

weekend

wknd



ARE YOU LISTENING?

Singer-rapper King on his latest EP, and India's emerging regional hip-hop scene **P6**

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In search of celebrity tigers


India's tiger reserves, from Kaziranga to Kanha, have been experiencing a steady rise in footfall. As crowds of jeeps, badly behaved tourists and Bollywood-style wedding parties take over the parks, how do you go on an ethical safari?

Preeti Zachariah
preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

When Arrowhead, one of Ranthambore National Park's favourite tigers, died of cancer, the Internet exploded with tributes. However, wildlife biologist Sanjay Gubbi, whose work focusses on the conservation of large carnivores such as tigers and leopards, believes that selective sympathies towards animals that have attained celebrity status, often because of their popularity with tourists, may be somewhat misplaced.

He argues that tourists who enter protected parks, and have an immense social media following, push for policies that are completely unscientific. "People may go on a safari and take a picture of a tiger limping or a wounded elephant and put it on social media, putting pressure on the Government to treat it," says the wildlife conservationist, who firmly believes that we should not interfere in the lives of animals. "If we start treating animals like humans, and the natural mortality comes down, the population goes up artificially," he says.

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pick of the week



Italian escape

Every Saturday, Focaccia at Hyatt Regency, Chennai, will host a slow-dining brunch experience, Pranzo, inspired by the relaxed charm of Italy. It offers a spread of over 70 dishes, ranging from soups and

an artisan bread station to a salad bar and gourmet cold-cut selection. Expect a cheese station and live counters of warm seafood salad bar (with scallops, prawns and sand lobster), pizza, pasta and risotto. 11am onwards; call 9884369333



Knit a knot

If the meditative momentum of crocheting is your cathartic refuge, then visit Apparao's Secret Garden on August 5, 6 and 8. It is hosting a workshop, called Rooted in Thread, that explores the nuances, curation and grace of ornaments in crochet, from 3pm to 5pm. The event is part of a month-long celebration of five senses guided by the rhythm of Nature at Apparao Galleries, Chennai.

Fee: ₹2,006 (inclusive of all material).



Dramatic appeal

Can strange, light-hearted encounters leave an indelible mark on you? Maybe the answer lies in the play, *Water Lilies*, written by Gowri Ramnarayan, directed by Krishna Kumar S, and

produced and performed by Masquerade, Chennai. Watch it at Medai - The Stage, Alwarpet, Chennai, on August 8 (7.30pm) and August 9 (3pm).

The tickets for the show are priced at ₹399 and will be available on allevents.in



Cause it matters

Chennai-based NGO The Mellow Circle will host a fundraising event for its recent initiative, the Prathyasha Home for destitute women. Titled A Night at the Movies, the NGO's

40-member ensemble, Mellow Circle Choir, will collaborate with Goan band A26 this Sunday at 6.30pm at Chennai's Sir Mutha Venkata Subba Rao Concert Hall.

Donor passes are available from ₹550 on in.bookmyshow.com.



Sudhish Kamath

First things first – have you cried watching *Saiyaara* yet? If not, watch the video episode of this column on YouTube to find out if the hype is real. Meanwhile, two new shows are battling for your weekend-binge time: Netflix's bizarre mystery *Mandala Murders*, and Prime Video's funny, irreverent *Rangeen*, about a journalist who becomes a gigolo.

You already know which one you want to see first, but let's take a closer look.

In two minds

The body count goes up, with every episode, in both the shows... in entirely different contexts.

Mandala Murders is promising on paper – ritualistic killings tied to a secret cult where science meets superstition – but this YRF show, starring Vaani Kapoor, never quite becomes the gripping puzzle-box it wants to be. There's some world-building, mythology-spanning timelines and decent performances, but storytelling only finds rhythm in the final episodes. This isn't in the league of the best in the genre – *Lost*, or even *Dark*. It's more of a "could've been" than a "must-watch". A small step in the right direction for Indian genre storytelling, but not the leap it could've been.

On the other hand, *Rangeen*, is

Comedy of errors

Between a murder mystery, sex comedy, a stand-up by Vir Das and a Gen Z version of *Friends*, here's all that's making waves on screen

exactly what it promises – and more. A journalist finds out his wife cheated on him with a gigolo, and instead of moping, he moonlights as one himself. This silly plot point sets the tone for a sex comedy, which it is not just about sex (the verb), but also about sex (the noun), as it dives deep into masculinity, intimacy and modern relationships. Vineet Kumar Singh leads a fine ensemble that includes Rajshri Deshpande and Sheeba Chaddha. The show never gets vulgar, instead trusts the viewer to fill in the blanks around the sex. Refreshingly devoid of male gaze, the show explores female desire and agency, gender dynamics, and the comedy of midlife crisis. Think *Tribhuvan Mishra CA Topper*, but deeper, more honest, and refreshingly real. This one's TV gold.

Comic timing

Vir Das's new Netflix special, *Fool Volume*, finds him in full command of his voice – after literally losing it just six weeks before his global tour. Cutting between shows in London, Mumbai and New York, the special is part stand-up, part love letter to the art of finding humour in bad times. Vir isn't aiming for easy laughs – he wants you to think, and then laugh. And he doesn't let the audience off easy either. It's sharp, personal, and proof that he's no longer just telling jokes – he's telling stories with punchlines. Don't miss the catchy

(Clockwise from left) Stills from *Adults*; *Rangeen*; *Fool Volume*; and *Mandala Murders*. NETFLIX, PRIME VIDEO AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



"Life is vertical" roast of Gen Z and the big "drop" at the end.

