

# Send in the CLOWN

AIR

**Joaquin Phoenix** relished playing the unhinged comic book villain in *Joker*. Will it finally win him the Oscar he deserves?

WORDS: SUZY MALOY AND LARA BRUNT

**J**oaquin Phoenix is famous for his intense commitment to roles. He learnt to play the guitar in Johnny Cash's unique style for *Walk the Line*, had his jaw wired partly shut by a dentist for his role in *The Master*, and even pretended – for 18 long months – that he had abandoned acting and become a rapper for the mockumentary *I'm Still Here*.

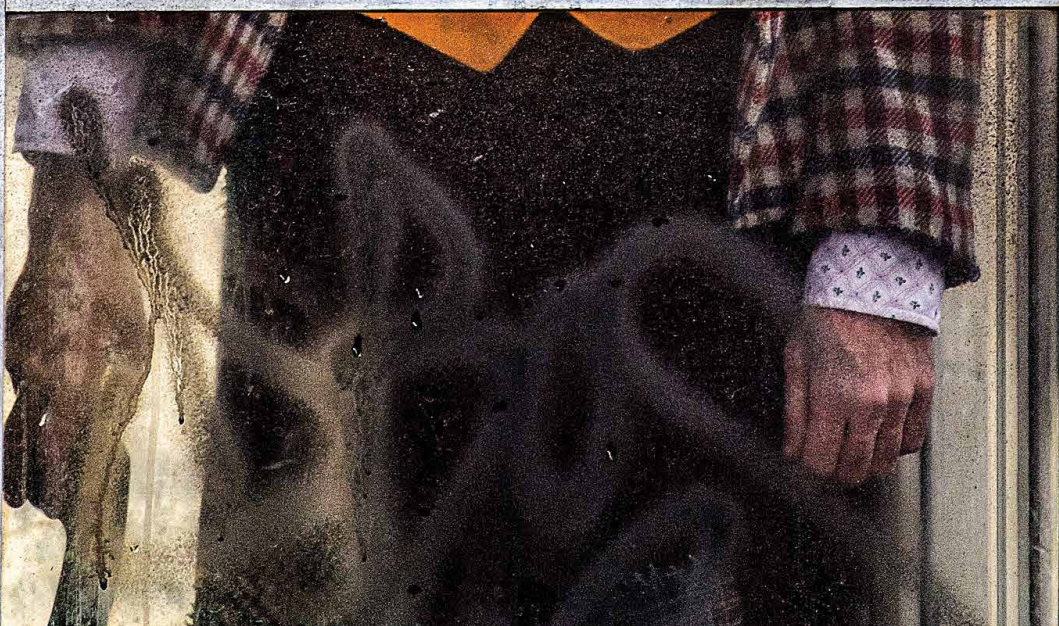
For his titular role in *Joker*, director Todd Phillips' critically acclaimed new film that charts the formative years of Batman's arch nemesis, Phoenix lost nearly 24 kilograms to help him get into character. "It turns out that affects your psychology. You start to go mad when you lose that amount of weight in a short space of time," he says.

The 44-year-old actor also spent hours studying videos of people suffering from pathological laughter, a disorder marked by bursts of uncontrollable and inappropriate laughing. Perfecting his laugh – a hysterical screech with an almost painful undercurrent – wasn't easy, he admits, but was absolutely crucial for the role.

"The second time I met Todd, I wanted him to audition my laugh," he says. "It was important to me that I could do it. And to be honest it was more difficult than I thought. I tried to do it, and I struggled. But I could feel there was the potential for something there. It took shooting for a couple weeks until we got it right."

While the mythology of the Joker is familiar, the original







DC Comics never really explored the character's origins in great depth, allowing the filmmakers freedom to interpret his backstory in their own way. The result is more character-driven psychological thriller – dark, disturbing and fiendishly good – than traditional comic-book fare.

Set in a crime-ridden Gotham City in the early 1980s, Phoenix stars as Arthur Fleck, a clown-for-hire and aspiring stand-up comedian struggling to find his place in society. Depressed and frustrated by his failures, Fleck begins a slow dissent into madness as he becomes the murderous Clown Prince of Crime.

Phillips pays homage to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy*, both starring Robert De Niro as social outcasts with deep-rooted psychological problems, and, as another nod to the latter, De Niro even pops up as a late-night TV host who is instrumental in Fleck's evolution from troubled young man to future super villain.

