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## THE STORY BEHIND THE PENGUINS ON THE ICE FLOE

by

**Yves Darondeau**

Bonne Pioche production company  
Producer of the film *The March of the Penguins*

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## Overview

The three creators of Bonne Pioche have a rule : nothing is taboo and there are no limits to any artistic genre, subject area or format. This is why, when they were looking for sponsors to finance Luc Jacquet's film *The March of the Penguins*, their first feature-length film as producers, they came up against people in the business who found their project hard to believe. How could this project possibly get off the ground if there was no casting, no references and no rushes ? A story about penguins fighting for the survival of their species won a great deal of sympathy but did little to convince financial backers. The film crew did not wait around for the funding and headed out to the Antarctic where they stayed for a year, filming in extreme weather conditions. Miraculously the images they brought back survived the polar cold. Despite being on the verge of bankruptcy and after many ups and downs, Bonne Pioche finally found international success when the film was released in 2005 which ensured its credibility in the world of cinema.

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## TALK : Yves Darondeau

My talk tells the story behind the film *The March of the Penguins* which was very important for our company. It was a project where at one point we were in the depths of despair and the film could justifiably have been entitled *The March of the Producers*. Like the penguins huddling over the incubating egg in our film, we too had to brave particularly hostile conditions before our project 'hatched'.

### Producing and not reproducing

Emmanuel Priou, Christophe Lioud and I come from the French provinces. In 1994, ten years after we graduated from the *École supérieure de réalisation audiovisuelle* (a film school specialising in animation and audiovisual production) where we first met, we created the production company Bonne Pioche. Each of us had professional experience as contract workers in the entertainment business in various areas (such as documentary production, advertising and cinema) and undertaking different jobs (such as cameraman, television director, assistant director and production director). Our aim was simple : we were determined to work together and so be free to produce the projects we wanted to, without having to worry about their genre, format or subject matter.

We started out by producing television documentaries such as *Thalassa* and *Faut pas rêver* for the France 3 channel. We filmed live performances at the Montreal festival *Juste pour rire*. Production was often difficult and was not very profitable, so we decided to work for advertising agencies and record labels instead, and it was these activities that enabled the company to survive financially. In 2000, the company had five employees.

We continued to develop more ambitious projects and became more interested in producing documentaries intended for international audiences. We produced a number of films with English, Canadian and American partners.

Then the idea of producing a film for cinema became our objective. We developed several ideas with this in mind, but we never had a sufficiently strong and unusual screenplay which we considered viable to launch ourselves into this type of production.

### A story for the big screen

In 2002 we were contacted by Luc Jacquet who was known for his work as a director of wildlife documentaries. He suggested making a film about the real life story of emperor penguins on the ice floe. As a biologist, Luc had spent several years in Adélie Land (eastern Antarctica) studying these birds. We had absolutely no experience of wildlife films and no idea at all about the technical requirements of filming in Antarctica, but the story seemed wonderful. It was totally new and the reproductive cycle of penguins had never been filmed before in its entirety and therefore would be likely to be of interest to a large audience.

Luc's project had been refused by numerous producers who were not happy with the complexities and the risks which might be incurred. We were the same age as Luc, curious and eager to listen. We immediately got on very well. We thought that this screenplay was strong and unusual enough for us to allow ourselves to venture into the world of cinema.

The penguins' reproductive cycle spans a year and is full of pitfalls. It is a real struggle for survival during which the males and females take turns to look after the unhatched chick. The stakes are high : the preservation of the species is at stake, set in an environment of extreme climatic conditions. People can identify with penguins : they walk on two feet like humans, and everyone knows what they are, even if they have never seen them close-up. In a nutshell, the project offered real subject matter about a true story which appeals to a wide public, and takes place in an extraordinary environment. We asked Luc to make it into a film for cinema. It would be our first feature-length production.

## In the Antarctic

The project was appealing, but there were many important risks. It meant spending a year in the Antarctic studying the complete reproductive cycle of the penguins. This continent is not well known. Few films have been made there, and it remains one of the rare places on Earth which is still difficult to reach. It takes at least ten days to get from Paris to the French base, Dumont d'Urville in Adélie Land, travelling via Tasmania and the port of Hobart where one boards the Polar Institute boat which then takes six days to reach its destination, often in perilous conditions. The journey takes place during the summer months of November and December when the ice floe has not yet formed, and it is still possible to reach the scientific base (which is part of the French Paul Émile Victor Polar Institute) by icebreaker.