Decoding Gen Z

Speaking of Gen Z, I'm loving the Gen Z variants and spin on comfort stories. My friend and fellow critic Raja Sen recommended *Adults* to me with a pitch that it's the Gen Z iteration of what *Friends* was for Gen X or what *How I Met Your Mother* was for millennials – the sitcom about a close circle of friends. What's different? No filters. No boundaries. No hard feelings. *Adults* mines uncomfortable and awkward situations for comedy, maintaining an "it's so real, but we are

also low-key exaggerating" vibe – often to remind you this is just a sitcom about all kinds of situationships. With just eight, 25-minute episodes, this is a quick, breezy binge of under four hours. Streaming on JioStar. Perfect for an evening with your closest friends – and situationships.

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



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(Clockwise from left) Singapore chicken rice; chendol; and cereal prawns from the special menu. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



events showcasing vibrant partnerships between India and Singapore through curated programmes centred on commerce, culture, and cuisine. Sadesh Babu, head chef, who has been with the restaurant for the last three years says they have picked dishes that are authentic and unique for the special menu. "Similar to the xiao long baos of the famous restaurant chain Din Tai Fung, we have soupy, flavourful baos

as well as dim sum. A satay platter – with both a Malaysian satay, which is less spicy, and a sambal satay, which has a bolder flavour as well as cereal prawns and cereal tofu – will be among the appetiser options," he says. The main course options include Nasi and Mee's Singapore chicken rice, which comes with sous vide chicken, chicken broth and bok choy. "This is our take on Singapore's unofficial national dish, the Hainanese chicken rice. It has been on the Nasi and Mee menu for years now and has always been a favourite," Sadesh says. There's also hawker stall favourite char kway teow, which is stir fried noodles with eggs and meat and some Malaysian representation through the nasi lemak. Among the new dishes for this menu are jumbo prawns in a creamy butter sauce.

"There are several similarities between Singaporean cuisine and food here in Tamil Nadu which diners seem to appreciate and enjoy. Our Singaporean dishes also have balachan or fermented shrimp or prawn paste in some dishes for the added flavour which makes a difference," Sadesh says.

For dessert, there is iced milo of course, but also ice kachang, a shaved ice dessert with jelly, sweet syrups and water chestnuts instead of red beans to appeal to the palate here.

The Singapore Edit at Nasi and Mee is on till August 10. For reservations, call the OMR branch at 7349776750 and the Nungambakkam branch at 7550067035.



The Banyan tree next to the Matrimandir; and John Mandeem (below). JOHN MANDEEN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Auroville in frame

The exhibition, *Capturing Life*, is a homage to photographer John Mandeem's time spent in India

Priyamedha Dutta
priyamedha.dutta@thehindu.co.in

Capturing Life, a selection of photos from Auroville across four decades (1980 to 2020) by the late photographer John Mandeem, will be featured at Centre d' Art, Auroville, till August 10.

John passed away on July 7 last year, and this exhibition – organised by Franz Fassbender, who is a member of Prisma, one of the Auroville units that specialises in publishing and distributing books – is a homage to John's time spent in India and spotlights Auroville through his lens. John, who grew up in northern California on the Pacific coast, North of Big Sur and Carmel, came to India at the age of 24, in 1968. A month later, he ended up in Pondicherry at the Aurobindo Ashram, where he was accepted by the Mother (Mirra Alfassa) as an ashramite.

"He was an artist whose medium of expression ended up being photography," says Sunaina Mandeem, his wife of 43 years. John acquired his first serious camera, a Pentax SLR in a rather unusual way. An Australian friend of his, who needed money to return to Australia from Auroville,

offered to sell him his camera.

"He was totally self-taught. He started reading a lot, he would get whatever photography magazines he could lay his hands on," recalls Sunaina.

John, through his reading, learned that processing black and white film with cold water yielded the best results. Lacking a refrigerator back then, he would cycle to an ice factory, buy a large block of ice, cycle home, and use the ice to cool the developing tanks for his film processing.

"He loved cameras, lenses and all accessories as much as the darkroom equipment and the process of developing and printing high quality photos. But most of all, he loved taking photos," says Sunaina.

He also taught Photography at the Last School in Aspiration township to many children in Auroville.

"There is a certain kind of beauty and poise in the photographs of John, which is something that people need to be reminded of through the exhibition," says Sunaina.

The exhibition will be featured at Centre d' Art, Auroville till August 10; Tuesday to Friday 2pm to 5.30pm and Saturday 10am to 12.30pm and 2pm to 5.30pm.



S Poorvaja
poorvaja.sundar@thehindu.co.in

Be it a comfort meal or complex flavours, Singaporean cuisine has much to pick from. When Nasi and Mee opened its first branch in Chennai in 2017, the restaurant was among the earliest in the city to have many Singaporean dishes on the menu, which included dishes from Malaysia, Japan and

Indonesia as well.

It is only befitting that the restaurant will now celebrate Singapore with The Singapore Edit, a special menu. As part of Singa60, Nasi and Mee in Nungambakkam and OMR will have a special à la carte menu of both old favourites from their menu and new dishes till August 10.

Organised by Hindu Tamil Thisai in collaboration with The Hindu and Business Line, Singa60 offers a rich tapestry of

A comet for ramen

Homegrown brand Comet and Bengaluru's Naru Noodle Bar drop a quirky sneaker collaboration that you didn't see coming

Priyadarshini Paitandy
priyadarshini.p@thehindu.co.in

Inoisily tear open my Naru ramen noodle soup packet and a pair of sneakers tumbles out. These sneakers have – hold your breath – chopsticks sticking out of them, not by accident but by design. This is the result of a collaboration between homegrown sneaker brand Comet and Naru Noodle Bar, Bengaluru. While a footwear label and restaurant collab is unusual, it is not unheard of. In the past we have seen Burger King X Fila, (Dubai-based Pakistani restaurant) Ravi X Adidas, KOIO X Dominique Ansel.

But this is, perhaps, the first time, two young Indian brands



are creating something like this.

