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# FROM MARVEL TO 'MOSUL': RUSSO BROTHERS EMBARK ON GLOBAL MISSION

When you have just directed the biggest blockbuster movie of all time, you earn the clout to dictate terms with even the highest executives in Hollywood. But for the Russo brothers, it also raised a question that would be familiar to the superheroes of "Avengers: Endgame"—what to do next with all that power? In an interview with AFP at the Toronto film festival, the Russos admitted the influence that comes with such uncharted global box office success is "an exceedingly powerful tool, more powerful than we understand."

"It can be used for positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement," said Joe Russo, who at 48 is marginally the younger of the affable duo from Cleveland, Ohio. The brothers did not spend their many Marvel promotional world tours just taking endless selfies with hysterical comic-book fans, but searching for new avenues to explore, they said. The result is a notably international and political slate of projects for their new studio AGBO—and barely a spandex-clad superhero in sight.

First up is "Mosul," which dramatizes the true story of Iraqi police's Nineveh SWAT team fighting to recapture their home city from the Islamic State group in 2017. The action thriller, inspired by a New Yorker article, is told entirely from Iraqis' per-

spective and shot in Arabic-radical ground for Hollywood. "It felt criminally overdue," said Anthony Russo, 49. "That's why we knew this movie had to get made—because this movie has never been made." Also in the works are "Dhaka," a film about the kidnapping of a Bangladeshi businessman shot mainly in India, and Japanese anime adaptation "Battle of the Planets."

But politics is a common thread to the brothers' next projects, which include a film about the opioid epidemic in their home state of Ohio. "We're living in a time where there's a lot of division-division is being promoted," said Joe. "You're either looking out for yourself right now, or you're looking out for the community." "And we choose to look out for the community."

Without naming any politicians directly, they say it would "be great" if the current White House watched "Mosul." "Clearly there is an incredible culpability on the part of the US in creating the problem in Iraq, and ISIS is a direct result of the war there," said Joe, using an acronym for the Islamic State group.

### More Marvel?

It is all a marked departure from the Russos' previous projects. The brothers first gained broad

recognition for their work on cult hit TV shows such as "Arrested Development" and "Community."

But after successfully directing "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" in 2014, they quickly rose to the top of the lucrative Marvel Studios filmmakers' stable. The brothers are not committed to any future Marvel films, but their desire to import new perspectives to Hollywood filmmaking is already apparent in the Disney-owned franchise's next projects.

"Ms Marvel" will soon become Marvel's first on-screen Muslim superhero, with a TV series on Disney+ streaming service about a Pakistani-origin teenage girl living in New Jersey. China-born Simu Liu will become Marvel's first leading Asian superhero in 2021's "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings." According to Joe, Marvel Studios boss Kevin Feige is "expending a lot of energy to diversify the Marvel Universe because everyone has the right to see their stories on screen."

Of course, the profit motive is unavoidable—"Endgame" made more at Asian box offices than the whopping \$860 million managed at home. "Joe and I love big global storytelling," said Anthony. "Our Marvel movies are among our favorite work that we've ever done." "Cinema is uniquely positioned to help open up people to new experiences



and new ideas." Does that mean a return to the world of superheroes one day? "Perhaps more Marvel movies. We're not talking about anything right now." — AFP

(From left) Directors/producers Mohamed Al-Daradji, Joseph Russo and Anthony Russo pose during a photo session for AFP at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival Day in Toronto, Ontario. — AFP



(From left) Robert De Niro, Todd Phillips, Joaquin Phoenix, Zazie Beetz and Bradley Cooper attend the 'Joker' premiere during the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto, Canada. — AFP photos

## Phoenix hails 'greatest' role as 'Joker' hits Toronto

Joaquin Phoenix said his critically acclaimed role in "Joker" was "one of the greatest experiences of my career," as the dark and ambitious comic book adaptation sent Toronto's film festival into a frenzy Monday. Fresh from scooping Venice's prestigious Golden Lion prize for best film on Saturday, the "Joker" premiere was the hottest ticket in town at North America's biggest film festival. "It seemed limitless, in how you could interpret the character and what you could do with it—it didn't feel like there were any rules," said Phoenix of playing the diabolical super-villain.

The film—and Phoenix's performance—have already drawn breathless Oscar predictions and controversy in equal measure. Batman's traditional nemesis has been famously played by the likes of Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger, but the "Gladiator" star's interpretation is arguably the most radical yet. Hailed as "sensational" and "unnerving" by some critics, it has raised concern for others that its depiction of mental illness and violence could prove "incendiary."