### *A year trapped in ice*

The filming process necessitated leaving a crew in the Antarctic for an entire year. It would be possible to contact the team but they would essentially be prisoners of the ice for the nine winter months during which time no boat or aeroplane could reach them because of the climatic conditions. Living conditions in the Antarctic for a year would be very taxing. There is absolutely nothing in the Antarctic during the winter : no inhabitants (apart from scientific teams), no animals, just a desert of ice.

Would the reels of film withstand polar temperatures and would it still be possible to view the film a year after it had been shot ? All we knew was that digital cameras could not withstand temperatures of - 40°C, whereas a camera taking the images on reels of film could easily be repaired if it stopped working. In any case, we did not have time to test out the equipment. It was already September 2002, and, thanks to Luc Jacquet, the Polar Institute offered our film crew (reduced to a strict minimum) accommodation through the coming winter months.

Having carried out psychological tests, we were able to employ the technicians who were best suited to this sort of adventure. Laurent Chalet and Jérôme Maison were capable of withstanding the most extreme filming conditions. They left for Adélie Land, accompanied by Luc Jacquet. Who had already experienced the winter out there. He came back in February with the last boat before the winter set in.

### *Filming penguins*

The Polar Institute can only accommodate twenty-five people each year, and it gave us permission to have just two technicians there during the winter period. It turned out that the filming did not require any more crew than this. The climatic conditions were extremely difficult but we had an advantage : emperor penguins have never been hunted by man and therefore are not afraid of humans, so we were able to approach them very easily.

Having spent several winters in Antarctica, Luc knew the unchanging annual penguin reproductive cycle by heart. The team's mission was to film the different phases. There were 140 hours of rushes. In the end, the editing process was not as difficult as one might think, because one emperor penguin looks extremely similar to the next, and so in this film, it is never the same emperor penguin from one shot to the next, even if the audience thinks that it is. This is the *tour de force* of Luc's film, making a cinematic story based on the natural behaviour of penguins.

We communicated with the team via the Internet for the nine winter months. They continued filming the behaviour of the birds until Luc reappeared after the winter. There was one accident during this period. In the course of a terrible storm, the two technicians got lost and one of them broke a leg. Fortunately, they managed to radio to the base, and a rescue party was sent out. They risked their lives.

## **During this time, in Paris...**

In Paris, our working conditions were just as extreme ! Our first major difficulty was to finance this project : no insurance company would agree to insure a film which could not give any guarantee that its reels were usable.

### *Not easily convinced by penguins*

At last in April 2003, we managed to find an insurance policy which allowed us to start looking for financial partners. Naturally, we received a large number of negative replies : a story about penguins on an ice floe who had to endure difficult conditions in order to reproduce, attracted a great deal of sympathy but convinced no-one. Additionally, we had never made a feature-length film, the director was an unknown, and we had no pictures to show prospective backers !

We had pre-sold two televised documentaries, each lasting 52 minutes, to France 3 and Canal +, our usual partners. This helped us finance setting up our team in the Antarctic, but the film had a budget of 2.8 million Euros, and filming had already started a few months earlier. Our company's equity capital was not sufficient to meet the costs of such a heavy investment. As a result, all our other projects started to suffer from the impact this film was having on the company's resources. It would have been better not to question the feasibility of the film and just keep going. We believed absolutely in this film, so we put our heads down, determined, and effectively ran the risk of never being able to raise our heads again.

### *Twists and turns*

We spent six months in vain, looking for funding, before we met Jean-François Camilleri, the director of Buena Vista, Disney's distribution company in France. When, out of pure desperation, we started miming penguins walking, he reacted miraculously. This story appealed to a wide public and was natural and original. It was exactly what he and Disney had been looking for to appeal to families. At the end of June 2003, he gave us his personal support for the project, without, as yet, any certainty about Disney's involvement. Two months later, he told us that the Americans had reacted enthusiastically. Clearly, this was all we needed to come to life again !

To our surprise, three weeks later, we learned that Disney's big boss would not back our project. A project by Richard Gere about the Antarctic had been refused, and so it was naturally impossible for political reasons to finance a similar French project.

Jean-François Camilleri continued to show his support for us, and even went so far as to offer his help to find us partners in France. The heads of Gaumont showed interest in the project, and agreed to take part if France 3 and Canal + were partners. This was impossible for the cinema branch of France 3 because filming was already underway. As for Canal +, after waiting two months for their reply, they finally refused. It was November 2003 and we were back to square one.