With Batman nowhere to be seen, the film is more nuanced than good versus evil. Boldly, it invites the audience to feel sympathy for the antagonist, a mentally ill man who is ignored, ridiculed and abused, while always reminding us that he is horrifyingly evil.

"The way I look at him is somebody who had experienced a lot of trauma, and a world that doesn't really know how to deal with it, so they just end up medicating him. I didn't really approach him as mentally ill, but I do think he was a true narcissist," Phoenix says.

It was more than six weeks into filming before Phoenix shot a scene as the Joker. "I was terrified," he admits. "But in hindsight it all made perfect sense. When I was Joker, I started to understand Arthur in a different way. Todd really created this amazing creative space where we could make mistakes. It was great that we weren't so much on the clock to develop this character. We discovered a lot about the Joker while on set."

Joker premiered at the Venice Film Festival on August 31, earning an eight-minute standing ovation from the audience and rave reviews from critics. The film won the top prize at the festival, and Phoenix's brilliant

physical performance has also sparked strong awards buzz. Although he's been nominated for an Oscar three times – for Best Supporting Actor in *Gladiator* in 2001, and Best Actor in *Walk the Line* in 2006 and *The Master* in 2013 – Phoenix has never taken home the golden statuette.

Born in 1974, Phoenix had an unconventional upbringing with hippy parents who travelled across the Americas working as missionaries. By the time he was five, the family had moved to Los Angeles; his mother, now working as a secretary to the head of casting at NBC, set about turning the children – River, Rain, Leaf (as Joaquin was then known), Liberty and Summer – into stars.

River hit the big time first, nominated for an Oscar in 1989, while Joaquin garnered attention for his role in *Parenthood* that same year. After his brother died of an overdose in 1993, Joaquin emerged from his shadow and won critical acclaim for his role alongside Nicole Kidman in *To Die For*. His performance as the paranoid young emperor in *Gladiator* in 2000 sealed his reputation as one of the most compelling actors of his generation.

Phoenix is deft at playing unhinged characters, but admits he was initially reluctant to take on one of pop culture's most iconic villains. "When they approached me, I thought no way I am going to do this. I always thought there was opportunity to explore more with these kind of characters that have not yet been explored. I have not seen it in other comic book movies," says Phoenix.

The Joker has been depicted numerous times on film and television, most famously by Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger, who was posthumously awarded the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his portrayal in *The Dark Knight* a decade ago. Phoenix made a conscious decision not to watch past characterisations, nor did he read the original comics.

"As we began doing the research, I thought I wanted to go my own way. I didn't want to be influenced by any other comics or any of that," he says. "I tried to approach it from the inside as a man, and not from the approach of this iconic super villain that everybody knows. I felt

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Interview: Suzy Maloy / The Interview People

I had a lot of freedom to find my version of the Joker.”

Why does he think the Joker is such an enduring character? “I don’t know. Some of it is just that he looks cool. But maybe there is a certain irreverence about things that he displays. Everybody has different appreciations for him,” Phoenix muses.

The actor worked with a choreographer to hone the Joker’s giddy malevolence. “We started watching these videos and one in particular really moved me. It wasn’t the dance, so much as the attitude that I liked. The arrogance was what I stole; that was where Joker comes out,” he says. “This idea of metamorphosis was intriguing to me. Who is this guy, and how did he become who he is? It was almost some kind of interpretive dance.”

Despite the febrile intensity of playing such a character, the actor revelled in the process. “I want to say it was super hard, but I had a ball,” Phoenix says. “I would show up at set two hours early to just sit in the trailer and talk about it.”

“It stayed with me every night after work for another two or three hours,” he continues. “I also didn’t really have a life at that time because I couldn’t go out to eat. I didn’t socialise at all. The person I interacted with was my director. That became my world. It was nonstop. That’s the best for me, I like working like that.”

The film includes plenty of dark social commentary – disaffected white men, mass gun violence, lack of empathy – and is not without controversy; some critics feel Phillips has been too sympathetic in his depiction of the homicidal clown. “Is *Joker* celebratory or horrified?” asked *Vanity Fair*’s chief critic, Richard Lawson.

“I like it that people are being challenged to different issues,” says Phoenix. “I don’t think Todd was making just one statement. I like that there weren’t any easy answers to these issues. I hope it brings up these feelings in the audience. Everybody felt differently about his motivations on set, too.”

With the director already talking about a sequel, would Phoenix reprise the role? “That’s tough to answer. It really depends on the audience, doesn’t it?” he reflects. Whatever the outcome, *Joker* might well have the last laugh come awards season.