"There was something that was drawing me towards it, and it just evolved as we worked together," he told the gala audience in a discussion alongside director Todd Phillips. "It started becoming something more than I could have anticipated and it was one of the greatest experiences of my career." Phoenix also paid tribute to his late brother River Phoenix, telling a separate festival prize-giving gala how River had made him watch Robert De Niro's "Raging Bull" as a teenager and told him he was going to be an actor.

"He didn't ask me, he told me. And I am indebted to him for that because acting has given me such an incredible life," he said. River, who initially overshadowed his younger brother and played the young Indiana Jones in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," died aged 23 of a drug overdose, with the recording of Joaquin's desperate call for an ambulance sold to the media. Phoenix was later joined on the red carpet for "Joker" by co-star De Niro. The film is set in the 1970s as a nod to the brooding cinematic character studies of the time, like De Niro's "Taxi Driver" and "The King of Comedy." De Niro said he "understood all the connections" but had signed up for the project because of director Phillips.

### 'Corrupt circus'

Phillips, previously known for frat house comedies including the "Hangover" trilogy and "Road Trip", bristled at suggestions the movie was a major departure for him. "I've never been a fan of pigeonholing people and I hate when it's been done to me—like 'Why does the guy in 'The Hangover' get to do this?'"

Earlier on Monday "The Laundromat"—Netflix's film about the "Panama Papers" global corruption scandal—arrived in Toronto. Meryl Streep was joined on the red carpet by Antonio Banderas and Gary Oldman, who play the heads of the shady Panama law firm at the heart of the scandal, after it was exposed in 2016 for aiding tax evasion among the wealthy elite. Banderas told AFP the story had to be presented as comedy "because otherwise we can cry," while Oldman said they wanted to portray a "corrupt circus." Elsewhere Christian Bale and Matt Damon attended the star-studded premiere for "Ford v Ferrari"—the racing film known outside North America as "Le Mans '66'".

Bale, who plays Ken Miles, said the legendary racer was "a man who is a dad, who is a husband and who is not a megalomaniac, who is living life at 230 miles an hour, not knowing if he can stop at the end of it." The Toronto International Film Festival runs until September 15. — AFP

## 'IT Chapter Two' scares up \$91.1 million to top N America box office

Proving again the lure of a good scare, the Stephen King-inspired film "IT Chapter Two" took in \$91.1 million this weekend to top the North American box office, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations said Monday. That three-day total fell below the original "IT," with its frighteningly impressive \$123 million opening in 2017. But the two films now rank as the top two horror openings ever, according to Variety.

"IT Chapter Two" stars Jessica Chastain, James McAvoy, Isaiah Mustafa and Bill Hader as the grown-up versions of the kids who battled the terrifying, shape-shifting clown Pennywise 27 years earlier—and now must do it again. There were no other new releases in the top 10, and the box office lineup—in what has been a slow year for cinema—was little changed from last weekend.

Slipping one spot to second—and miles behind "IT Chapter Two"—was Lionsgate's political thriller "Angel Has Fallen," which earned \$6 million. Gerard Butler stars as a Secret Service agent wrongly accused of attempting to kill the US president (Morgan Freeman).

In third, also down one spot, was Universal's raunchy tween comedy "Good Boys," at \$5.5 million. Disney's updated "The Lion King" also slipped one spot, to fourth, at \$4.3 million. In fifth place was Universal's action film "Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw" starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Jason Statham, taking in \$3.8 million on its sixth weekend.

### Rounding out the weekend's top 10 were:

- "Overcomer" (\$3.7 million)
- "Dora & the City of Lost Gold" (\$2.3 million)
- "Ready or Not" (\$2.3 million)
- "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark" (\$2.3 million)
- "Once Upon a Time in... Hollywood" (\$2.2 million). — AFP



## Maggie Smith: Prickly yet endearing 'Downton Abbey' countess

Legendary actor Dame Maggie Smith is a British treasure in film and theatre but she is best known on the world's stage for her role in the TV series "Downton Abbey", whose film adaptation premiers in London on Monday. Smith, 84, has won global affection for her portrayal of the acid-tongued yet endearing Dowager Countess Lady Violet in the period drama, which has screened in over 100 countries. But for more than half a century, Smith has excelled in whatever she turned her hand to, winning a clutch of awards including two Oscars, and coming to personify a particular kind of English eccentricity.

