

Film Review: A painted face hides a bitter truth in the 'Joker'



VENICE: Todd Phillips' dark work "Joker" proved to be the darling of the jury and clinched the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Not that the movie was undeserving, but turning a clown into a killer could be seen as going against the very grain of what all of us have come to love. We have always adored a joker, and have laughed with him, have we not?

But Phillips' Joker, played with admirable excellence by Joaquin Phoenix (who won the 2017 Cannes best actor award for "You Were Never Really Here"), is more a villain than a comedian. Joker, aka Arthur Fleck, is given a twist by writers Phillips and Scott Silver. They were heavily inspired by Martin Scorsese's characters (especially Robert De Niro's in "Taxi Driver") and DC Comics' "Batman: The Killing Joke."



Fleck is mentally ill, a perpetual loser, so even in his most hideously violent moments, we cannot help but feel a sense of remorse for a man battered by an unfeeling society. Early on, he is seen standing outside a store with a placard that reads: “Everything Must Go.” Some boisterous teenagers snatch the placard from him, and when he protests, they beat him mercilessly.

Fleck tries to turn the saddest, most painful moments into a joke with a funny crackle of laughter (which Phoenix had to practice really hard to get), hoping to get into a normal state. But the laughter often sounds like a sob, a cry for help. Then there is his mother, and we are reminded of Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s masterly “Psycho.”



Impressively mounted, “Joker” has been written and edited to evoke a feeling of compassion for one reduced to such a pitiable state by the community, including his own mother. And Phoenix, who lost weight for the role, with cheeks sunken and eyes dropping in distress, literally hypnotizes us with his weird expressions and strange mannerisms, bringing to the fore his unimaginable sorrow. It is a pity that he did not bag the best actor award at Venice.
