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WHY MANJUMEL
BOYS CLICKS IN TN P4



Snakes in my luggage (Clockwise from below) Whitaker and pet kite in Bombay, 1959; with his first milk snake in Hoosick, 1947; Whitaker with a spectacled cobra, 2020. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND JANAKI LENIN



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Promise me you won't kill a snake – Romulus Whitaker's mother said to the young boy, when he brought home his first milk snake in a jelly jar. He had found it under a rock on the pastures of Upstate New York's Hoosick, where he spent a few of his childhood years. She called the creature beautiful. This precious moment set the tone for Whitaker's life and career in the company of reptiles, big and small.

And, so it should come as no surprise that his life spills over more than one volume of an autobiography. The unassuming American who is hailed as 'the snakeman of India' – for Madras, the man behind the beloved Snake Park and Crocodile Bank founded in 1976 – lays bare his early years in the irreverent, engaging *Snakes, Drugs, and Rock 'N' Roll: My Early Years* (published by HarperCollins), the first part of his autobiography written with author and wife, Janaki Lenin.

Was the title meant to shock? From his home, on the outskirts of Bengaluru, the 80-year-old opens with a hearty, full laugh. "This seemed to be a title that would grab attention, at the snakes level, drugs level or the rock n' roll level. It also reflects the age that I was talking about, the first 25 years of my life. I have had this title in mind for possibly 10 years!"

The book is an easy read with interludes from Whitaker's school days, his time in service as a medic for the US Army during the Vietnam war, and at sea as a sailor, among early days of career.

A long road
It took Janaki and Whitaker nearly five years to put the book together. It was no single moment or incident, rather the conversations that the naturalist had with acquaintances and friends – sometimes over a glass of beer – who incessantly ask about what shaped his early life, growing up, and his time in Agumbe, that led to the idea of an autobiography.

Whitaker says, "I guess



India's very own snakeman

Romulus Whitaker recounts memories, with creatures great and small, from the first 25 years of his life in his recently-published autobiography

people just got sick of me telling an individual story, they said, 'we wanna hear it all'." His early years, sometimes in astonishingly vivid detail, thus came alive.

The details make one wonder about how well documented Whitaker's childhood years were. "Actually, my mom [Dorris Norden] can be blamed for a lot of it because she was wonderful! The main person who shaped my worldview was my mother. She saved so many of my early writings, like the letters I sent home from school, narrating the various experiences I have had. Before she passed, she handed over everything she collected over the years. And it's not only the letters that I wrote home, but the letters I wrote to my cousins in America. They were very fascinated by my life in India," he recalls.

In all the hours spent discussing the structure and flow of his memories, he is evidently nostalgic for some parts of his early childhood. "Even though I was born in New York City and spent a few years there, the move to Hoosick out in the countryside was just magical. That set the tone for the rest of my life, really. I wanted to be out in the wild then, and I am

still the same. If I want to relive something, it would be going back to that place."

He continues, "On a recent visit, I turned over a rock, and lo and behold, there was another snake. I was thinking to myself it is probably the great-great-great grandson or granddaughter of the snake that I caught back then!"

Through the narrative, the onus Whitaker places on people and relationships is unmissable. A tiny window into his life and move to India, his school days in Lawrence School, Lovedale, and Highclerc School (now Kodaikanal International) and his relationship with his Indian stepfather Rama Chattopadhyay, and step-grandparents Harindranath and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, all make the narrative personal.

When he started working, a few others became pivotal to his life in the wild. In the US, it was his former boss at the Miami Serpenterium, Bill Haast, and a hero of yesteryear, Raymond Ditmars of the Bronx Zoo, and in India, another hero, a British doctor and herpetologist called Colonel Frank Wall.

A well-lived life lends itself naturally to an engaging read. "Well, it's my story so it's a bit hard not to boast too much but we did try to minimise the 'I, me, mine' adjectives. The combination of my memory, and Janaki's editorial skill is what shaped it," Whitaker adds.

This volume barely scratches the surface of his life's work as a naturalist. "The book shows me as a kid who didn't really gel with academics at all. I had much more fun out in the wild."