She has played numerous characters from Mother Superior in "Sister Act" (1992) to a professor of metamorphosis in the Harry Potter films saga. However, since playing the Countess of Grantham, Lady Violet Crawley, in "Downton Abbey" she says she cannot go out without being recognized. "It's ridiculous—I led a perfectly normal life until Downton Abbey," she told the British Film Institute in April, 2017. "I would go to theatres, I would go to galleries and things like that on my own. And now I can't."

Smith has played the ruthless aristocrat in all six seasons of the show, created by screenwriter Julian Fellowes in 2010, winning a Golden Globe and three Emmy awards. After initially declining to act in the big screen adaptation of the series, Smith eventually agreed to appear in the film, which goes on general release in Britain on Friday and in US and European cinemas later this month.

### Snooty schoolteacher

Born on December 28, 1934, the daughter of an Oxford professor of pathology, Smith made her stage debut in 1952 with the Oxford University Dramatic Society. After a string of stage successes in London's West End and on Broadway, she famously appeared opposite Laurence Olivier in an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Othello" in 1959. This led to her joining Olivier's celebrated 1960s National Theatre company where she earned critical acclaim alongside her husband, the actor Robert Stephens.

By the end of the decade Smith's film career had taken off, winning the best actress Academy Award in 1969 for her unforgettable portrayal of a snooty, unorthodox Edinburgh schoolteacher in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie". She also picked up a best supporting actress award in 1978 for "California Suite" and in all has been Oscar-nominated six times. Smith's marriage to heavy-drinking Stephens, with whom she had two sons, collapsed in 1973 and they divorced two years later.

She remarried shortly after to the screenwriter Beverly Cross, who died in 1998. Smith was made a Dame of the British Empire in recognition of her work in 1990 and, besides receiving the top honors, has won many other stage and screen awards in both Britain and the United States.

### 'Energy and curiosity'

Smith is widely considered an actress with the rare ability to turn a cameo role into a central feature of a film. She "can capture in a single moment more than many actors can convey in an entire film", said the acclaimed director Nicholas Hytner after working with her on "The Lady in the Van" (2015). "She can be vulnerable, fierce, bleak and hilarious simultaneously, and she brings to the set each day the energy and curiosity of a young actor who's just started out." However, Smith can leave some feeling overawed.

"It's true I don't tolerate fools but then they don't tolerate me, so I am spiky," she told The Guardian newspaper in 2014. "Maybe that's why I'm quite good at playing spiky elderly ladies." Perhaps the best example was 2001's "Gosford Park"—also written by Fellowes—in which Smith played the snobbish and frightful Lady Constance, the Countess of Trentham, with aplomb. Smith is also credited for her tenacity to her craft. The actress has suffered from Graves' disease, a manageable thyroid condition causing tiredness, weight loss and heart flutter that affects a tiny proportion of individuals in the western world. She survived a breast cancer diagnosis in 2007 and filmed "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince" two years later whilst enduring chemotherapy treatment. "I was hairless. — AFP

## Silver spoon to silver screen: Downton Abbey makes cinematic debut

Everyone's favorite English aristocrats made their big screen debut on Monday, with the world cinematic premiere of global television hit "Downton Abbey" bringing old world charm to London's Leicester Square. The Crawley family make their comeback after the series drew to a close in 2015 following nine successful years. And they are back with a bang, awaiting the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to Downton. "I didn't particularly want to see a movie when we finished the show... then there was this kind of

a groundswell asking for a movie and it became real," Julian Fellowes, creator and scriptwriter of the show and film, told AFP before the screening.

The entire cast of the series is reunited, including Maggie Smith as the acrimonious dowager countess, despite her initial refusal to slip back into the matriarch's starched dresses. Other actors have joined the team, including Imelda Staunton (Dolores Umbridge in "Harry Potter"), who plays Lady Bagshaw. She joins her husband Jim Carter, who plays retired butler Charles

Carson. Unfortunately, Staunton had little luck in getting her husband to wait on her, telling AFP in mock outrage: "I got nothing out of him! He was on the other side of the dining room." The series traced the ups and downs of the aristocratic family and their servants from 1912 to the end of 1925, mixing day-to-day gossip and intrigue with large historic themes. — AFP



(From left) British actor Hugh Bonneville, US actor Elizabeth McGovern, British actor Michelle Dockery, British actor Laura Carmichael and Irish actor Allen Leech pose on the red carpet upon arrival for the world premiere of the film 'Downton Abbey' in London. — AFP photos



Creator and writer Julian Fellowes poses on the red carpet upon arrival for the world premiere of the film 'Downton Abbey'.