LA MARCHE DE L'EMPEREUR: A REVIEW

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OF all the things to watch, why a French documentary? That was the question I asked myself even as I popped in the DVD for *La Marche de l'empereur*, which tells the story of the annual migration of the Antarctic Emperor penguins. By the time the end credits appeared, I was smitten.

What would be just another show about a bunch of birds crossing the ice is transformed through fabulous videography, masterful storytelling, and music that fits the script like a glove, into a truly remarkable saga.

The story is not a new one. The incredible journey that this film documents has been undertaken over millennia by uncountable penguins. What may be mundane for Antarctica is made magical for us who cannot fathom the hardship these extraordinary birds face, and yet there are elements in here that we can relate to.

Emperor penguins in their thousands abandon the deep blue security of their ocean home, climbing up on the ice to begin their long journey into a bleak, lifeless terrain. In single file, in a line that stretches for miles, the penguins brave blinding blizzards and gale force winds to march unerringly for their traditional breeding ground. They are guided by primal forces, sheer instinct, and the ethereal radiance of the Southern Cross. Upon arriving at their first stop, a comical courtship ritual begins, and ends with the penguins pairing off into monogamous couples.

The females remain long enough only to lay a single egg. Once this is accomplished, exhausted by weeks without nourishment, they begin their return journey across the ice field to the fish-filled seas. The male emperors are left behind to guard and hatch the precious eggs, which they cradle at all times on top of their feet. After two long months during which the males eat nothing, the eggs begin to hatch. Once they have emerged into their ghostly white new world, the chicks can not survive for long on their fathers' limited food reserves. If their mothers are late returning from the ocean with food, the newly hatched young will die. Once the families are reunited, the roles reverse, the mothers remaining with their new young while their knackered-out mates head for the sea, and food. While the adults fish, the chicks face the ever-present threat of attack by prowling giant petrels. As the weather grows warmer and the ice floes finally begin to crack and melt, the adults will repeat their arduous journey countless times. The Emperors' March resumes, traversing many hundreds of miles over some of the most treacherous territory on Earth, until the chicks are ready to take their first faltering dive into the deep blue waters of the Antarctic.

There is a strangely human element to the story, reinforced by the fact that Jacquet has used voice actors for the two protagonist penguins, giving voice to their thoughts and emotions, which is more personal than having some narrator telling the story. There are some moments in the movie, like when the chick runs out to greet his returning father, or when one anguished penguin mother, upon discovering her baby frozen to death, loses her mind and attacks another chick, that you almost forget that these are birds we are looking at. The narrative is further aided by a customised soundtrack provided by Emilie Simon, whose haunting voice and eerie lyrics add to the magical quality of the spectacular landscape that forms the backdrop of the film. My personal favourite track was "Frozen World", which played during the penguins' mating ritual.

I believe an English-language version of the docu-drama has been made by Warner Brothers, with Morgan Freeman as the narrator, but if you can find the French version with decent subtitles, I'd still recommend that one, because it is truly a work of art.

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Joke

A 70-year-old man went to the doctor's for a physical.

The doctor ran some tests and said to the man, "Well, everything seems to be in top condition physically, but what about mentally? How is your connection with God?"

And the man answered, "Oh me and God? We have a really tight bond, he's so good to me. Every night when I have to get up to go to the bathroom, he turns on the light for me, and then, when I leave, he turns it back off."

The Doctor was astonished. He called the man's wife and said, "I'd like to speak to you about your husband's connection with God. He claims that every night when he needs to use the restroom, God turns on the light for him and turns it off for him again when he leaves. Is this true?"

And she said, "That idiot, he's been peeing in the refrigerator!"