He assures, "The second volume is in preparation and we are halfway through it. I have 100 times more stories to filter out, and I am fortunate that Janaki is very clinical about getting the right story in the right place. We have to be meticulous in choosing the best ones."

Most mornings now are spent poring over nuggets of found memories and sheafs of research. More from an extraordinary life await, where all the wild things are.

Fair winds

For these pilots, navigating the sea is just as easy as the infinite skies

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At the Spring Haven Wharf where Chennai's violent summer sun has settled comfortably in the sky, a group of pilots, accustomed to navigating the clouds, is making its way to J80 class sailboats (racing keelboats) at the Harbour, hoping to try their hand at controlling the waves.

For many, who are still in their stiff white and blue uniform, it is their first time onboard a sailboat. "I have lived in Chennai all my life but have never been to

sailing in the sea," says Amrita Ravindran. She is one among 30 pilots from Indigo trying their hand at sailing, at the 112-year-old Royal Madras Yacht Club (RMYC), the oldest sailing club in South India, as part of the airlines' month-long Women's Day celebrations.

"It is pretty remarkable how we have all been given an off on the same day. My biggest draw to take part, was to meet all the other women pilots from Chennai. Unlike corporate offices, we only get to meet our first officers and co-captains. It is nice to meet the other pilots from the

organisation for the first time. Did you know that Indigo has the highest contingent of women pilots in the country?" asks Shailaja Gopinath who has been flying since 1995.



The last time she was on a sailboat, Shailaja says that she was taking it slow. This time, she is happy to get her hands dirty. Amrita adds that the idea of working in teams is also bound to help break the ice and bring the contingent closer.

Honorary secretary of RMYC, Captain Vivek

Shanbhag, says that the mechanics of flying and sailing are not too different and adds that it is usually a cakewalk for pilots. "The aeroplane, like the sailboat, does not distinguish between a man and a woman," he says.


At 11am, the group, armed with bright blue T-shirts and sunglasses, leaves the wharf in four boats. In minutes, they get a lifetime supply of salty breeze and gentle waves lapping by their sailboats.

Floating along Pilots from Indigo dip their feet as they sail at the Chennai Harbour. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT




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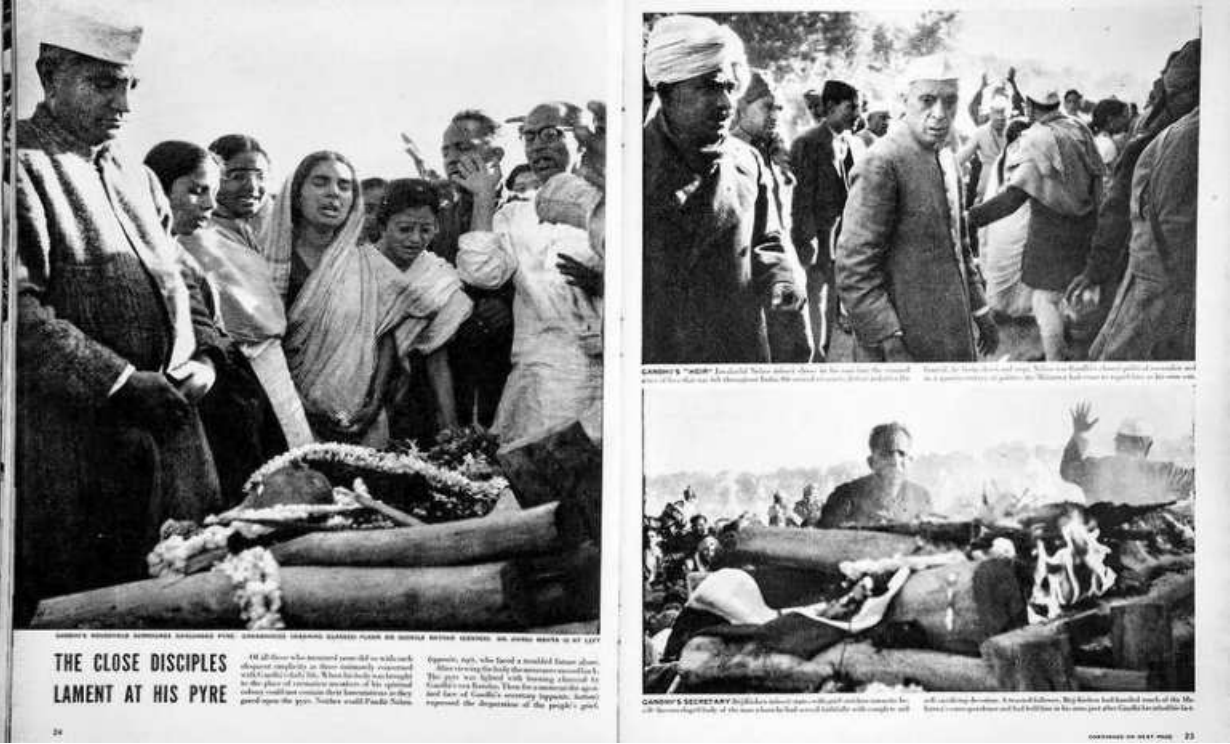


