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## “SCOTT SILVER AND TODD PHILLIPS, YOU TRICKED US.

YOU TOOK A COMIC-BOOK CHARACTER AND USED IT TO TALK ABOUT CHILDHOOD TRAUMA, GUN VIOLENCE, ISOLATION AND MENTAL HEALTH, AND INSTEAD OF INCITING VIOLENCE, YOU INVITED THE AUDIENCE IN TO SEE WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN YOU’RE ONE OF THE FORGOTTEN, AND I DEEPLY APPRECIATE THAT.”

JOAQUIN PHOENIX, ACCEPTING 2020 CRITICS’ CHOICE AWARD

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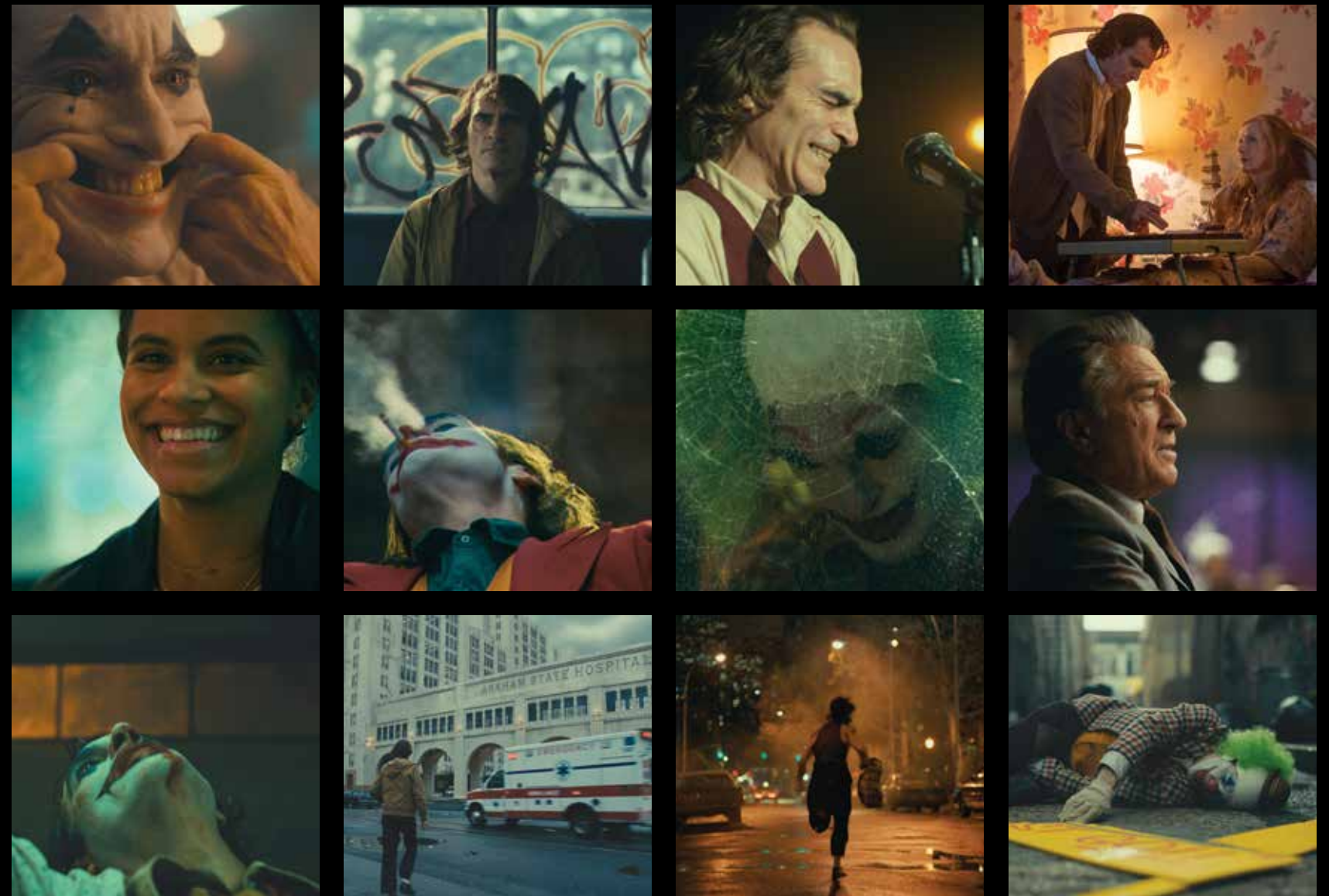
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# 'JOKER' PROVES THE POWER OF EMPATHY