The Comet X Naru sneaker comprises 400 pairs that will drop on August 2 at 11 am at Comet's store in Indiranagar, Bengaluru. Following which, a few pieces will drop on the website on August 3 at 6 pm. "This is a Bengaluru first community drop. Both are Bengaluru brands. We've got lots

of love from them and they have given us a platform to thrive on," says Utkarsh Gupta – co-founder of Comet, adding that Comet's first collab was with artist Santanu Hazarika.

Naru has joined forces before, with chefs, restaurants, and local artists for T-shirts. "But this is the first time we are collaborating with a sneaker brand," says Kavan

Kuttappa, chef and founder of Naru Noodle Bar. After a meal at Naru, Utkarsh was visibly impressed with the food, attention to detail, and how passionate Kavan was. That got him thinking. "And after six months of planning, design and samples, we are here," adds Kavan.

Kavan was also part of the design process. The shoe is black to match Naru's uniform. Then there is the winding Naru logo which resembles noodles and has the word Na in Kannada and the rest in Japanese, which is embroidered on the shoe.

"We have also added minor elements at the back like a monkey on the left, and the noodle he is slurping on stretching to the right and ending in a noodle bowl," explains Utkarsh. It is a black on black stitch and subtle. There are also some hidden elements. Kavan suggested putting Urumaki and Ajimata, inspired by their kitchen, beneath the heel tabs.

The final surprise is a pair of detachable chopsticks. Utkarsh says, "As a founder I am looking for inspiration. And this is cool, unique, fun!"

The Comet X Naru sneakers are priced at ₹5,999.



Sound of music

Have you ever sung your heart out, but with a group of strangers? After Goa, Delhi and Bengaluru, The Stranger's Choir, a pop-up choir founded by Medha Sahi, is coming to Chennai in August and brings together a large group of people who have never sung before, and might not ever sing together again. You do not need to have any music experience, and no auditions are required to join. All one needs is a love for music and harmony. At Apparao Galleries, Nungambakkam on August 10 from 11am onwards. ₹1,250 per person for a three-hour event. For registrations, log onto registerforthe strangerschoir@blogspot.com



(Above) The Comet X Naru sneaker; (left) Kavan Kuttappa. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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(Clockwise from below) Ensuring that education is a vital aspect of wildlife tourism; tigers in the wild; and Arjun Manjunath. ARJUN MANJUNATH AND AP



CONTINUED FROM
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According to conservationists, there are other aspects of tiger tourism that need to be addressed including the impact of risky tourist behaviour (being noisy, getting off vehicles during safaris or misusing mobile phones) and the creation of infrastructure that exceeds the carrying capacity of these forests. “I am not against tourism,” says Dharmendra Khandal, executive director of Tiger Watch, a leading wildlife conservation NGO working in Ranthambore. “But the way it is going on, it needs some kind of correction.”

Tiger tourism rising
India has 58 protected areas designated as tiger reserves, established under Project Tiger, the tiger conservation programme launched by the Indian Government in 1973. According to the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) website, ecotourism in these reserves is supposed to emphasise low-impact activities, such as guided Nature walks and safari tours, promoting a deeper understanding of the delicate ecosystems that support these magnificent big cats. “Strict regulations are in place to ensure minimal disruption to the natural habitats, safeguarding the vulnerable tiger population.”
Tourist footfall in these reserves has been steadily increasing in recent years. The Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, for instance, has already welcomed over 7 lakh visitors this year, while the Kanha Tiger Reserve has had 2.58 lakh so far, 16,000 more than the previous year, claims these parks’ websites.



In the view of Chandreyi Bandyopadhyay, Nagpur-based wildlife writer and enthusiast, this exponential rise in tiger tourism has been putting things out of balance. Wildlife tourism, once specific to hobbyists and real enthusiasts, is now driven by increased accessibility and popularity of individual tigers, she says. Since COVID, more and more people are opting to holiday in forests, obsessing about seeing tigers in the wild, “because sightings increased and social media came in”.
This tourist frenzy – to sight a tiger and get Instagram-worthy photographs – often leads to a blatant flouting of the safari guidelines laid down by the NTCA, which include regulations on vehicular movement and maintaining a safe distance from the animal. As T Shatru, a Chennai-based wildlife enthusiast and photographer, rather



In search of celebrity tigers

candidly puts it, “At the end of the day, tourists want to see a tiger, and they can be idiots.” Recalling his last encounter with Chota Matka aka T-126, one of the best-known tigers of Maharashtra’s Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, he says, “There were nearly 30 jeeps, blocking the road, not allowing him to walk. And everyone was honking, yelling and trying to get as close as possible.”
While parks are doing their best to minimise poor behaviour – mobile phones are banned inside reserves like Pench and Tadoba Tiger Reserves during safaris, for instance – Chandreyi feels that heftier penalties on tourists who flout safari protocols may be necessary. “I think, like for flying, people who disregard the rules of the forest despite being warned by guides must be blacklisted.”
This tiger obsession among tourists is also emblematic of a larger problem with the country’s conservation narrative. “In many ways, it has been both a blessing and a blind spot for conservation in India,” says naturalist Arjun Manjunath, lead trainer and wildlife advisor at the Bamboo Forest Nature Conservancy, located in