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Notes on a nation

From rare photographs of Gandhi's assassination to canvases of resistance — The Asian College of Journalism campus is now home to two unusual exhibits by SAHMAT



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On the walls of the Asian College of Journalism today is art that begs a second glance. At first, it may seem amateur-ish. But a closer look reveals layers — of resistance, activism and opinions that defy fear. Superimposed on unassuming hessian sheets are words and images of over 280 writers, artists and activists, each driving home the importance of unity and defiance. Take for instance, artist Pushpamala N's image of a writing slate that carries an ode to Rohith Vemula or photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew's photographs of 1970s

Bombay where late thespian Gurcharan Singh Channi performed his radical street theatre production *Disturbed Area*, that spoke of State violence and political conflict. Titled Hum Sab Sahmat, a pandemic project, the display pays tribute to SAHMAT's (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Art Trust) 1991 exhibition titled Images and Words where artists were encouraged to react to the political climate of the time, using any medium.

Frozen in memory
Curated by Ram Rahman and Saarthak Singh, an allied fascinating exhibit of photographs by Henri-Cartier Bresson, Margaret Bourke-White and Max Desfor titled The Light Has Gone Out, conceptualised last year, takes us through the moment and aftermath of Gandhi's assassination. It is a study on how photojournalism proves pivotal in shaping a nation's history. Ram who is also one of the founders of SAHMAT says, "Some of these images have never been seen before. The idea was to bring out this moment in our history, particularly at this point in time. It was also to remind people why Gandhi was killed and who killed him. The photographs show how personal stories and practices perfected the way the event got documented and reached the public booth."

Spread across the corridors and on wooden structures erected at the entrance, are messages that touch



More to come

Last weekend saw a captivating, and almost conversational performance by Gaana Vimala, who belted out many Ambedkar anthems written by herself, followed by two Tamil plays, *Idam* and *Mei* directed by artist and activist Pralayan. In tandem with the exhibits on display are:

On March 22, 5.30pm onwards:
Performance as Politics: Song and Dance by Nrithya Pillai, vocal and nattuvangam: Janani Ramesh; flute: Devaraj; mridangam: Ganesan, followed by Dafs Musical Concert by Muslim Fakirs.

On April 5, 5.30pm onwards:
Chennai Kalai Kuzhu will present King Mahendravarma Pallavan's *Mathavilasa Prahasanam*, dramatised and directed by Pralayan.

The displays are on till April 18; entry is free

upon political developments in the country, timed around the pandemic. Which is why artist Aban Raza, whose team curated the display, envisions it as a continuing project. "The first action was to segregate the reponse theme-wise. Some were talking about the

environment, some about the rise of communalism, while others were commenting on women's rights and the attack on universities and on the Delhi riots. It was a lot of working on one image with a text to make sense of the narrative."

The format, which is unaffected by the space of display, was designed with accessibility at its centre. The show has travelled to Shantiniketan, Bhopal, Ajmer, Jaipur, Himachal Pradesh and protest sites since its inception.

