



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A different Light"

A Different Light - 2nd November 2019 – “Movie time reflections on the Joker”

I used to resist going to the movies. It was the conformity that put me off - the idea of havening to sit in one place while watching 90 or so minutes of prescribed entertainment, without being able to move around at will- felt somewhat perturbing. But now, in the age of streamed entertainment on Smart TV, when we are offered what seems to be an endless choice of entertainment, it's a nice change to go to the movies and not have to make those decisions for an hour and half and get what is delivered to you.

I recently went to see 'The Joker', a dark movie, to say the least. It portrays the background of one of the set of villains in the Batman series of TV and films. The main character Arthur Fleck, is a part time clown who has a condition called the Pseudobulbar Affect or Emotional Incontinence. Basically he breaks out into fits of laughter at the most inappropriate times. People have accused me of doing the same on the rare occasion. I have a tendency to laugh at misfortune.

It's bizarre when you do things that are out of your control, when you want to stop but you just can't. I have recently had some bouts of Cough syncopy, where you cough uncontrollably until you faint. When I start coughing my wife and daughters yell at me "BREATHE, BREATHE!" and "Where's your inhaler?"

In the film Fleck's laughing is so maniacal that he is ostracized by society and subjected to violent beatings. He loses his job, funding for his medication is cut, as well as his counselling program. He is so badly treated by society that you find yourself wanting him to seek revenge on his persecutors, of which there are many. Eventually he snaps and has a violent episode himself, lashing out at bullies on a subway train with a gun.

He transforms from being a down trodden victim into a mysterious and malevolent character that has a dark coolness about him, that you just can't help but like, on some level. Does it portray mental illness in a bad light? Oh yes. Does it villainize disability? Oh, yes. But it is also a chilling commentary on how there is a cost for society when people with impairments are repeatedly let down.

There is a cringe worthy scene in 'The Joker' when a couple of his former workmates – clowns in everyday garb- visit Arthur, as he is on his downward descent into madness. As one of the former colleagues is killed by Arthur, the other, a small person attempts desperately to leave the apartment. The camera focuses in on the door and in particular the lock, which is clearly too high for this character to reach. The audience holds its collective breath as we anticipate the murder of this chap also, akin to shooting goldfish in a bowl. But, no, the Joker is a more nuanced being than we expect. Fleck displays a sense of comradery with those also unfairly disadvantaged by a world set up to cater for a one size fits all mentality. Fleck unbolts the door and lets his would be victim go.

The media is full of conflicted interpretations of this tortured tour de force by actor Joaquim Phoenix. Going 'to the movies' allows for a communal cultural experience that enables us to engage in a societal discussion – if the material is thought provoking enough. If you want to be part of the discussion you do need to get out and see what on top. I just caught the latest Taika Waititi epic exploration of 'group think' via the lens of Hitler Youth, 'Jojo Rabbit'. The equally confronting and hilarious film is also inspiring much critical discussion and analysis- which I now feel qualified to join, having sat with the locals at the Event theatre while quaffing my bubbles and ice-cream. But don't even get me started on the sociological implications of 'Zombieland Double Tap'....Happy Halloween all !

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception. A Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.