans, birds, ponds and cattle living as one, as if to portray how man's greed disrupts all peace on Earth. In one scene, the grunting calls of a swarm of red-naped ibis birds flying above are intercut with a dreadful turn of events as an ominous sign. Sounds and music become tools to punctuate moments, and composer Santhosh Narayanan becomes both an orchestra conductor and a soothing whisperer.

With *Vaazhai*, Mari Selvaraj – apart from showing you who he is – makes you smile, laugh, think, and leaves you with a lump in your throat. In the end, when you see Sivanaindhan, you will wish you could comfort him however you can. And so, it's a reminder that Sivanaindhan does live in our world, and one hopes that making this artwork gave him some relief.

Vaazhai is currently running in theatres

A weird, disconcerting trip

English

Blink Twice

Director: Zoë Kravitz

Cast: Naomi Ackie, Channing Tatum, Christian Slater, Simon Rex, Adria Arjona, Kyle MacLachlan

Storyline: A cocktail waitress and her friend are bewitched when a tech billionaire whisks them off to his private island and then all the trouble starts



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Blink Twice, Zoë Kravitz’ directorial debut is so assured that you feel like you are watching an auteur with several films under her belt. Put Blink Twice beside Ishana Night Shyamalan’s The Watchers, and the contrast is felt even more sharply. The other striking thing about Blink Twice is a reminder of how often tech billionaires are cast as the villains of the millennium – is that jealousy or what? Blink Twice is visually arresting – the frames, with a preponderance of primary colours including luscious red, blinding white and fiery yellow, make you wish to consume the picture whole, reminding one of early Tarsem Singh. There is this feeling of a sensory overload. Written by Kravitz and ET Feigenbaum, Blink Twice tells the story of a cocktail waitress, Frida (Naomi Ackie), who catches the eye of tech mogul Slater King (Channing Tatum) at a fundraiser.

King has done some bad things in the past but has publicly apologised for his wickedness and is now a good boy thanks to his therapist Rich (Kyle MacLachlan). The opening scene where Frida and her friend Jess (Alia Shawkat) prepare for the gala is reminiscent of the party preparation scene in Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo+Juliet. Frida and Jess are invited to join King and his friends on a tropical island. It seems like a dream getaway, with gourmet food, wine, sunshine and surf and a seemingly endless supply of psychotropic substances. King’s friends include his righthand man Vic (Christian Slater), who is missing a finger, fine dining enthusiast Cody (Simon Rex), straight-as-an-arrow Tom (Haley Joel Osment) and his overburdened assistant Stacy (Geena Davis). Sarah (Adria Arjona) one of the party girls, is initially hostile to Frida and there is also a maid (María Elena Olivares) who mumbles “red rabbit” whenever she sees Frida. Frida slowly realises all is definitely not right in this paradise and the more she digs the more horror she uncovers. The movie starts off slowly with scenes that

do not necessarily segue smoothly. There is also a problem with things happening rather arbitrarily – maybe it is to give that psychedelic sense of events and conversations fading in and out without following a chronological order. It was distracting though, as it took you out of the film to wonder, how did that happen or how did she get there, and why is the drug and antidote kept in the same place. The acting is superb and the dream-like visuals are captivating. The music takes you back to campus and questions of life, the universe and everything including memory and forgetting which is one of the themes of the film. On top of everything else, the censoring was intrusive especially considering the blurred vape was a crucial plot point. With tighter editing, Blink Twice would have been a great film, instead of an unsettling curiosity. And where was that trigger warning?

Blink Twice is currently running in theatres

Snippets



Jack Black and Paul Rudd in talks to star in new Anaconda movie

Jack Black and Paul Rudd are reportedly in early talks to star in a new Anaconda movie for Sony Pictures. While no deals have been finalized, the project is generating buzz due to the involvement of the comedic duo. The script has been penned by Tom Gormican and Kevin Etten, the writers behind The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent, with Gormican set to direct. The film will be produced by Brad Fuller and Andrew Form under their Fully Formed banner. Unlike the 1997 original, which was a thriller featuring Jennifer Lopez and Ice Cube, this new Anaconda is expected to take a different approach, leaning more towards comedy while still keeping the giant snake at the center of the story.



Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menen team up for director Pandiraj’s next

Director Pandiraj, who last helmed the 2022 film Etharkkum Thunindhavan, is teaming up with Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menen for an untitled project. Produced by Sathya Jyothi Films, the new film sees Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menen collaborating once again after the Malayalam film 19(1)(a). Nithya recently bagged the National Film Award for Best Actress recently for her role in Thiruchitrambalam and in an interaction with us regarding the prestigious win, she said she was looking forward to this film with Vijay Sethupathi. “It’ll not just be a romantic film but something that breaks genres,” said Nithya.



Neena Gupta to make her Malayalam comeback with Rahman’s series

Veteran Bollywood actor Neena Gupta is making her comeback to Malayalam cinema after more than three decades. The actor will soon be seen in the Malayalam web series 1000 Babies along with Rahman. The makers of the thriller shared the series’ teaser and showed a glimpse of both the actors’ mysterious characters set against the backdrop of a maternity hospital. The series is set to premiere on Disney+ Hotstar soon. 1000 Babies also stars Sanju Sivaram, Ashwin Kumar, Adil Ibrahim and Shaju Sreedhar. Directed By Najeem Koya, the series is penned by the filmmaker along with Arouz Irfan.