By FREDERIC DODDS

A funny thing happened to Arthur Fleck, aka Joker, en route to becoming the centerpiece of a cultural phenomenon that continues to strike a responsive note with global audiences: The character didn't generate the mayhem pundits continually warned could be headed our way if we dared to venture into a multiplex to see "Joker." Instead, Arthur became a voice for the forgotten, the troubled and the downtrodden. "Joker" conveys an idea, and boiled down to one word it is "compassion." You might even say that compassion is the movie's superpower.

Writer-director Todd Phillips says, "I love the complexity of Joker and felt his origin would be worth exploring on film, since nobody's done that. Even in the canon, he has no formalized beginning. So Scott Silver and I wrote a version of a complex and complicated character and

**"'Joker' is the movie that touched the most electrifying chord with audiences."**

**OWEN GLEIBERMAN, CHIEF FILM CRITIC, VARIETY**

how he might evolve — and then devolve. That is what interested me — not a Joker story but the story of becoming Joker. "For example," he adds, "in the movie you see the difference in how kids and adults react to Arthur, because kids tend to see the world through no lens. They don't see rich versus poor or understand a marginalized individual like adults do. They just see Arthur [the party clown] as a guy whose only intent is to make them smile. It's not inherent [for adults]. We have to learn how to be unaccepting of others — and unfortunately, we usually do." Recalling his excitement about Phillips' thoughts on the material, Bradley Cooper, one of the producers, described the movie's bold approach: "Take prob-

Todd Phillips turned a famous character into a voice for the forgotten and overlooked, and made an origin story that resonates with our current moment

ably the most famous villain and say, 'Okay, what if we humanize this person? Let's see what could be possible causes for who he becomes, and where can we, as a community and a society, find our own way to see how this could happen and how this could be remedied?'" And yet before the public even had the chance to see the film, there was widespread media speculation about its story and swirling questions about whether the movie would encourage violence. *Variety* chief film critic Owen Gleiberman has acutely dissected the misunderstanding that surrounded the film's debut, delving into why the empathetic approach to its antihero is actually the source of its connection to audiences. "As Arthur says,

'Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?'" he writes. "As the basic security of the American middle class frays before our eyes, the primal anxiety is starting to tear at the fabric of people's well-being." In Gleiberman's view, the movie's role in awards season is not just one of contender but one of social indicator: "If 'Joker' wins, it will play as a celebration of the rare power a film built around a comic-book scoundrel could summon in a year when it expressed the rage, alienation and insanity that so many are feeling." The ailing, angsty, late-'70s/early-'80s Gotham of Phillips' "Joker" doesn't look very dreamlike, as most movies born of this genre do. In fact, the film more greatly resembles what we see in America today, where some are thriving but the poor and middle class are being squeezed to the point of despair. While op-ed pages issued cautions about "Joker" and its potential to provoke the darkest forces in our society, a few clearer-minded writers saw the film's true intentions straight out of the gate. "Even after the early accusations that it was a film liable to incite violence proved unjust," Gleiberman notes, "it was

**"What if we humanize this person? Let's see what could be possible causes for who he becomes."**  
BRADLEY COOPER, 'JOKER' PRODUCER

demonstrated beyond doubt that the movie spoke to humans of every gender, race and age group. "In an alternate universe, Phillips' slow-burn anti-comic-book spectacle would be the Oscar frontrunner, and not just because it has the most nominations. It's the movie that touched the most electrifying chord with audiences." *Forbes* magazine issued a think piece on Aug. 31, 2019 — the same day "Joker" premiered at the Venice Film Festival — noting presciently, "When you watch this film, I assure you you're not going to be thinking Joker is glamorized or fetishized the way he's been in most previous incarnations. This is one of the year's best films and will be in the running for multiple Academy Awards."

