



Joker hits theaters

Joaquin Phoenix takes center stage

KAZI MD SHAIMUL REZA

A mainstream Hollywood psychological thriller opening to an eight-minute standing ovation at the Venice International Film Festival and then clinching its loftiest accolade so far, the Golden Lion, is not a run-of-the-mill incident in the global cinematic landscape. But when the most iconic antihero from DC lore, the quintessential psychopath and Batman's arch nemesis, finds a re-imagined storyline, amidst the obvious flurry of speculations and controversies, history gets rewritten.

It is the early 1980s and director Todd Phillips, the man behind *The Hangover* trilogy and *Due Date*, drops us into the fractured city of Gotham. Our mentally ill protagonist Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix) is seen sitting in front of a mirror, putting on his clown makeup; a tear trickles down his cheek as he stretches the corners of his mouth with his fingers to orchestrate a smile on his painted face.

The first message that *Joker* sends us is

that our protagonist is unhappy—each passing minute reveals instances of the world ganging up on him as he strives to pull himself through this cesspool. A struggling clown by profession, Fleck harbours a genuine passion for standup comedy. On top of the incessant bullying and abuse he encounters routinely, he is also afflicted with a medical condition causing him to break into fits of laughter at the most inopportune moments.

Unlike Christopher Nolan's masterpiece *The Dark Knight*, where the Joker emerges as a masochistic maniac with zero empathy and a spine-chilling propensity for murder from minute one, *Joker* lets us delve into the humane aspect of the super villain's psyche. Here, he is not just the murderous psychopath we always knew him to be. In *Joker*, he gets a plausible origin story. We get to journey through every hue of his pain, confusion, and doubts, which have been inseparably blended in with the insanity at his core. We witness his becoming, his transformation—from a harmless loner to a menace.

Joaquin Phoenix takes this pop culture brand to staggering new heights with his masterful portrayal—his powerhouse performance is undoubtedly the highlight of this film. He laughs hysterically, dances erratically, conjures up bizarre facial expressions, orchestrates emotive monologues, and then commits coldblooded murders. He is the reason you would not want to take your eyes off the screen.

His unforgettable performance is comparable to that of Jack Nicholson's in Tim Burton's *Batman* and Heath Ledger's in *The Dark Knight*—two timeless portrayals of the Joker. Bickering over who was the best is a pointless debate and an affront to the unique artistry they have each demonstrated.

His ear-piercing cackle, exuding grief, joy, and insanity all at once, lingers and

of Batman!). An intelligent twist in the climax shows that the worlds of Batman and Joker always collide.

Joker is a grim film overall; it flaunts a flavour that is unduly dark, capitalising on nerve-wracking scenes of violence. The sublime cinematography, background scores, and location photography significantly boost the film's aesthetics.

The Joker's monologue towards the end has some moving messages. "Everybody is awful these days. It is enough to make anyone crazy," or "If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me," are not just emotional rants but well thought out references to our generalised lack of empathy and constant disenfranchisement of people at the margin.

The ethical conundrum and a key propellant for the controversies that have been brewing since the film's release is this—the story unravels in a way that makes Fleck the perennial victim in an eternally oppressive, uncaring world. The constant bullying and abuse inflicted on him tugs at our heartstrings in a way that it renders his morally abhorrent actions valid. In a not so subtle way, we are being fed that his distasteful retaliatory outbursts were necessary.

Phillips was incautious with the depiction and glorification of violence and nihilism as the means to escape from all that is unfair in this world, as evidenced through Fleck's life trajectory. The self-serving messages the film conveys to victimised people can potentially incite them to embrace their destructive instincts. Our protagonist, who was unnoticed all his life, became a political icon after shooting his bullies in the train; this inspired an upsurge from the common people who resorted to vandalism and murders to get back at the system that disenfranchised them. The Joker's honest confession afterwards, "In my whole life, I didn't know if I even

gives us goosebumps. Phoenix said in an interview that he mastered it by watching videos of pathological laughter. His skin-and-bones appearance, giving off Christian Bale-in-*The Machinist* vibes, felt like a relevant artistic touch to the film.

Robert De Niro is cast as talk show host Murray Franklin, a figure Fleck adores. It's a clever allusion to Martin Scorsese's satirical *The King of Comedy* with reversed characters. Fleck and his mother Penny (Frances Conroy) enjoying the Murray show together is a breath of fresh air amidst the film's gloom. Conroy's appearance is brief but meaningful.

Although the *Joker* was meant to be a standalone film disconnected from the DC universe, the familiar world of Batman surfaces here. Its emergence is short but impactful enough to fill us with nostalgia and longing to witness the iconic chemistry of the Joker-Batman duo. Courtesy of Fleck's interesting connections with the Wayne family, we manage to catch glimpses of Thomas Wayne, Alfred, and young Bruce (spoiler alert: no trace

really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice," acknowledges how violence liberated him from the pangs of oppression.

Joker also fails to portray a nuanced characterisation of mental illness. The stereotyped image of the unpredictability and irreversibility of mental illness gives us reasons to fear, shun, and be wary of, those grappling with mental health. The film also seems to have swapped the narrative that people with mental illness are not the ones hurting others, when, more often than not, they are the ones getting hurt. There is no doubt that Phillips could have addressed these issues more delicately.

Despite all that, *Joker*, in my opinion, is a worthwhile cinematic experience that not only entertains but also prompts us to question the discrepancies of our system, highlighting how villains are made, not born, evil.

Kazi Md Shamiul Reza is a student at Dhaka Medical College.