

Joker (2019)



Arthur scrawls on a mirror the song title his mother often says to him for encouragement. (c) Warner Brothers

Of all the super villains, in the D.C. or any universe for that matter, the Joker is the most interesting. Definitely worthy of his own origin movie. No wonder why top actors were willing to play the part in live action Batman films— Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman*; Heath Ledger in Christopher Nolan's 2008 [The Dark Knight](#) (the actor earning a posthumous Best Actor Oscar); and earlier Cesar Romero on the TV series.

Now in director Todd Phillips' film we have Joaquin Phoenix. Because of his incredible performance and the insightful script by Todd and co-writer Scott Silver, we are given the most complex Joker yet. The dark film provides a description of the breakdown of both a set-upon individual and of a society on the verge of chaos and anarchy.

I hesitated for a while to cover this film because of the outcry stemming from the fear that it contains so much violence that it might trigger shootings similar to the one at the theater in Aurora, Colorado, where 12 people were murdered

and 70 injured. Would this be one more action thriller that either glorified violence or used it as a prop to induce excitement in the audience? The fact that it won the Golden Lion for Best Film at the prestigious Venice International Film Festival was proof that Phillips' film was not an exploitive film, but a serious portrayal of the horror that could develop from untreated mental illness, as well as a critique of societal indifference. Whether intentional or not, *Joker* can be taken as a cautionary film.

In the first half of the film Arthur Fleck is a pathetic victim who slowly changes into the horrible villain of the Batman sagas. He is taking 7 different medicines while living with and caring for his mother, home-bound because she is incapacitated by the infirmities of old age. We first see him putting on clown make-up at an agency that hires out clowns. He tries to smile into the mirror, succeeding only by using the fingers of his two hands to lift up the corners of his mouth. The brightly colored happy face he has applied is marred by the tear that mixes with the dark make-up under one eye, foretelling what is about to happen to him, as well as revealing his inner feelings. Later he will whisper, "I just don't want to feel so bad anymore."

Arthur's career preference is not that of a clown but of a stand-up comedian. But he has not had his break, so now he has been hired to cavort while waving a "Going Out of Business" sign in front of a store. Most of the crowd passing by ignore his dancing and frantic gestures calling attention to the sign. A gang of young thugs seize the sign and take off down the sidewalk, Arthur yelling and pursuing them. In an empty alley they suddenly stop, smash the sign, knock Arthur down, and kick him into unconsciousness. How unjust that the hospitalized Arthur loses his assignment with the store because he cannot return the stolen and smashed sign!

Arthur is also victim of a neurological condition that results in involuntary, inappropriate laughter. On a commuter train a

mother rebukes him for making funny faces for the amusement of her child sitting in front of him. He starts laughing, and cannot contain it, neither in volume nor length, which, of course, freaks her out, even after he shows her a card explaining his condition. This is but one of several such instances.

We see in a hospital ward that Arthur can be effective as an entertainer as he prances and dances to the amusement of the sick children. Unfortunately, the pistol that a colleague earlier had given him for protection falls onto the floor, the happy group suddenly seized with fear and panic. This becomes the final straw for his boss, the man firing him despite his attempt to explain both the gun and the loss of the sign.

The positive sides to Arthur are also on display, beginning with his love for his mother Penny, movingly portrayed by [Frances Conroy](#). Their love and mutual dependency are genuine, the plot not going the route of the rebellious son turning against and killing an overly dominant mother—well, not quite, the film unfolding in its own dark way as Arthur learns a family secret. The two like to sit and watch a talk show hosted by Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro). Arthur fantasizes that he is a guest on the show. In his daydream his mentioning his care for his elderly mother wins the admiration of Murray and the audience. We learn that she once worked for millionaire Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen) and has written to him for help in improving their living situation.

In addition to his care for his mother, Arthur's interest in the beautiful single mother living down the hall, Sophie Dumond ([Zazie Beetz](#)), is rewarded when she returns his interest. She attends one of his stand-up comedy gigs and offers support during his mother's health crisis. Or does she? There hangs over their relationship a shroud of fear that this lovely woman will end up as one more of the Joker's victims—especially after Arthur, clad in his clown regalia riding home on the subway, encounters three Wall Street

bullies. With his inappropriate laughter he distracts them from harassing a female passenger, who wisely slips away to another car. The three suits mock him and then knock him down and kick him. He pulls out the gun and shoots and kills two of the well-dressed thugs on the train and relentlessly follows the wounded one onto the station platform all the way to the stairway where he finishes him off.