Aban says, "The idea was to talk about where India is heading, and perhaps not agreeing with the direction it's heading. It was a deliberate decision to involve writers, artists, photographers, journalists..." On each sheet is Hum Sab Sahmat written in multiple languages, signalling the multicultural nature of the opinions.

The picture of Gandhi's cremation shot from above is a fascinating one for many reasons, says Ram. "The story is that Cartier-Bresson used his small Lyca camera to move around and take some pictures and when he couldn't get up on the *machan* (platform), Max Desfor, offered to take some pictures on Cartier-Bresson's camera." Two weeks later, one of those pictures appeared in *LIFE* magazine with an attribution to Cartier-Bresson. "I found that fascinating, how do you then credit an image is the question." The picture of a young Gopalkrishna Gandhi by the funeral pyre was one of the other rare finds, a picture that Ram did not know the existence of.

He concludes, "A lot of these images bring alive a history that you have known. But a visual record of it somehow makes it more tangible and closer home."

Colliding canvases

The Chennai Biennial spotlights 50 Indian and Korean artists



A coming together Timing Game_Checkmate by Song Yujin. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the story of Jeju island and its relationship with the palm trees there, which are being affected by the changing climate and environs. It is hard to miss the myriad styles from the two countries, and yet how effortlessly all the art comes together.

Chennai Biennial 2024 is on at Lalit Kala Akademi, Greams Road, till March 26. Visit inkcentre.org/chennai_biennial2024.html for information.

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There is a sprawling field of yellow against a strip of blue sky — all on canvas in a painting titled Spring in Jeju by Son Ilsam at the Lalit Kala Akademi. Not too far away, a herd of deer stands majestically against a starry sky painted in hues of green and black in Magesh Ramachandran's A Placid Dream.

At Confluence, the fifth edition of the Chennai Biennial organised byInKo Centre and K-Art International Exchange Association, the works of 50 artists from South Korea and India are on display, chronicling a range of perceptions — Nature, people, and the world around them. While the Biennial usually showcases the works of contemporary Korean artists, this edition has contemporary artists from India displaying their work to mark the 50th year of Indo-Korean relations. After making a stop in Jeju and Busan, the exhibition is now in Chennai.

"The works on display are a homage to the artists' perceptions and how their empirical experiences are at the heart of their work. Twenty-five different artists were selected from across India, and their works are a reflection of the vibrancy of the country, and all the culture, tradition and heritage it brings alive," says Ashrafi S Bhagat, art historian and critic, who has curated the paintings of Indian artists. The Korean paintings have been curated by Kim Injun, an artist and critic, who says that the works of the Korean artists are filled with emotion and spirit that reflect their individuality.

"I am always in a romantic relationship with Nature, and this is my interpretation — a surrealist one. I have always been fascinated with nightscapes and I connect whatever I see to the human emotion," says Vidya Sundar, about her painting Autumn Serenade. Vasuki Lakshminarayanan's painting Togetherness In Harmony, has a gathering of women of all ages, and an elephant and a tiger set against hues of blue and green.

"We are treating Nature with ease, and are slowly forgetting to harmonise with it," says Song Yujin, whose work Timing Game Checkmate, tells



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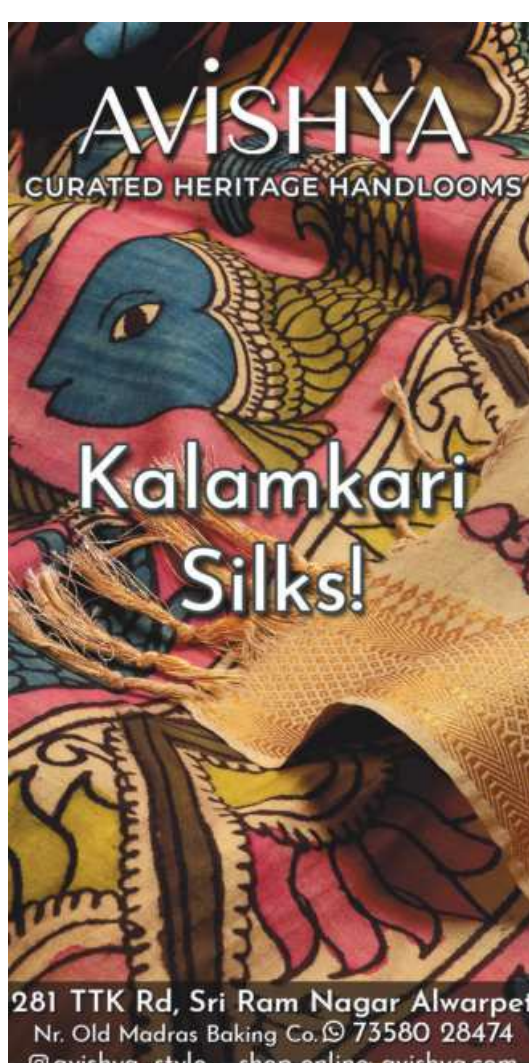
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▶ **Malayalam cinema's motley crew**
A still from *Manjummel Boys*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