Just a week later, that take on the film's serious intent, its intensely relevant subject matter and its fearless accomplished filmmaking came to fruition, as "Joker" made history, winning Venice's top prize, the Golden Lion. Gleiberman's own review from the festival was packed with ruminations on how and why the movie successfully engages its audience with a startling tour-de-force confrontation of both America's very real social ills and how they figure into the personal torments of Arthur Fleck. "There's no denying we feel something for him — a twinge of sympathy, or at least understanding," he writes. Analyzing the character's almost Dostoyevskian condition, he adds, "[Arthur's] laughter is an act that parades itself as fakery. What it expresses isn't glee; it expresses the fact that he feels nothing, that he's dead inside. He's a man on the edge of a nervous breakdown ... even as you're gawking at his violence, you still feel his pain." Over time, spurred in part by the reactions of filmgoers, more critics were taking a thoughtful look at "Joker," and what they saw wasn't a dangerous movie but a movie with a message

that desperately needed to be received. In October, for example, USA Today quoted a social worker who found Arthur's roller-coaster ride of on-again, off-again medical and social assistance "accurate." The social-health professional said, "[The film] depicted how one day you have a program and the next day you don't. And you see how that impacts the people you serve. It's enormously frustrating. We're dealing with people's lives." Then came the raves from reviewers, guilds and the Academy. "Joker," which had started in the eye of a storm amid a media frenzy of fear, had become critically celebrated, embraced by audiences and honored with more BAFTA and Academy Award nominations than any other film in 2019. Gandhi once said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." The filmmakers of "Joker" have created a piece of art that is startling in both its cinematic élan and its compassionate portrait of society's lost souls — the ones that we see around us, traumatized and dispossessed.



# MAVERICK MOVES

Years on indie pics taught director street smarts

By JAMES LINHARDT

Many directors have an indie past. For Todd Phillips, that meant dropping out of NYU film school to finish working on his first documentary. In that first feature, the 1993 documentary “Hated: GG Allin & the Murder Junkies,” an in-your-face portrait of punk’s most reprehensible icon, the budding writer-director was already breaching the porous divide between irreverence and madness. The film opens with a “message to a sick society.” A moment later, it’s revealed the quote is from a serial killer.

Knowing distributors might balk at his cinematic effort, Phillips took a low-paying data-entry job at Miramax in its early days to find the names of every independent theater and theater manager in the U.S. That took three weeks; then he quit and spent a year getting “Hated” booked across America. Eventually, it grossed \$1 million.

In 1994, Phillips formed the New York Underground Film Festival, which five years later *Variety* called

“notorious” for its devotion “to the strangest images to be found on celluloid or videotape.”

His follow-up documentary, 1998’s “Frat House,” an exposé of campus culture’s underside made with directing partner and fellow festival founder Andrew Gurland, tied for Sundance’s Grand Jury Prize for documentaries.

By the time he made his narrative directorial debut with “Road Trip” in 2000 and followed that with “Old School,” Phillips had established himself as an indispensable chronicler of young-adult subculture, from the sick and twisted to the merely offbeat.

Nearly two decades later, there’s the astringent cultural commentary of his magnum opus, “Joker,” which delves deeper than the director has gone but is perfectly suited to his psychologically acute lens. “What ‘Joker’ has in common with my other movies is the idea of chaos,” Phillips says. “If ‘Joker’ is an agent of chaos, how do we get there? Is he made that way? Society made him? Is it a combination of events?”

Incisive questions, indeed — ones Phillips’ films continue to mine.

# TODD PHILLIPS’ RISKY VISION

Helmer’s journey from radical docs to comedies prepared him to create transformative cinema

By JAMES LINHARDT

Reeling in the wake of Donald Trump’s election, Academy Award-nominated writer-director Todd Phillips decided to come out strong. He wanted to make a film about the evolution of a complex character whose malaise would depict a world profoundly out of sync.