A gut-bursting nightmare

With Romulus, Fede Álvarez delivers a carnally charged, visually stunning, and unrelentingly brutal entry that pays homage to its illustrious predecessors

English

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The Alien franchise has long thrived on the malleability of its basic premise: place unsuspecting humans in a confined space with a perfect predator, and then watch as dread, despair, and a whole lot of gore ensue. Yet, with each instalment, this simple formula has been filtered through the distinctive lenses of its directors. From Ridley Scott’s claustrophobic original, a haunting meditation on isolation and corporate indifference, to James Cameron’s bombastic, adrenaline-fueled sequel, each film has stamped its own aesthetic and thematic imprint on the franchise. Now, the modern godfather of the grotesque, Fede Álvarez, has sculpted his vision of the franchise into a psychosexual nightmare which embraces its roots with both ooze-soaked hands and yanks us into a relentless, viscerally charged cinematic experience that redefines the potential for nostalgia-fuelled franchise instalments. Set between the events of Scott’s Alien and Cameron’s Aliens, what Romulus brings to the table is not reinvention, but refinement. The seasoned Uruguayan purveyor of horror behind Evil Dead and Don’t Breathe, embraces the franchise’s legacy with fangirl enthusiasm, and helps Romulus find its footing by sidestepping the pitfalls of reinvention. Instead, Álvarez opts for a return to form, an homage to the franchise’s gritty origins that injects it with a potent dose of contemporary sensibility. The plot is a straightforward, almost spartan affair – a group of young colonists on a mining planet, desperate to escape their bleak existence, hatch a plan to hijack a seemingly abandoned spaceship. What they discover, of course, is that this twin-ship, dubbed Romulus and Remus, is far from empty.

Alien: Romulus

Director: Fede Álvarez

Cast: Cailee Spaeny, David Jonsson, Archie Renaux, Isabela Merced, Spike Fearn, and Aileen Wu

Storyline: Space colonisers come face to face with the most terrifying life-form in the universe while scavenging the deep ends of a derelict space station

The brilliance of Romulus lies in its atmosphere. Álvarez, co-writing with longtime collaborator Rodo Sayagués, understands that beyond the series’ biomechanical monstrosities, is its oppressive ambience of impending doom. The film’s primary setting – a sunless, decaying Weyland-Yutani Corp mining colony – features some breathtaking production design, where rusted metal, toxic fog, and the dim glow of industrial lights create a grunge dystopia. This third-world outpost feels lived-in, worn down by the relentless grind of corporate exploitation, where hope goes to die. It’s a setting that echoes the claustrophobic tension of Scott’s original, yet makes it feel even more suffocating, more inescapable, and grounds the carnage to follow in a grim reality through some fantastic world-building. The young cast, led by Cailee Spaeny as Rain, is a departure from the world-weary crew of the original films. Spaeny brings a raw, unpolished tenacity to the role, a stark contrast to the steely resilience of Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley or the cool pragmatism of Michael Biehn’s Hicks. Rain’s vulnerability, however, does not diminish her strength. Instead, it transforms her into an intelligent, adaptable survivor grappling with the weight of survival in a universe that has no use for the weak. David Jonsson, as the android Andy, delivers a performance that feels both tender and unsettling, as he oscillates between an innocence that draws you in and a detachment that leaves you wary. For all its blood-drenched spectacle, Romulus also manages to slip a heart beneath its chest plate of terror. The relationship between Rain and her android “brother” Andy, injects a dose of pathos into the otherwise relentless carnage. Their dynamic touches on the perennial Alien theme: the quest for humanity in a world that often feels designed to strip it away. Yet, of course, the H.R. Giger’s iconic creations are undeniably the true stars of Romulus. As a horror auteur with a tendency of leaving a trail of viscera in his wake, Álvarez does not shy away from

capturing them in all their horrifying glory. The film’s set pieces are masterclasses in tension, with Álvarez orchestrating gut-wrenching scenes that will likely leave you squirming uncomfortably. The gore is plentiful, the violence unflinchingly graphic, but it never feels gratuitous. Every spattering of flesh, every torn membrane serves a purpose – to remind us of the fragility of the human body and the unrelenting, unforgiving primality of the xenomorphs. The film’s most unsettling scenes don’t just focus on the creature’s merciless hunt, rather, the perverse intimacy of those encounters. Álvarez lingers on the invasiveness of these moments, with every phallic creature’s lethal embrace birthing even more horrifying entities. As was the case in his Evil Dead, the body, in Álvarez’s vision, isn’t just a vessel to be destroyed in increasingly imaginative ways, but a site of a twisted, bestial violation which culminates in a scandalising final act. The sound design, led by Lee Gilmore, is some of the most outstanding this year. The theatre-rattling takeoff into space, the hiss of acid dripping through steel and flesh alike, the sickening squelch of bodies being torn apart and chest’s being burst agape – it’s all rendered as a jarring sensory experience that’s disturbingly immersive. Benjamin Wallfisch’s slick synth-laden motifs and cleverly-hidden callbacks to prior films complements the sense of dread that permeates every frame. With Romulus, the Alien franchise storied lineage has found fresh, fertile ground for its horrors, spinning a tale of isolation, corporate insouciance, and the grotesque beauty of life’s most primal fears. It is a film that revels in its venerated gore and its unrelenting tension and is quite simply, one of the most entertaining genre films this year. Whether you’re a die-hard fan or a newcomer to the franchise, Alien Romulus is a ride worth taking, though you may want to bring along a strong stomach for the journey.

Alien: Romulus is currently running in theatres