All about the boys

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In one of the most pivotal moments in the sensational Malayalam survival thriller *Manjummel Boys*, a flashback cuts to a close-up of actor Soubin Shahir. The crowd in a packed screen in Chennai erupts cheerfully. Over the last decade, Soubin has established himself as a star performer in Malayalam. However, a sporadic Malayalam cinema viewer from Tamil Nadu might only know him as the guy who acted in *Kumbalangi Nights*, and last year's blockbuster *Romancham*. What makes a fan from Tamil Nadu welcome the actor like they welcome a Tamil superstar? The truth seems to be that Tamil audiences have found a star in *Manjummel Boys*, but it is not Soubin or Sreenath Bhasi; it is the film itself.

Almost a month since it was released in theatres, director Chidambaram's *Manjummel Boys* continues to have a dream run in Tamil Nadu. According to theatre sources, though films of Malayalam superstars Mammootty and Mohanlal have historically pulled reasonable crowds to select few theatres, the craze post 2015's blockbuster *Premam* has ushered a new wave of Malayalam cinema viewers in Tamil Nadu.

"Malayalam films still only play in multiplexes. And even if they are showcased on single screens, it's the Tamil-dubbed version," says

Beyond 'Kanmani Anbodu': A look into the success of Malayalam film Manjummel Boys in Tamil Nadu

Vishnu Kamal, owner of Kamala Cinemas, Chennai. Thanks to good word-of-mouth promotions, *Manjummel Boys* started screening even in single-screen theatres from the second week of its release. "*Manjummel Boys* is 'the' film that has saved theatres this March," adds Vishnu.

Filmmaker Halitha Shameem says "the kind of response the film received even in interior Tamil Nadu is surprising. I only thought it'd do well in cities, towns and the film festival circuit".

Halitha is right about the reality in southern Tamil Nadu. Srithier S, joint secretary of the Tamil Nadu Theatre Association, says he was shocked to see the response to from interior Tamil Nadu.

"A decade or so ago, when a Malayalam film released, only a handful of centres like Tiruchi, Chennai and Coimbatore used to play them. Never have I seen a

non-dubbed Malayalam film being played in places like Thiruvavur. Aranthangi and Jeyamkondan."

According to Srithier, *Manjummel Boys* has earned a share of ₹12 crore from Tamil Nadu. Produced by Soubin's Parava Films, the film is currently the highest-grossing Malayalam film of all time at ₹200 crores. What has made *Manjummel Boys* such a phenomenon in Tamil Nadu?

Looking back
Based on a real-life incident that transpired in 2005, *Manjummel Boys* tells the story of how a vacation to Kodaikanal becomes a nightmare for a bunch of friends from Kochi when one of them unexpectedly falls into a crevice in the Guna Caves, which got the name after Kamal Haasan's 1991 film *Gunaa*. If you follow social media closely, the most pivotal aspect that catapulted the film to fame would seem

obvious: the use of the famous 'Kanmani Anbodu' song from *Gunaa*.

Halitha, however, feels it would be shallow to just credit 'Kanmani Anbodu' for the success of the film. "*Manjummel Boys* is exceptional craft-wise," says Halitha.