Gothangaon, Maharashtra. While he is aware of the animal’s charisma and ability to draw people to it, he believes that “too much focus on the tiger leads to a narrow set of experiences, and you end up neglecting the larger ecosystem.”
Striking a balance
As more and more tourists flock to these reserves, hoping to sight a big cat, another major issue crops up: unmitigated development within and around tiger reserves. While the NTCA has laid out rules for tourism in tiger reserves, stating that it needs to be “contemplated as ecotourism... ecologically sustainable Nature tourism,” this does not always hold true. “There are very few examples of real ecotourism in this country,” believes Sanjay. In his opinion, the larger impact of infrastructure creation in these parks to support tourism is a major cause for concern. “The Corbett Tiger Reserve is now ensconced all around with tourist infrastructure, cutting off tiger corridors, organising Bollywood-style wedding parties that create huge noise pollution in addition to the other



stress on resources, etc.”
Ranthambore is another reserve that “is going in a very wrong direction,” feels Dharmendra. “They are developing wedding hotels in Ranthambore, because this is now a destination wedding area,” he says.
Drawing the line between conservation and sustainable development is always a challenge, believes L Krishnamoorthy, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Madhya Pradesh. “Conservation is a complex thing, where everyone’s support is needed. We have to assume that it is a multifarious activity where many people are involved.” However, he firmly believes that ecotourism, when done correctly, is an integral

part of conservation. “Ecotourism is important for creating awareness about wildlife, creating job opportunities for local communities and also to generate resources that can go towards park management initiatives,” he says.
Managing conflict
Another cause for concern is that wildlife tourism could exacerbate the already serious issue of human-animal conflicts in and around tiger reserves. While local communities have traditionally coexisted with wildlife for centuries, the situation is changing rapidly. Forest cover is shrinking even as the human population and also the tiger population, in some areas, are increasing. Besides, many people living within the notified core areas of the tiger reserves have been and continue to be relocated, often against their will. The tourism juggernaut, too, does not help. “They (locals) bear the cost of conservation, while the excitement of conservation is enjoyed by a rich tourist, the social influencer or the photographer. If such people can also become promoters of conservation, then their endeavours will have meaning and benefit wildlife,” says Sanjay.
Prioritising local communities for employment activities, something that is already happening in Madhya Pradesh, as Krishnamoorthy points out, could help mitigate the conflict. “Whether it is the guide, protection watcher, driver or gypsy owner, almost everybody is from the local community. Wherever the tourism zones are joining villages, community tolerance is high because they know they are getting livelihood opportunities and visibility because of the tiger.”
Tourism, centred around the commodification of tiger sightings, even when branded as ecotourism, however, is clearly not enough. Instead, it may be necessary to reassess our priorities regarding the role of tourism in conservation itself, as Sanjay implies. “The larger argument has been that since tourism brings in revenue, we need to have it to conserve these areas. But I feel that conservation is like education and health; you can’t expect to generate revenue out of it,” he says, adding that one needs to see wildlife tourism as an educational tool, not an economic model. “Keep it at a minimal carrying capacity and accessible to the public. You shouldn’t make tourism expensive and out of reach of the common people”.



Priyadarshini Paitandy
Priyadarshini.p@thehindu.co.in

Within the elegant confines of the Oberoi’s ballroom (Delhi), under the soft glow of lights and the scent of fresh mogra, 95 looks – rich with chikankari, resham, kasheedakari, shaded threadwork, jaali, and zardozi – narrate the story of artisanal techniques. Tarun Tahiliani’s collection Quintessence, showcased as part of India Couture Week, is a quiet celebration of craft – textile, form, and finish.
Strains of the piano, saxophone, cello, and drums fill the hall as models meander across the different seating areas. The music segues into jazz, classical, Indian and soft rock even, in a way that is symbolic of the diverse moods of today’s bride.
The silhouettes – in tulle, lace, satin, organza, and bandhini – include lehengas, panelled kalidars, concept saris, layered jackets, and structured corsets, created keeping in mind



When threads speak

Tarun Tahiliani’s collection at India Couture Week demonstrates how he thinks in English, and dreams in chikankari

movement, grace, and lightness. The colour palette starts off mellow with subtle shades of ivory, beige and soft gold and graduates to misty rose, blush, almond, pinks and then to reds.
For this presentation, the designer chose to ditch the usual runway and do a salon-style

viewing. The salon is a kind of runway – just more intimate, says Tarun. “Couture, by nature, is incredibly detailed. Even I’m often stunned when I see how many thousands of hours go into a single garment,” he says. To honour this craftsmanship, he wanted people to experience the pieces up close,

