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## The gigantic summer blockbuster you probably haven't heard of — yet

Now showing stateside, 'Baahubali 2' an awe-inspiring piece of Tollywood cinema

**S**o, you think of yourself as a citizen of the world. If you want the other guests at the dinner party to think so, too, you better have at least some idea of what the 7.3 billion non-U.S. denizens of the planet are watching at the movies.

Your timing is perfect. "Baahubali 2: The Conclusion," the biggest-budget, highest-grossing Indian film ever made, is currently playing at a cinema near you.

It is at once comfortably familiar and exotically different.

Baahubali means "the one with strong arms;" and, in portraying the beneficent Herculean warrior, Telugu-speaking cinematic heart-throb Prabhas is as acrobatic as Errol Flynn, as flirtatious as Billy Dee Williams and as ripped as Arnold Schwarzenegger — a fusion of John Henry, King Arthur and Ben-Hur but with really fabulous hair.

The Telugu movie industry,

originating from the south of India, is known as "Tollywood" — as opposed to Hindi-speaking "Bollywood" more familiar to American audiences.

The movie has all the mayhem, blood and combustion of American blockbusters, plus the cliff-hanging suspense of old-fashioned Saturday movie matinees.

Before "Baahubali 2," of course, there was a "Baahubali," and there are enough flashbacks and

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expository explanations that no one is left behind.

This dynastic Cain-versus-Abel fantasy is biblical in scope. Amarendra Baahubali and his cousin Bhalaladeva (Rana Daggubati) are



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raised together as brothers. They live in the walled kingdom of Mahishmati, where barbarians and wild animals lurk on the frontier. Each is deeply devoted to the formidable Queen Mother Sivagami (Ramya Krishnan). She must choose one of them to become king. Things go awry when both men want to wed the same princess, Devasena (Anushka Shetty).

strong roles for the two women stars, one of the themes of the film is that the dignity of women must be acknowledged and respected.

Operatic in its family drama, exhilarating in its exquisitely choreographed combat and loaded with enough mind-blowing special effects to give a galaxy full of meteorites and space aliens a run for their money, "Baahubali 2" is equal parts "Game of Thrones," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "The Lion King."

In the same way that DC and Marvel have used comic superheroes as the foundation for major U.S. action franchises, writer-director S.S. Rajamouli drew from the one of India's largest-selling comic series Amar Chitra Katha rich with Indian history, mythology and folklore as his source material for the Baahubali series.

Admittedly, at three hours, "Baahubali 2: The Conclusion" is a long haul. But it is time well-spent with a dashing hero, uplifting moral and rousing music.

There is a theory in Hollywood that audiences love original storytelling so long as it's the kind of story we've heard before and a story that we want to tell ourselves.

So it should be no surprise that what is most compelling about "Baahubali 2," is its ancient and universal theme of love, loyalty and leadership. That it is thrillingly told as a 21st century style entertainment is a bonus.

Now there's a topic for your dinner party.