Phillips’ vision would marshal the intellectual property of the DC Comics Universe to tell an original story with its roots in real-world dysfunction. Along with co-screenwriter Scott Silver (an Academy Award nominee for hit picture “The Fighter”), he imagined a film that would subvert the comic-book genre. It was conceived as not an escape from reality but an investigation of our fraying social fabric and corroded public

discourse.

The result is “Joker,” an innovative film — anchored by Joaquin Phoenix’s intense, Oscar-nominated performance in the title role — that reflects both the early 1980s of its setting and a deeply unsettled current cultural moment.

Phillips’ filmmaking origins are in hard-hitting stories about complex characters and social discontent. With “Joker,” he found an unexpectedly perfect opportunity to make a true Todd Phillips film.

To break new ground with “Joker,” Phillips ironically looked to Hollywood history — and his own. He began his career as something of a renegade documentary filmmaker, whose edgy projects would go on to become underground favorites. Having come of age as an artist in New York City some 25 years ago, Phillips was inspired by the best of 1970s New

Hollywood, including seminal films “Network,” “Taxi Driver” and “Dog Day Afternoon.” And through that lens, he saw an opportunity to reimagine Joker with an examination of a man and a city on the edge.

According to production designer Mark Friedberg, Phillips often spoke with his crew about the idea of the “shadow self” — a facade that masks one’s vulnerabilities — and the subtle visual transformation involved in Arthur Fleck becoming Joker. Together they worked on ways to reveal the character without always

relying on dialogue, to tell the story in a way that one could watch the movie without sound and still feel its emotional impact. “Joaquin’s performance is so measured, and he says so much without saying a word,” Friedberg says.

For the director, protagonist Arthur Fleck’s concerns cut deeply on both a mythic and a historical level, and Phillips and Phoenix joined forces to reimagine Joker as an intensified version of a New Hollywood-style antihero. He’s a man who has been driven to the brink of an emotional cliff by an unkind society. “Arthur is the guy you see on the street who you walk right past — or over,” Phillips says. “With this movie, we get a peek at what’s below the surface.” He suggests that at its core, “Joker” is a portrait of a society devoid of empathy.

To hammer home Arthur’s lonely, misunderstood existence visually, Phillips opted to give his original fiction film a gritty, documentary-style texture. “We included a few elements from the DC

**“Let’s do the more outside-the-box thing ... It just felt like people were ready for something different.”**

TODD PHILLIPS

canon,” he says of his goal, “and set it in a broken-down Gotham City around 1981, because that harkens back to that [New Hollywood] era.”

According to Friedberg, “The dysfunction, the disconnection from the powers-that-be ... that’s the New York City of my youth. It was dirty. Every city agency was on strike at some point, and the ones that weren’t were corrupt. That’s what I thought made this such a striking piece when I read it. And that’s where our conversation started about this world of “Joker” — a Gotham that is not New York but is its own dark, gritty, tough urban city with roots in our collective past but with an eye toward our current moment.”

Phillips and Phoenix worked in tandem all during shooting to ensure that Arthur Fleck’s transition to Joker was gradual, even imperceptible.

That partnership challenged them both at times, Phoenix says: “I find it very difficult and unsatisfying to work with myself. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Todd. I tested him daily.” He remembers an extreme — and in retrospect, crucial — moment during the shoot, when Phillips made him do the same scene over and over until it hit just

the right note, leaving both director and actor emotionally depleted. Of course, they eventually did get their take. As Phoenix recalls of the one that nailed it, “[Todd] said, ‘What was that?’ And I said, ‘Sincerity.’ He said, ‘Well, you should be sincere more often.’”

Phoenix credits Phillips’ tenacity with helping him tap into the core of the character. “Working with Todd on a scene,” he says, “if we didn’t find a surprising way of exploring it in the moment, we felt like we weren’t doing it right.”

Directorially, Phillips tapped into his do-it-yourself documentary roots to give the movie an intensified realism and a sense of palpable danger. “You gotta be bold,” he says, “because there’s much more great stuff available than ever, and you’re competing with so many things. So it’s really about cutting through the fog.”