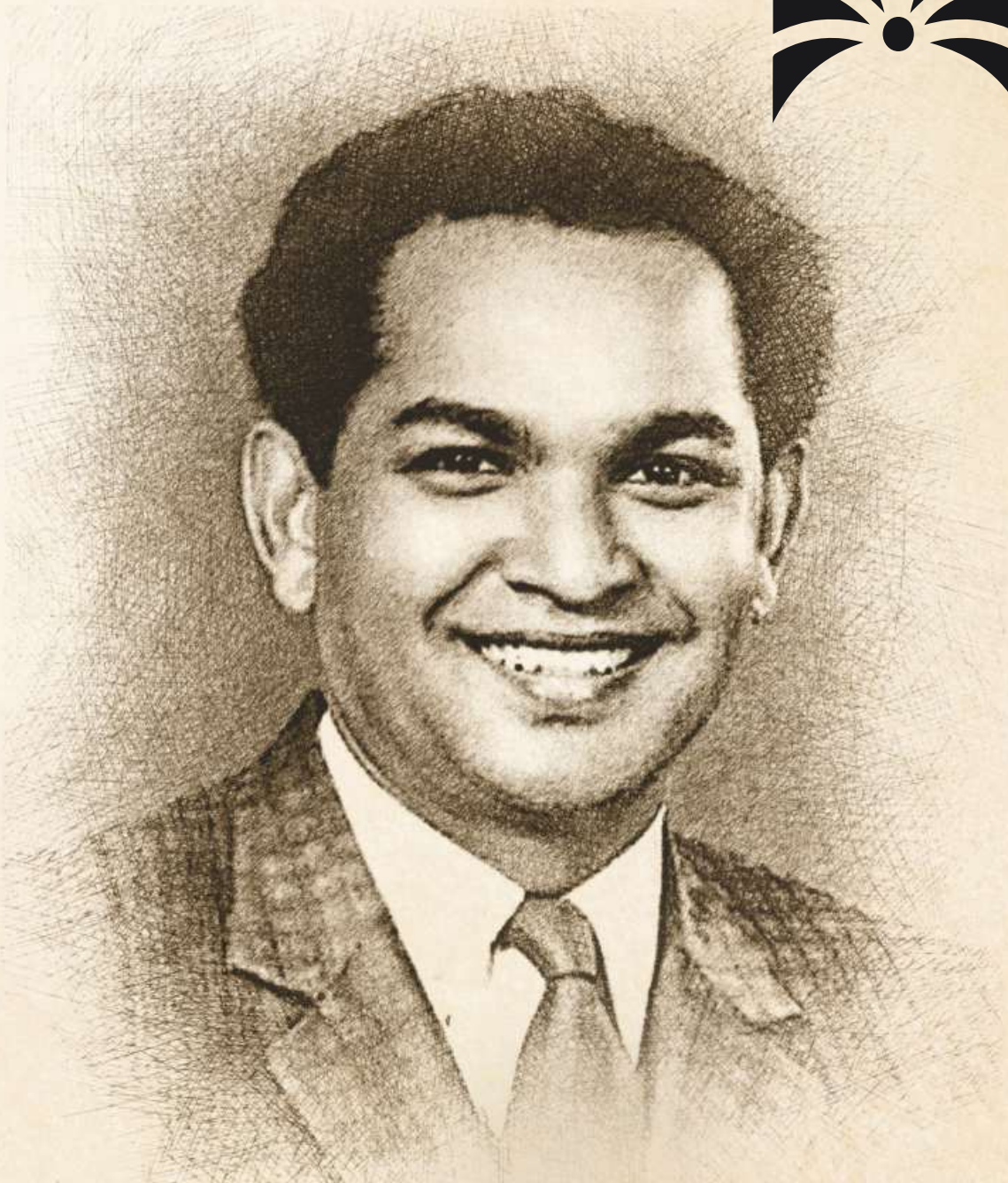
(Clockwise from far left) Tarun Tahiliani; an outfit designed by him; models on the ICW runway; and a creation by Tarun. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



like the original Parisian couture salons where models walked between seated guests. “Back then, it was about silhouettes. For us, it’s about silhouette and the mastery of embroidery – something I

believe no one in the world does quite like India. With the subdued colour palette in Quintessence, you need to get close to truly see the finesse,” explains Tarun. The garments teem with delicate florals, abstract foliage, and reimagined Mughal motifs.
This collection, in some way, is a reflection of who Tarun is – “deeply Indian, constantly evolving, thinking in English, dreaming in chikankari”.
Quintessence is light and devoid of excesses. It takes a step back from heavy bridal wear. It’s an evolution, not a rejection of tradition, Tarun clarifies. Brides today are choosing individuality over convention. They want to own who they are on their big day, not be weighed down by what they are “supposed” to wear. The market is shifting too and this stems from women becoming more emancipated, educated, and expressive. They want wedding clothes that reflect them, not just societal expectation, he says.
The wedding market now has a lot of Gen Z brides. This generation

is known to be starkly different from the previous generations of millennials, Gen X, etc. Does the designer take a different approach while designing for them?
“I don’t design for generations – I design for now. And “now” is fluid,” says Tarun, adding, “Gen Z brides are confident, self-aware, and experimental, but that doesn’t mean we discard tradition. Rather, we reinterpret it – like a farshi skirt reimagined as a pleated wrap or chikankari on modern corsetry.” He approaches it by understanding the intention of the bride/groom. Whether someone is seeking minimalism or maximalism, Tarun offers tools to express that identity through cut, fabric, and detail. “The only rule is authenticity,” he adds.
For this show, Tarun once again chose to disperse with the concept of a celebrity showstopper. This goes with his firm belief that clothes must be the showstopper. He says, “I’ve said it time and again – craft, karigar, construction: that’s the real star. Let the work speak.”



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தமிழ் முருகன்

Tamil

Vadivelu,
Fahadh Faasil
steal the show



Srinivasa Ramanujam
srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

What do we like most about Vadivelu? If you said his comical expressions and reactions, you'd be mostly right. From *Friends to Vetrikodi Kattu*, Vadivelu's body language and facial expressions when delivering funny lines have filled awkward silences in many drawing rooms as they play out on television.

In *Maareesan*, his latest feature, written by V Krishna Moorthy and directed by Sudheesh Sankar, Vadivelu sheds all those strengths. Here, he is Velayudham, an Alzheimer's patient who has largely forgotten his past. In his introduction sequence, he is chained and calling out to someone whom he thinks is his son.

Only, he is not. The stranger is Dhayalan (Fahadh Faasil), a goofy small-time thief who has broken in. In his mind, this is a quick job – a man tied to a chain and an empty house. But there's money... if only he spent more time with this man short of memory.

The two decide to go on a road trip, and that changes things drastically. While the first half is a slow burn, reminiscent of many Malayalam films for its pace and sweet nothing-ness, an arresting interval block sets things up nicely for a thriller.

The twists are many, but they all arrive slowly. Do we really know someone fully? *Maareesan* explores this aspect in good measure by taking up a protagonist who has dementia. That itself is a triumph – because forgetfulness is a big ordeal. What is life without memories, the lead character asks nonchalantly, and you feel sympathetic to his state.

And what is it about FaFa, as Fahadh Faasil is popularly called? How do all these mischievous shades of grey in the universe attract this actor? Slightly taking off from his performance in his Malayalam film *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum*, a film that kickstarts with him swallowing a necklace that he stole, Fahadh once again aces the goofy part in *Maareesan*, using his shrug-off mannerisms to good effect. His camaraderie with Vadivelu is heartfelt.