Being a film about a bunch of boys choosing friendship over everything else also seems to have worked in *Manjummel Boys*' favour. Ruban, the owner of GK Cinemas, Chennai, says that much of the bookings in his theatre are bulk bookings. Historically, films like *Boys*, *Chennai 28*, and *Saroja* have worked in Tamil and the lack of such films in recent years might also be a reason, says Halitha.

What also seems to have worked in its favour is the long drought of good commercial films in Tamil to pull crowds to

the theatre. As Srithier points out, after Vijay's *Leo*, which was released in October last year, none of the Tamil films have managed to taste considerable success in theatres. "The theatre business is purely profit-motivated and so if any film that is cleared by the censor board would work for the audiences, we are ready to screen them," says Srithier.

Even after its release, there has not been a Tamil release that has come even close to challenging *Manjummel Boys* in its run. "If a big star film like Vijay's *The Greatest of All Time* or Rajinikanth's *Vettaiyan* or Ajith Kumar's *Vidaa Muyarchi* had been released alongside *Manjummel Boys*, the collections would have split; but that is not the case," says Vishnu.

Is the success of the film in Tamil Nadu a one-off situation, or can it do what *Premam* did? "I believe *Manjummel Boys* will introduce Malayalam cinema to a larger audiences just like *Premam* did," says Halitha. But Ruban and Sridhar disagree.

"2016's *Pulimurugan* was the biggest hit from Malayalam here, and only 2018 managed to surpass that. So, producers in Malayalam cannot expect the same kind of reception for all the films," says Ruban.

But, who could have expected a film like this would shatter all box office records? Perhaps, *manidhar unardhukolla idhu manidha kaadhala*.

The most pivotal aspect that catapulted the film to fame was the use of the famous 'Kanmani Anbodu' song from Gunaa



▶ **A cup of tea**
Kalli Paal-la Oru Tea, the anthology series produced by Pa Ranjith under his Neelam Social banner, is currently streaming on Neelam's YouTube channel. With segments directed by Abishaa, Sneha Belcin (late), Kanishka Chidambaram E, and Sivaranjani, the anthology tells four stories about the issues that affect women in this patriarchal society. With music scored by Revaa, the anthology has cinematography by Kiran Mayi and Vigneshwari and editing by Shanthini, Santhosh Krishnan and Sudhish Krishna.

Kalli Paal-la Oru Tea is presented by Neelam Social and Neelam Pengal Mattur Thirunar Cinema Mandram.



What's your problem?

Why actors Benedict Wong and Liam Cunningham signed up for this live-action adaptation of the acclaimed Chinese novel

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Even if you are not familiar with Liu Cixin's celebrated Chinese science fiction *The Three-Body Problem*, regarded as one of the genre's most successful novels of the previous two decades, the cast and crew of its Netflix live-action adaptation are sure to make you feel at home. Two of the three showrunners for the film are David Benioff and DB Weiss, who are best known for creating another novel-to-series adaptation; George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* which was made into the cult classic TV show *Game of Thrones*. In front of the camera, we have an ensemble cast that includes *GoT* fame Liam Cunningham and Benedict Wong known for playing



▶ **M for murder**
(Clockwise from left) Liam Cunningham as Wade, Benedict Wong as Da Shi. NETFLIX

Wong in the Marvel Cinematic Universe since *Doctor Strange* (2016).

In *GoT*, Cunningham played Davos Seaworth, a humble and loyal counsellor to Stannis Baratheon; a much-beloved character. In *3 Body Problem* though, the veteran – in what seems to be a diagonally opposite role – plays Thomas Wade, a charismatic leader of the world's most elite intelligence operation. "If you were in trouble, he would be a good man to have on your side. He is not someone who you would like to be your enemy," says Cunningham.

Unlike Cunningham's Thomas Wade, Wong seems to play a character who is quite analogous to his real-life persona. He is Da Shi an ex-intelligence officer turned no-nonsense detective who investigates mysterious deaths within the scientific community.