We were in a financial crisis and were forced to pay ourselves half-salaries. We considered selling part of the company. Our only comfort was our suppliers who continued to support us, and even agreed to let us postpone our repayments to some date in the future.

## **The bet finally paid off**

When the icebreaker was able to arrive at the base, the Antarctic team was joined by Luc Jacquet and a cameraman specialising in underwater photography. As ill luck would have it, the team was forced to stay a month longer than intended as the baby penguins had taken more time than usual to reach the sea. When the film boxes arrived in Paris in December 2004, we no longer had any money to develop them all. Therefore, we developed just a few reels. We

were anxious to discover if the reels had managed to survive nine months without being developed. Miraculously, the images were all intact.

In the end, the dangers were behind us. We had managed to carry out the production and had taken all the financial, human and technical risks. Filming was over.

Our moral was very high, even if our finances were at their worst. The technical risk was no longer a problem and we could now get down to the editing process and the search for people to continue the film's production. Émilie Simon was chosen to compose the music, and Michel Fessler was employed as a co-writer to continue Luc's idea of describing the natural behaviour of penguins based around the story of a couple of penguins struggling to keep their newborn alive, against the odds.

*The studios get interested...*

When I went to see the French studios, I suddenly felt that there was renewed interest. The Cannes film festival was approaching and it was up to them to decide if they wanted to finance the project. I pressed them to let us know their decision and not waste any time. This upset them a little, but several of them were about to agree. As far as Jean-François Camilleri was concerned, he had already agreed to distribute the film in French cinemas and to invest in the production, but the way Disney works in the United States is complicated, and a certain length of time has to elapse before a contract can be signed. The support of one of the biggest distributors in French cinema was clearly an advantage. Two weeks before the opening of the Cannes film festival, several French groups made us solid offers, insisting that we let them have *carte blanche* for the rest of the work that remained to be done.

We had not struggled for a year-and-a-half to let the project slip through our fingers now, so we refused their offers and instead chose an international distribution company, Wild Bunch, which paid us one million Euros to sell the film abroad. Buena Vista offered to pay at least 500,000 Euros for distributing the film in France and a private co-producer, APC, 200,000 Euros.

Two days after Cannes opened, the film had already been sold throughout the world, apart from the United States. Canal +, which had showed little interest in our project over the past year-and-a-half, offered to buy the film in advance of its completion. This allowed us to settle our budget of 2.8 million Euros, at last !

Post-production continued until December 2004. Our distributor decided to release 400 copies of the film to cinemas rather than the usual 150 for a prestigious documentary, and strongly invested in the marketing so that the release of *The March of the Penguins* in January 2005 was sure to be the film event of the month. When the press was shown the film, we were able to see how enthusiastic the public were likely to be about the film. It sold 2 million tickets in France, a far better result than anything we could have expected.

## Epilogue

At the same time as it was released in France, the Sundance Festival in Utah was chosen as the venue for the premier of the film in the United States and Warner contacted us to distribute it. The first week-end following its release, the film played to packed audiences in New York and Los Angeles. Subsequently, the film went from being shown in 4 cinemas to 2,600 cinemas nationwide in the space of a few weeks. *The March of the Penguins* established its position as a blockbuster, becoming the most successful box-office French film in the United States in the history of cinema, beating *The Fabulous Destiny of Amélie Poulain* and *The Fifth Element* ! It was nominated for several awards in prestigious festivals, and in 2006 it won the *César* award for the best sound, the *Victoire de la musique* award for the best original cinema soundtrack, and the Oscar for the best documentary feature.

*The March of the Penguins* is a real UFO in the world of cinema. It upset all forecasts from leading Hollywood specialists, some of whom even went as far to question the American system of production. Certainly, apart from its success, the ratio between the cost of the film and the revenues it accrued is truly exceptional for a film documentary. It is therefore a cinematographic phenomenon and also a social phenomenon. Our penguins aroused the curiosity of an audience from a broad social spectrum in all four corners of the world.

## DISCUSSION

### Financing the film

**Question :** *Could you explain in detail the mechanisms for financing a film in France ?*

**Yves Darondeau :** The script is the first essential stage in the financing of a film, even before the production stage. One has to find a distributor who is interested in the script and who is ready to invest a minimum amount of money guaranteed on receipts. The distributor also pays the costs of the film's release and any technical costs. A distributor for the video market may be necessary if the film distribution company does not also manage distribution of the film on video. The second stage involves international sales. One has to find agents who will put up a minimum amount of money guaranteed on receipts, depending on the film's potential.