When the first promo material of *Maareesan* came out, I wondered if it would be another *Meiyazhagan*, that is, a film in which two people get to know each other better. *Maareesan* has that aspect going for it in the first half, but in far less impactful measure. The atmosphere-building is leisurely done. We keep getting scene after scene with very little happening. Sometimes I wish Vadivelu would just break into an impromptu comedy sequence, but he stays strictly in character, as he must.

A flashback could have been trimmed, and characters other than the leads are less explored. But when it is a film about forgetfulness that cheekily weaves in a popular Ilayaraaja number – the lyrics of which go “*Nethu oruthara paarthom...paarthu oruthara maranthom*” – it deserves a look in.

Maareesan is currently running in theatres



Hilarious problematic entertainer

Thalaivan Thalaivi tries to be a hilarious family entertainer about a mismatched relationship, and a marriage story that makes a serious statement about relationships

Tamil

Bhuvanesh Chandar
bhuvanesh.chandar@thehindu.co.in

After watching *Thalaivan Thalaivi*, you might ponder over a lot of things – from how tiffs in families can arise out of petty reasons and how gender dynamics play out in Indian families, to whether the film's radical stance on divorce is a bit skewed. But before you get into all that, you will be tempted to do this – hit a south Indian non-veg joint for some hot steaming parottas and chicken salna (you win if you order the alluring Paal Parotta that Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menen devour in the film).

Somehow, spice is the term that comes to mind when thinking of Pandiraj's latest flick ('masala' feels too strong these days). *Thalaivan Thalaivi*, like a spicy Madurai fare, has all the flavours you would find in a crowd-pleasing entertainer. At its bare bones, it may not tell a novel story – about a feisty couple whose marital life turns sour, from their families and friends adding unnecessary spice to a match already at odds. But the film truly comes into its own in the first half, thanks to how audaciously Pandiraj mixes the several elements we've come to associate with such family entertainers.

Assembled with intent and purpose, the film reminds us that the template can still work – and that the elusive monster called patriarchy will rear its head in a world built to host it.

We begin with Perarasi a.k.a Arasi (Nithya Menen ably shoulders the part) and her family taking her infant daughter to perform the ceremonial tonsure at their family deity's shrine. But while the barber is halfway through the shave, Perarasi's estranged husband, Aagasa Veeran (a fantastic Vijay Sethupathi), interrupts and sends him flying, infuriated that the ceremony is taking place without his notice. The two families collide, there are brawls, slaps and taunts, and the chaos attracts the attention of a local thief (Yogi Babu) and a family (Kaali Venkat and co.) visiting the temple for their son's birthday.

Why are the two families so enraged at each other? Why did Arasi walk out of her married home, leaving a husband she so dearly loved? What is, after all, the issue

Thalaivan
Thalaivi

Director: Pandiraj

Cast: Vijay Sethupathi, Nithya Menen, Yogi Babu, Chemban Vinod

Storyline: As a couple heads for divorce, we recount their lives to see where the trouble really lies

between Veeran and his brother-in-law (RK Suresh)? How much parotta does Veeran, a parotta master at the family-owned hotel, eat when he's stressed?

A child with half-tonsured head, a boy carrying his birthday cake, and a thief shaken away from his thieving pursuit, wait patiently with the audience as a hilariously chaotic story unravels the answers to these questions. Firstly, one thing is made clear right from the beginning – these are anything but 'normal' families, if there's ever been one. A joke calls Veeran a 'Kirukku Payan' (crazy fellow), and you are left in splits because these are truly mad, mad people. Characters, especially the central couple, get so eccentric that they border on absurdity, and at times, even come across a tad too annoying.

At the hands of less able performers, this shtick wouldn't stick, but Vijay and Nithya somehow sell the charm, romance and the eccentricities of their characters, and the easy chemistry on screen allows us to forgive when it gets slightly repetitively theatrical. Every five minutes, we have them bickering at each other, with Veeran screaming pointlessly, only for Arasi to silence him without breaking a sweat. This becomes a pattern, and you love how self-aware the film is about Veeran's helplessness.

Much of the first half sails quite smoothly – except for a few problematic dialogues, which we will come to in a bit – as we witness how Arasi, after marrying Veeran, gets distraught at how her in-laws treat her. An educated young woman who fell in love with a man she believed to be caring, Arasi questions whether she was married to work as an unpaid labourer at their hotel. The life of comfort that she was promised, where she would truly get to be an 'arasi', is compromised, and so she returns to her parental home. Veeran then follow her home, pacifies her and brings her back. This becomes a vicious cycle, and it's hilarious how, after a point, these tiffs are triggered by ego brushes, one more nonsensical than the other.

Now, while it's fine to show these inconsequential reasons as such, you expect the trigger for the bigger, central tiff that eventually led to divorce to be strong. This is where the film begins to lose its footing, as the reasoning isn't convincing enough. Post the intermission, the film moves quite erratically till the climax. The

stretch, from when Veeran's enemies leave to confront him at the temple to when the two go on a religious pilgrimage to get back together, is haphazardly written. Up until this point, humour lent a strong hand, especially thanks to Yogi Babu, but when the jokes dwindle as well, the middle stretch gets quite tedious to sit through.

The climax we get to also becomes the final entry in a series of problematic takes in the film, like a jibe about who the 'wife in the relationship' is when Arasi slaps Veeran. Yes, domestic violence remains deeply normalised in such milieus, but it's ironic to see it in a film that speaks against egotistical clashes. A film that places its faith in sentimentality to heal broken hearts might have done well to show that same compassion to the rest of its characters.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of *Thalaivan Thalaivi* is the anti-divorce stance that it propagates. A major concern that might arise from Pandiraj's preachy dialogues is that the film could be perceived as one that supports patriarchal notions surrounding divorce that tend to imprison women in relationships, when in fact, it could have served as a case study on how divorce isn't always the answer. There was value in being a film that only shows how egos cloud judgements, and that love deserves a second chance (and that parottas can be comfort foods).

