

March of the Penguins. Directed by Luc Jacquet. Worse yet, there's a Laurent, a Christophe, an Emmanuel, a Jérôme, and an Yves hanging around the production staff... might's well decant some brie, Marie-Victoire. Starring: Morgan Freeman, voice of... Hollywood sacred cow like who'd pan *him* reading the Discovery Channel script with a dead-pan delivery that might in fact have welled up from the soul of a flightless bird.

Try this: Get your bowling ball. Eat a whole bucket of *KFC*. Pass the bowling ball to your wife using only the folds of your belly (or the cheeks of your butt if you haven't got enough of that). Walk to Roanoke. Eat another bucket of *KFC*. Wife stays home. Sits on bowling ball. You walk back. Wife now passes you the bowling ball same way as before. Now *you* sit on bowling ball. Wife walks to Roanoke. Eats a bucket of *KFC*. Walks back. On the way a Rotweiler the size of Detroit bites her on the butt. Bowling ball exchange once more. Roanoke one more time. And back. Then both of you try to hold your breath in a bathtub full of icewater for fifteen minutes. Now give your idiot thirteen-year-old the keys to your Buick along with your VISA card. Walk to Roanoke. Don't come back.

That, apparently, is the life of an Emperor penguin. Who knew?

I'd be risking my life membership in the Eighty-Second Airborne Division Association if I urge you to shinny down to the Art Cinee-mah to catch a French (ptui!) film about penguins, but I dunno... these hazed-over 90-degree days with their soul-wilting humidity, you just might find the endless ice-choked vistas dusted in snow, the glacial sea lying open among the bergs and floes (and no, I haven't a clue what's the difference between a *berg* and a *floe* unless aren't the floes the ones that grow down and bergs the ones that grow up? Or the bergs got the two humps and the floes only the one? Well, anyhow...) kind of refreshing. Everybody loves penguins. Penguins stole the show in *Madagascar*, for instance. Remember Danny DeVito's misunderstood but loveable Penguin, schlurping shreds of raw fish out of an adorable little flipper in *Batman Returns*? Burgess Meredith from the teevee series, emitting these plaintive but sinister little ack's and yerk's from down in his throat? *Chilly Willy* from the comics, who hated the cold and floated in a bathtub to the tropics where he lay in the last panel on a beach lounge, soaking sun and strawing lemonade while—lesson here, kids!—now dreaming of the Pole he's abandoned? Anybody recall that Steve McQueen as Sergeant Eustis Clay had a plan to print advertising on penguins and turn them loose in where? ...Mississippi? ...Alabama? *Soldier in the Rain*. Dunno as that penguin for *Kool* cigarettes ever caught on, but, hey... somehow we'll buy a *noble* penguin but not a *hip* one.

Thing is that penguins stand upright—like us!—while not many critters do, most of them uncuddly: Think of your bare-butt baboon or your fanged orang. The black on white (or t'other way around) *does* sort of look like a tux. They *do* bear themselves with a sort of *triste* dignity we might wish was ours. Annnnnnd—don't we wish it, too?—the ungainly little things, reintegrated into their element, the sea, can be graceful as a ballerina, swooping and looping, shooting through the opaque water, freed from their clumsiness up in the air where *we're* stranded... by our birth and by our gravity. On top of which, or so the film shows us, the little buggers are *tough*! Apparently this French (ptui!) film

company sat on a clan of them for a year as they engaged on what has to be one of the least efficient mating sojourns in Nature (the penguins, not the French): a murderous march (hence the title) from the water's edge to a mysterious "breeding ground" (like who can tell one snow patch from another) where they first select a mate (like who can tell one of those things from another), then um, er... fertilize (mercifully, we *and* the penguins are spared the indignity of detail here), after which it's months of taking turns marching back to the sea for food (note to myself for future reference: mate where the food is, bozo), back to the breeding ground where the other has hugged the precious egg to itself all this time *and without evidently any nourishment except snow*, pass the egg, return to the sea, and on and on till young Spottiswood or little Melissa hatches, fuzzy black-eyed puffball not much less vulnerable out of the shell than inside it.

But they do seem, sometimes, human... and therefore both laughable and tragic. They nuzzle with a familiar tenderness. They fall on their butts on the ice. They skim down slopes on their tummies. They squawk at intervals where we figure somehow we might, too. They seem to grieve, likewise, over the frozen eggs that their fingerless flippers cannot quickly enough retrieve or the chicks lost to remorseless cold. They waddle purposefully if without comprehension into the teeth of the howling blizzard, huddle against the Antarctic (or the other one if that's not it) and their own stoic solitude, generate life. Too bad they can't breathe a little into Morgan Freeman.