Throughout the production of “Joker,” aesthetic decisions were guided by Phillips’ desire to push the limits of conventionality and aim for something completely new. “One of the mandates we had on this movie was when in doubt, let’s just be bold. Let’s do the more outside-the-box thing. And it just felt like people were ready for something different.”



# MUSIC BEFORE MOTION

Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir's haunting score steers Arthur's downward spiral

By JON BURLINGAME

Cellist Hildur Guðnadóttir could've been seen as an offbeat choice for the soundtrack to "Joker." The Reykjavik-born, Berlin-based composer had released several solo albums and written the score for 2018's "Sicario" sequel, "Day of the Soldado," when Todd Phillips called.

"He seemed to know my work pretty well," Guðnadóttir says of the writer-director. "He asked if I was interested in writing music based on my feel-

ings from reading the script. He really didn't give me much direction in those first calls—he was curious to see how I heard it. But I knew he was keen on the cello, so that was the leading voice from the start."

Guðnadóttir began improvising music on her hallorophone, an electro-acoustic cello whose extra resonating strings and feedback mechanism produced an especially cutting-edge sound. "I connected really strongly with Arthur's loneliness and his sense of being lost," she says, "not understanding how circumstances had affected him and this underlying turbulence. I had a strong physical and emotional reaction to that and was able to find the notes that became his theme."

She sent the music to Phillips, who was still months from shooting. Later, as the director was capturing the now iconic bathroom scene, he played the composition to Joaquin Phoenix, who right away

began dancing to it. "The scene is his actual reaction to the music," Guðnadóttir says. Without expecting to, she had helped choreograph one of the film's signature moments. A year later, she wrote the full underscore and recorded it with a 72-piece orchestra in New York City. Adding the sometimes harsh sound of baroque stringed instruments to more conventional strings, brass and woodwinds (along with her cello tracks, which she'd already recorded in her Berlin studio), Guðnadóttir created a unique musical tapestry, at once melancholy and disturbing, for Arthur Fleck's gradual descent into the mad clown.

"In the beginning, you feel like you're only listening to a solo cello," the composer says of the finished product, "but as the film develops, the orchestra steps more and more in front and in the end suffocates the cello. It's what I felt was happening with his personal transformation."



# A CHARACTER UNMASKED

How thoughtful direction, masterful acting and craft helped Joaquin Phoenix become both Arthur and Joker

By JOY GOHRING

"What happens when you go through life wearing a mask ... pretending?" asks director Todd Phillips.

"Joker" protagonist Arthur Fleck starts out sad and shy, slouching along weary and wilted. This perfectly reflects an early note Phillips gave star Joaquin Phoenix—that Arthur walks with "heavy shoes," carrying the weight of the world.

That countenance ensures what Phillips calls "the shadow self" stays contained. But the indifference and cruelty of the world chip away, and when Arthur's guard finally shatters, what emerges is Joker, a person so malevolent it's hard to believe he and Arthur—a man who only longs for love and kindness—occupy the same flesh and bones.

That dichotomy was aided by Phoenix's own physical evolution, in which the actor lost 52 pounds in order to personify a gaunt, lonely man seeking connection in a world lacking empathy.

Phillips saw the character as lean from the outset, and Phoenix fully immersed himself in the idea of Arthur having a skeletal frame. The director recalls the star quipping, "I got it—I'll just stop eating and starve myself."

The drastic weight loss helped him become more aware of his body. It lent an

unfamiliar lightness that allowed Phoenix to saunter and contort in new ways and, in the film's iconic "bathroom scene," finally settle into the balletic movements that showcase Joker's metamorphic arrival.

The character's physicality is also evoked in his reflexive, almost maniacal laughter. Uncontrollable chortling is now a recognized medical syndrome, but back in 1981, says Phillips, "it was not really diagnosed, though it was a real condition."

