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'Joker' goes deeper than a comic book, but still proves entertaining

"Joker" isn't trying to be a comic book blockbuster. It's trying to be a Scorsese film. It succeeds on both counts.

Made on an art house budget of \$55 million, "Joker" has collected almost \$300 million in international box office during its first week in theaters. Director Todd Phillips, the bro-cineaste known for the "Hangover" series, now leaps ahead of other comic book auteurs with bigger names and less storytelling capacity.

Prior to its release, folks who feared it would inspire copycat crimes denounced the film: The mass shooter in Aurora, Colo., wore harlequin-dyed hair as he murdered moviegoers at a 2012 midnight showing of "The Dark Knight Rises." The previous installment in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, "The Dark Knight," featured Heath Ledger as the Joker in a legendary performance.

ulist male rage so much as it explores how an isolated, invisible person, battered by the system, grows to believe violence is a viable and thrilling life hack.

"Joker" is a thought piece masquerading as adolescent entertainment. It isn't "Death Wish" revisited, it's "Native Son."

Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix), the given name of the title character, works at a clown-booking agency in Reagan-era Gotham. Even among the clowns, sad-sack Arthur is teased mercilessly and treated unfairly by his boss.

There's a garbage workers' strike on, and as the movie progresses, the piles of rodent-gnawed black plastic bags grow higher and higher. The subway cars are sprayed with colorful graffiti tags. The city is unraveling.

At the top of a stairway as towering and interminable as



REBECCA L. FORD

REBECCA L. FORD is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM.rford@scharfbanks.com

work sessions are abruptly terminated due to government austerity cutbacks.

A clown colleague slips Arthur a gun after he is

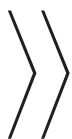
nary citizens don identical red-nosed masks in solidarity with the killer clown.

We know where this is headed. At least, we think we do.

Phoenix received an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of Johnny Cash in "Walk the Line." In "Joker," the biopic of an equally familiar fictional character, he delivers an even more extraordinary performance. Phoenix lifts this funny-book drama into the realm of operatic grandeur.

Before we've even paid for our popcorn, we know the nascent Joker will adopt a life of crime. Like Michael Corleone at the conclusion of "The Godfather," "Joker" ends with our understanding that Arthur's conversion is complete.

He's headed down the bloody path of Heath Ledger's anarchist Joker-as-sociopath, rather than Jack Nicholson's



"Joker" doesn't exploit populist male rage so much as it explores how an isolated, invisible person, battered by the system, grows to believe violence is a viable and thrilling life hack.

After "Joker" opened, critics complained the movie took itself too seriously — pretentious and untethered from its comic book roots.

The truth is that "Joker" is a fine film on every level, as cinema and as pulp.

"Joker" doesn't exploit pop-

Chichen Itza, Arthur lives in a tattered apartment with his eccentric birdlike mother (Frances Conroy). She once worked for, and is obsessed with, wealthy mayoral candidate Thomas Wayne, father of Bruce. Arthur's seven psychiatric medications and social

ambushed in an alley by street thugs. Later, on a subway car at night, still in costume and greasepaint, drunken Wall Street types corner him. He shoots the bankers and becomes a media sensation. (Gotham apparently has little love for Wall Streeters.) Ordi-

cartoonish "clown prince of crime."

Even so, portraying this lost and battered soul as the villain of eminence we know he must become this malevolent force remains a leap. That is a riddle for the next film to solve. Stay tuned.