After all, this film had already undone the scope for any moral pursuits, as it had just shown how ill-fitted these two people are in the relationship. On one hand, the film overblows a fractured dynamic for the gags, and on the other, it wishes to make a serious statement on relationships. Regardless of who to blame or what had transpired between the two, there's incompatibility, and the film never provides answers to how the underlying issue is resolved – do they figure out the role Arasi plays in the family? Do the mothers understand the perils of their actions? We never know, and so the film turns reductive in its moral lessons.

Perhaps the moral we could take from this whole exercise is that couples can decide for themselves – you don't need relatives, friends, or filmmakers to tell you what is right or wrong.

Thalaivan Thalaivi is currently running in theatres



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This ambitious misfire relies heavily on Pawan Kalyan's star power

Telugu

Sangeetha Devi Dundoo
sangeethadevi.k@thehindu.co.in

Hari Hara Veera Mallu - Part 1: *Sword Vs Spirit*, with the tagline 'battle for dharma', was in the making for over five years. The delay was partly due to the pandemic, and later, the lead actor Pawan Kalyan taking on his role as Deputy Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. The film, originally directed by Krish Jagarlamudi, changed hands midway, with A M Jyothi Krishna stepping in to see it through. The shift is visible on screen.

This period drama, blending fact and fiction, often loses its way and feels stretched.

Pawan Kalyan plays Veera Mallu, a rebel who steals from the rich and helps the poor. The film takes creative liberties to build a fictional story, leaning into the actor's public image and his alignment with *sanatana dharma*.



Kalyan refers to himself as a *jana sevakudu*, a nod to his political outfit, the Jana Sena Party. On screen, he plays the familiar son-of-the-soil figure.

As the story unfolds, this persona is further underlined. Veera Mallu is sent to retrieve the Kohinoor from Aurangzeb's (Bobby Deol) peacock throne. His mission is tied to protecting Hindus, who are shown

being forced to pay the jizya tax to practise their faith. To an extent, the film avoids turning this into a polarised 'us versus them' narrative. Two of Veera Mallu's trusted aides are Muslims. The villain here is clearly Aurangzeb. While this approach might echo current political sentiments, the film does not offer the emotional depth to keep us truly engaged.

The narrative begins in 1650 AD at the Kolluru mines near the Krishna river. Starving labourers stumble upon precious stones, but go hungry, jostling for favour among their superiors. When a young miner asks if their lives have any worth, the response lays bare the hierarchy – local landlords, then the Qutb Shahis, and finally the Mughals.

Veera Mallu's entry is staged in a manner reminiscent of *Baahubali*. But it is a weak imitation.

The first half drags along, saved occasionally by M M Keeravani's music. While the story feels patchy, a couple of action scenes show Veera Mallu's knack for stealing diamonds and standing up for the oppressed.

Veera Mallu is styled like a homegrown superhero – staring down wild animals and later doling out advice on man-animal conflict. But without sharp writing or convincing visual effects, it does not land.

A host of actors pass through with little impact, their roles underwritten. Sathyaraj, Nasser, and Kabir Duhan Singh leave brief impressions. Bobby Deol looks

disengaged as Aurangzeb. Nidhhi Agerwal as Panchami has a strong screen presence and her role offers a small twist. The late Kota Srinivasa Rao appears in a brief role – his final film.

Despite being set in the 17th century, Kalyan enters the frame much like he does in his modern films. His costumes steer clear of period styling, possibly to reflect his outlaw status, but he still stands apart, neither noble nor peasant.

Hari Hara Veera
Mallu: Part 1

Direction: Jyothi Krishna and Krish Jagarlamudi

Cast: Pawan Kalyan, Nidhhi Agerwal, Bobby Deol, Sathyaraj

Story: An outlaw, Veera Mallu, is tasked with retrieving the Kohinoor from the Mughals. He has other plans.

While he has screen presence, that alone cannot rescue a film that loses its way.

As the film progresses, the storytelling and visuals unravel further. The VFX are distracting, even *Adipurush* looks polished by comparison. The avalanche is marred by fake-looking rocks, and the less said about the tornado, the better. The Charminar set lacks authenticity, and most others fail to impress or feel lived-in.

The final hour is centred on the battle for dharma. This portion leans heavily on religious sentiment, in an attempt to offset the wavering narrative. The closing moments are reminiscent of SS Rajamouli's *RRR*. It is hard to elaborate without giving too much away, but the intended high point lacks both conviction and emotional weight.

If there is a second part, it will need far sharper writing and more assured filmmaking.

Hari Hara Veera Mallu - Part 1: *Sword Vs Spirit* is currently running in theatres

An emotional misfire

Sarzameen

Director: Kayoze Irani

Cast: Prithviraj Sukumaran, Kajol, Ibrahim Ali Khan, KC Shankar

Storyline: An army officer out to eliminate militancy in the Kashmir valley finds himself at a vortex where his principles are put to the test



Hindi

Anuj Kumar

anuj.kumar@thehindu.co.in

Sulking sons, duty-bound fathers, and suffering mothers make for engaging Hindi cinema. This week, emerging director Kayoze Irani revisits familiar daddy issues with mixed results. *Sarzameen*'s basic premise reminds me of Ramesh Sippy's *Shakti*, where circumstances force a father in uniform (Prithviraj Sukumaran) to choose between his son (Ibrahim Ali Khan) and his duty.

Set in the picturesque political cauldron of Kashmir, the stakes get higher here when the neglected son stutters his way into the enemy camp led by dreaded militant Kabil (KC Shankar). As expected, the mother (Kajol) tries to be the connecting link, but a past that needs to be addressed remains unhealed, leaving wounds unresolved.

After preparing the audience for a realistic terrain, Irani takes mainstream leaps of faith, landing

in no man's land. The film attempts to explore parenthood, patriotism, and militancy, but fails to effectively integrate the personal within complex socio-political dynamics, instead resorting to tropes that have become clichéd due to overuse.