"We talked a lot about who would Arthur be and why is he like this—what is his thing, and where does that laugh really come from?" says the director. "Joker is a narcissist, but he's an egoless narcissist in our mind. You know, the ego is Arthur—the ego is the thing that's trying to control this wild horse that is Joker, but Joker is pure id."

Phoenix was relentless in landing on Joker's painful cachinnation. He studied videos of people with uncontrollable laughter disorders and kept testing out different pitches and rhythms. Eventually

**The drastic weight loss lent an unfamiliar lightness that allowed Phoenix to move in new ways.**

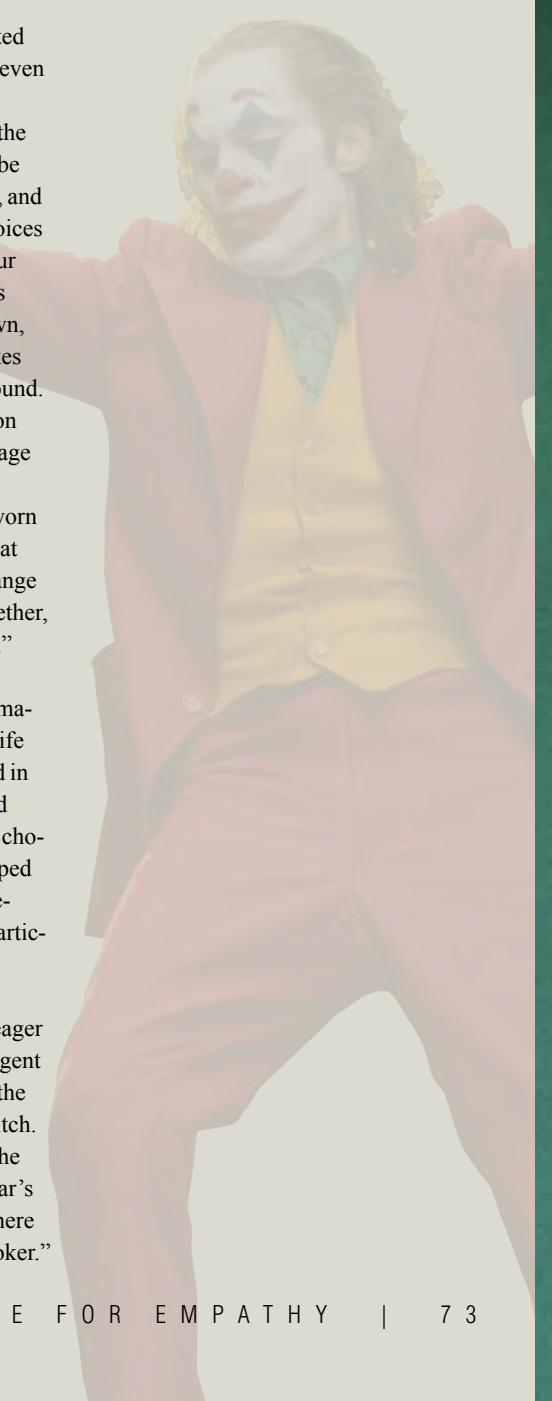
he landed on the timbre that best suited Arthur, though the search continued even into the film's shooting stage.

Costumes added another layer to the character. Phillips notes that wardrobe for actors is akin to putting on a skin, and costume designer Mark Bridges' choices helped Phoenix personify both Arthur and Joker. Early in the film, Arthur is dressed as a frail, Chaplinesque clown, but sometimes it's the man who makes the clothes and not the other way around.

As Arthur dons a two-piece maroon suit with shoulder pads to take the stage at a comedy club, he seems almost pathetic. But when the same suit is worn as Joker, as he dances onto the stage at "Live with Murray Franklin," the change is striking. "This time it's all put together, with a nice waistcoat and a '70s line," Bridges says.

In this moment, Arthur's transformation from a man stumbling through life to the fully realized Joker is captured in his confident dance onstage, as the id fully takes over. Phoenix says it was choreographer Michael Arnold who helped school him on the evolution of movement and dance, and the actor was particularly affected by a 1957 TV performance of "The Old Soft Shoe."