"Apart from the accent, similar to

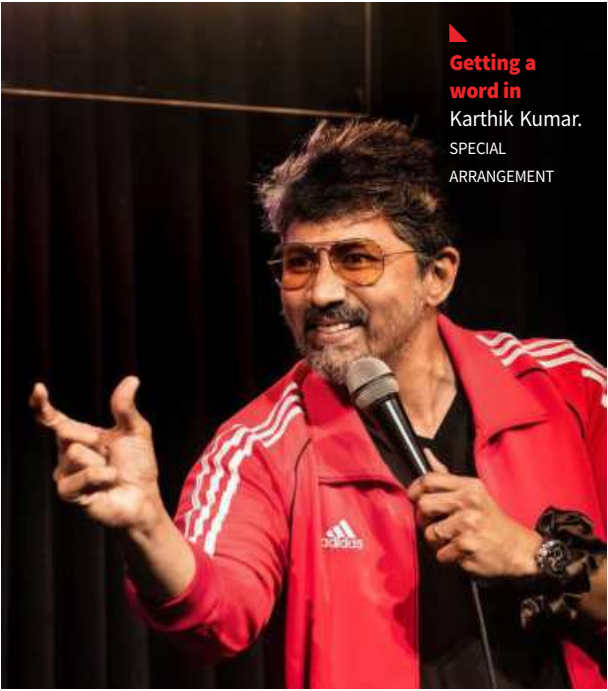
what Liam said, our characters will get the job done. He works in counter-terrorism, he's an operative but he is also quite a loner who has been fired and promoted as well. We can say he has failed upwards (*laughs*)," says Wong.

Cunningham is also working with talents like John Bradley and Sir Jonathan Pryce who were also his *GoT* co-stars. "A reunion with the boys" is how Cunningham addresses the question of collaborating once again with them. "I hadn't seen the script, I didn't know if they wanted me for a week, but I shut the other job down. Luckily enough, the part was Mr Wade and it was a fine decision."

3 Body Problem is set to premiere on Netflix on March 21

Male gaze

Why Karthik Kumar's stand-up special, *Aansplaining*, is releasing in theatres



▶ **Getting a word in**
Karthik Kumar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Don't be surprised to see comedian Karthik Kumar's face on posters at a cinema hall near you. He is not acting in a film, nor directing one.

His comedy special, *Aansplaining*, which premiered on stage in 2022, is now releasing on the big screen, making it possibly the first-ever Indian stand-up act to be screened in theatres. Apart from creating a new revenue stream for the comic, this move might also take it to a newer set of audiences who are largely filmgoers.

"The traditional route for stand-up comics is to perform their material live and then put it online, where it reaches a large number of people. But, a unique thing about a theatrical experience is that there are people around you; it is a community experience of the art," he says, "It creates an almost-live experience, like watching a Chennai Super Kings' cricket match at a movie theatre or a pub."

Aansplaining is not a typical comedy show. Through anecdotes, Karthik Kumar delves into the intricacies of gender stereotypes, patriarchy, and modern masculinity. Among other things, it makes you think and introspect on your relationships.

"A lot of people came in wanting only fun and laughter, but this show landed a few serious thoughts in a funny manner. I learnt to make as many thinking things fun, during the course of the show. I want to be able to make people re-look things

that they are doing and question them, but in a fun manner," he explains.

Karthik Kumar is still putting together material for his next stand-up, something that he promises will also make audiences think, but for now, he is also busy narrating a film script to prospective actors. It will be a story about fatherhood and what being a father means. "I really love directing," says Karthik, whose debut directorial feature *Super Senior Heroes* released in 2022, "I'm going into this

I want to be able to make people re-look things that they are doing and question them, but in a fun manner

KARTHIK KUMAR

knowing well that it takes a lot of time and effort and doesn't pay well. It's a thankless job, because it is probably the closest thing to parenting, in the arts."

That *Aansplaining* hits theatres in March augurs well for it, as this month is considered a dull month at the cinemas. "Niche screenings are bringing in audiences, as has been proved by re-releases of cult classics. This is alternative programming for cinema halls."

From the stand-up comedian's perspective, a theatrical screening could well be a "new playground," as Karthik Kumar puts it. "But the only playground is, and will always be, live."

Aansplaining is releasing on March 23 in select PVR INOX Cinemas in Chennai, Bengaluru and Coimbatore