It seems the makers set out to map the complexity of militancy in the Kashmir valley through a personal story, but ended up making a safe product to populate the OTT shelf. Hence, the drama doesn't leap at you, the conflict doesn't engage you enough, the suspension of disbelief doesn't hold, and the layers in the story don't add up to create an emotional swell.

Prithviraj and Kajol form an interesting screen pair. However, despite their immense talent, their chemistry doesn't click, and the melodrama falls short. Shankar is no Amrish Puri to generate the dread of revenge. For a script that demands a deep emotional commitment, Ibrahim Ali Khan, like the film, is undercooked.

Sarzameen is currently streaming on Hotstar

Snippets



Nolan faces backlash for filming The Odyssey in occupied Western Sahara

Christopher Nolan's upcoming historical epic *The Odyssey* is under scrutiny following reports that the production filmed part of the movie in Dakhla, a city located in western Sahara — a territory 70% occupied by Morocco. The region remains classified by the United Nations as “non-self-governing,” and has long been the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco and the indigenous Sahrawi people. Nolan, who spent four days filming in Dakhla, has been criticised by human rights groups and cultural advocates for inadvertently aligning with Morocco's ongoing control of the region.

The Odyssey is slated for a global release on July 17, 2026.



Naseeruddin Shah transforms into JRD for Made in India – A Titan Story

On the occasion of J R D Tata's 121st birth anniversary, Amazon MX Player and Almighty Motion Picture unveiled the first look of *Made in India – A Titan Story*, with veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah portraying the industrialist. The upcoming biographical series highlights the legacy of Tata, whose leadership helped shape modern India's industrial landscape.

Directed by Robby Grewal and written by Karan Vyas, the six-part series explores the formation of Titan — one of India's most iconic consumer brands. Alongside Shah, the show features Jim Sarbh as Xerxes Desai, the founding managing director of Titan.



First-look teaser of Breaking Bad creator's sci-fi series out

Apple on July 25 unveiled a first-look teaser of its upcoming sci-fi series *Pluribus*, which is *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan's return to television. Starring Rhea Seehorn, the nine-episode series premieres with its first two episodes on Apple TV+ on November 5, followed by new episodes every Friday.

In the extremely unsettling 30-second first-look teaser, we see a woman wearing pink scrubs lick donuts before placing them in a box that reads 'Help yourself.' Meanwhile, the first-look image of Seehorn from the series features the actor's character, on a phone call, looking ahead with a puzzled expression.



First family's stratospheric ride

With heart, humour, and a baby who reads Darwin, this retro-futuristic Marvel adventure is tender and thrilling

English

Mini Anthikad Chhibber

mini.chhibber@thehindu.co.in

WandaVision's Matt Shakman does retro so elegantly; not as a museum piece but a living, breathing world, no matter how unreal. And so it is with *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, the second reboot of MCU's Fantastic Four movies based on Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comic books.

Set in 1960, the film revels in its 2001: *A Space Odyssey* aesthetic. It was a conscious choice by Shakman, who wanted the film to look like Stanley Kubrick had made it in 1965. So there are practical sets and props, fashions, colours and sequences shot using a 16mm film camera.

The ensemble cast sends the film's likeability index soaring. Pedro Pascal as Reed Richards and Vanessa Kirby as Sue Storm light up the screen with their crackling chemistry, with Ebon

The Fantastic Four: First Steps

Director: Matt Shakman

Cast: Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Joseph Quinn, Julia Garner, Sarah Niles, Mark Gatiss, Natasha Lyonne, Paul Walter Hauser, Ralph Ineson

Storyline: With earth as the next dish on a planet-eating cosmic being's menu, it is time for the Fantastic Four to swing into action

Moss-Bachrach as Ben Grimm, Reed's best friend; and Joseph Quinn as Johnny, Sue's younger brother, completing the quartet.

Like *Superman*, *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* also eschews the origin story. On Earth-828, talk show host Ted Gilbert (Mark Gatiss) gives a recap of the four astronauts, Reed, Sue, Ben and Johnny, getting their superpowers from cosmic rays on mission to outer space in 1960. Four years on, the Fantastic Four are perceived as guardians of the earth. When Reed and Sue's long-cherished dream of becoming parents comes true, it seems like everything is going to be super fine.

Disaster strikes right then with the appearance of the Silver Surfer (Julia Garner), who informs the fab four of the planet-devouring Galactus' (Ralph Ineson) plans for earth. The ravenous being offers to spare Earth in return for Reed and Sue's son, Franklin, putting further pressure on the super-beings and turning the frightened humans against them.

Reed puts his super brain to work to figure out a way to defeat Galactus while keeping his family and the world at large, safe. Sue uses her high emotional intelligence to calm the earthlings. Johnny, who is deeply enamoured with

the Silver Surfer, deciphers her language and tries to communicate with her. He has clearly eschewed his womanising ways, which was anyway very '80s. Ben is the proverbial Rock of Gibraltar everyone leans on when they need a moment.

Family is the new superpower with everyone stepping up for each other. There are jokes and eye-wateringly spectacular action sequences (Johnny's first contact with the Silver Surfer is heartbreakingly beautiful), for sure, but that baby Franklin is beyond sweet, even if his idea of light reading is Charles Darwin's, *On the Origin of Species*!

Natasha Lyonne further ups the charisma quotient as Ben's love interest, the school teacher, Rachel Rozman, while the sociological underpinnings are provided by Paul Walter Hauser's Mole Man. This first film in Phase Six of the MCU, with a sequel in development and a mid-credit sequence pointing to *Avengers: Doomsday*, *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, has all the ingredients for blistering fun at the movies. May the Four be with you.

The Fantastic Four: First Steps is currently running in theatres