Arthur has spent time in a mental hospital and has been meeting regularly with what apparently is a psychologically trained social worker (Sharon Washington), but she seems distant and uninvolved. When she reads one of his journal entries, "I hope my death makes more cents than my life," she merely asks what he means by this, rather than showing concern that he might be suicidal. Later he will accuse her of not really listening to him. At one point, she informs Arthur that this is their last session because the city, in an economy measure, has cut its funding for the mental illness prevention program. He asks what he is to do and where he will get his meds, and she replies, "They don't give a shit about people like you, Arthur. And they don't give a shit about people like me either."

There is much more, including a killing so brutal that I had to look away—this is definitely not a film to take a child to see! There is an encounter with the boy Bruce Wayne, as well as his father Thomas, who is running for mayor. But this father is not the benevolent philanthropist of the comic books, but a snobbish member of the 1% who looks down on people like Arthur. Arthur does gain an appearance on Murray Franklin's TV show, but the outcome is very different from Arthur's earlier fantasy. Indeed, the very ending of the film turns out to be different from the usual comic book conclusion. Look carefully at those footprints left by Arthur as he walks down the hall with Frank Sinatra's version of "That's Life" playing on the soundtrack.

The film's designers have produced a Gotham that is as dark as

the Joker's mind. The 1981 look of New York is reproduced, with graffiti scrawled on subway trains and the walls that line alleys. There is a garbage strike on, so the streets and sidewalks are littered with overflowing bins. The homeless cluster around barrel-fires beneath overhead tracks and in alleyways. There is intense debate over the subway killing of the three Wall Streeters, with many regarding the mysterious clown as a champion against the rich. They don clown masks and swarm the streets in demonstrations against the authorities.

The aural mood is as grim as the visual, composer Hildur Guðnadóttir's cello-centered mournful score perfectly in synch with the tone of the film. Some of the other songs on the soundtrack are used for irony, such as the aforementioned "That's Life." Of course, Stephen Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns" is used, first sung by the doomed mockers on the subway train. The real, and delightful, surprise is that there are 9 compositions by Charles Chaplin from his *Modern Times*, including the one developed into the song "Smile."

This film demonstrates how far the comic-based genre has come since the 60s when the TV series was played for the campiness of the costumed heroes and villains. Phillip's film is closer to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy* than to any of the Batman films in which the special effects enhanced action is more central. What a delightful coup that the filmmakers succeeded in casting Robert De Niro as the talk show host, in that he played the mentally ill Rupert Pupkin, the comedian in *The King of Comedy* who went to the length of kidnapping talk show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) in order to appear on his show!

The film is relevant in its depiction of the rebellion against the 1% and the willingness of the public to go along with an extralegal response to crime. There is little in the way of redemption or hope in the film's dark universe. In Biblical times Arthur/The Joker would have been considered as possessed by demons, but in Gotham there is no Jesus to release him from

their power. The only flicker of light or hope that Arthur could have been freed is in the scene in which two of his fellow clowns come to his apartment where he kills one but spares the other, even though he is an eyewitness. That man, other than Sophie, is the only one who had treated Arthur kindly. Even though his psychic is horribly twisted there is still a fragment of humanity with Arthur that responds positively to kindness. But, by the film's conclusion Arthur Fleck, once for all practical purposes invisible to society, is now totally enmeshed in the dark identity of the Joker. As he says to Murray Franklin, "For my whole life, I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do, and people are starting to notice." They certainly will!

This review will be in the November issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.

Note: On FaceBook a friend posted the lyrics of "[We Are All in This Together](#)," written by Carole King and David Palmer. I immediately thought of Arthur as I read the second verse with its lines "And some men laugh for reasons/They can never quite explain." This in turn illuminated the rest of the song, with the third verse becoming both a lament and a prophetic statement. Check it out at the above site, and on YouTube you can hear Carole singing it.