Phoenix soaked up the research, eager to viscerally capture the vastly divergent halves of the character's whole, but the evolution wasn't like throwing a switch. "All the preparation disappears into the performance," says Phillips of his star's genius. "There's not one moment where you see him switch from Arthur to Joker."





# CRAFT TEAM BEHIND THE MIRROR

Virtuoso artisan contributions helped reveal Arthur Fleck's soul and nuances of darkly relevant tale.

By **BOB VERINI**

A single brief scene highlights the artanship and teamwork that have made “Joker” the year’s most nominated motion picture. According to Todd Phillips and Scott Silver’s script, Arthur Fleck was to follow his first violent act — wiping out a trio of privileged jerks (the crew called them “the Wall Street Three”) in a subway car — with a panicky run through lurid city streets and into a public restroom.

There, he was to dispose of the gun, wash off his clown makeup and look at his reflection in the mirror. Cinematographer Lawrence Sher sums up the original conception: “He comes into the bathroom, collects himself: ‘Oh my God, what have I done?’”

The straightforward, plot-driving sequence, which appeared on the shooting schedule 10 days in, was prepared with the same care as the rest of the movie. For the set, built in-studio, Sher says he and production designer Mark Friedberg sought to “come from a place of reality.”

There’s a harsh, flickering fluorescent light overhead, two smaller bulbs (one burned out, natch) next to a filthy mirror, and the mixed palette Sher favored — greens and reds mixed with yellows. “You can feel the sense of sodium vapor” hovering in the air, Sher says. “[It’s] a very powerful color in the movie.”

Contributing to the effect would be Arthur’s clown face paint, smeared with the blood of the Wall Street Three. Makeup designer Nicki Ledermann was ready to make it “really messy and bloodied, conveying the shock and the anxiousness he just experienced.”

Superior preparation allows a production team to pivot quickly when ideas strike. Sher recalls director Phillips sauntering over at one point to say, “Listen, I think we have another idea ... We’re going to play this piece of music.”

Phillips was referring to an early selection Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir had scored for what she calls “my main instrument” — an electric cello, here subtly augmented with multiple sounds and sources. Guðnadóttir notes one of the first elements of the screenplay that

grabbed her was the murders and their aftermath. That planted the seed in her mind: “I sat with it for a while ... The notes just clicked, and then they just hit me in the chest.”

They would soon hit everyone in the chest, for as Sher recounts Phillips’ instructions, “‘Joaquin’s going to come into the bathroom. Let’s put the camera in place. You won’t know where he’s going.’ And we didn’t want to know.” The DP adds that the director’s aim was clear: Let the camera dance with Joaquin.

Friedberg and Sher’s work readily accommodated this last-minute inspiration. “Our intent was for Joaquin to be able to go anywhere in that bathroom,” Sher says. “Mind you, it’s very small.”

What his camera captures, as anyone who has seen the movie will recall, are the earliest moments of Joker’s emergence, as Arthur’s mask of pain starts to fall away.

**What the camera captures are the earliest moments of Joker’s emergence, as Arthur’s mask of pain starts to fall away.**

“Todd put on the music really loud,” Ledermann says. “None of us had heard it before. And I have to say the entire crew was truly watching with their mouths hanging open in awe.”

Only a couple of takes were needed to achieve an effect of uninterrupted ecstasy. Editor Jeff Groth says, “There’s a cut to one shot from within the bathroom stall ... which we liked because it had a kind of framing that looked like he was on a stage.” Otherwise, Groth cuts only three times before Arthur, his anguished face now triumphant, faces the mirror with arms spread — a new beginning.

The assembled crew agreed something remarkable had happened. “Instantly we went, ‘This is really haunting.’ It speaks to the metamorphosis in a way that’s true to the movie, which has a lot of silence,” Sher says. “It allows for this really beautiful connection between music, cinematography and acting.”

That interplay between artisans and actor continued throughout shooting, helping Phoenix create his acclaimed performance.

“I could not believe my eyes every day,” says producer Emma Tillinger Koskoff. “Being on that set watching Joaquin work was one of the great privileges of my career to date. I don’t know how he does it.”