The third stage of financing involves television channels. Canal +, the number one French broadcaster, is obliged to invest in cinema and pre-buys the rights to distribute films twelve months after their release. All the other French television channels can also take part in the project by investing both in the co-production and in film distribution rights. It is possible to negotiate several distributions. As far as 'Sofica' companies are concerned, these are companies whose mandate is to collect funds to reinvest in the cinema and audiovisual industry. They have the advantage of offering tax exemption on part of the investment made by individuals. They are not co-producers but benefit from priority reimbursement methods, which are defined during initial negotiations with producers. Private bodies and geographical regional councils can also contribute to the financing of a film.

**Q. :** *You have not mentioned the Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC : French equivalent of the British Film Institute).*

**Y. D. :** Because we had never produced a feature-length film, we could not benefit from the funds of the CNC. We could have asked for an advance on our receipts before we started filming, but we began production very quickly and did not have time to formalise our request. However, we did not need the CNC's money, but the CNC's approval for production was necessary in order to open a CNC account and generate funds to finance the film. In the end, the CNC was neither a neutral support nor a neutral partner but it gave the stamp of approval to our project.

### Fixed ideas about production

**Q. :** *It was clearly difficult for people to accept this project as it was out of the ordinary and went against traditional ways of doing things. Do you think that innovation is necessarily fragile ? I am struck by the modest development of your company compared to most production companies which often take themselves seriously very quickly. Has it been to your advantage to tread slowly ?*

**Y. D. :** When we created Bonne Pioche, one of the priorities of my associates and I was to work as a team. Constant contact with each other on a daily basis, far from being politically correct, is very stimulating. We are curious about everything. Why should we limit ourselves to a particular genre ? Most of our friends who are producers, have chosen to specialise, and this has helped them become known much more quickly. As far as we are concerned, we have always let it be known that we are interested in everything. This means that we move forward more slowly but it gives us an advantage : the lean years which we experienced made us build

solid foundations for our company and this should stand us in good stead should a crisis in the future. We could have given up when we embarked on *The March of the Penguins* project, but as a threesome, we found force in numbers. This is one of the themes of the film ! We support each other in our work. Progressing slowly has also helped us to remain open to discussion. Fear of the unknown and of differences is human. Of course, innovation is frightening, but how can one create if one does not take risks ?

**Q. :** *Is Bonne Pioche the anti-model of EuropaCorp ? EuropaCorp tries to protect itself from risks by encouraging traditional methods, such as using film stars, making action movies and marketing. On the other hand, you tend to do things which have never been done before and which nobody wants, and yet this works. Is your company's name a lucky charm ? Is your adventure something of a fairy story ?*

**Y. D. :** I learned in the field, and I started producing when I felt I was ready. It is more of a passion than an entrepreneurial approach. All producers are generally like this. There is no ready-made recipe for this risky profession. Each film is a prototype. Every year, films no-one expects to do well have very good box office results. This is good because it constantly fuels creation. Success might creep up on us from nowhere ! I am stimulated by learning new things. I feel that I am at school all the time ! This is perhaps our magical formula. We are lucky enough to have a profession which opens up horizons. It would be wrong to restrict ourselves. I do not rule out anything, including making a film with Bruce Willis !

I greatly admire the work of Pierre-Ange Le Pogam and Luc Besson and their attempt to counterbalance the influence of American cinema. Theirs is an independent and European company. It has its rightful place and it is essential that it exists. It also produces risky films, such as the wonderful *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* directed by Tommy Lee Jones. EuropaCorp and Bonne Pioche are very different companies but have one point in common : they both want to remain independent and develop new models.

**Q. :** *Do your associates agree with your risky, eclectic strategy ?*

**Y. D. :** We have been working together for fifteen years, and we have devised a very simple method of working. Our choice of films has to be reached unanimously. We do not take a risk unless all three of us are completely ready. This is a prerequisite for the working of our company. One of us may be very enthusiastic about a particular project and the other two may be more reticent. This prompts discussion and makes us refine our reasoning. Since we are all different, we consider that a project has some meaning if it is capable of winning over the others.

### **True artistic choice**

**Q. :** *The film commentary was at the centre of a certain amount of controversy. How do you react to criticism about it ?*

**Y. D. :** *The March of the Penguins* attempts to tell the natural history of penguins like a story, using a poetic rather than a scientific approach. In the film, everything is true but certain parts have been edited. The reality is a great deal more cruel. For example, the mortality of baby penguins – a natural occurrence – was cut from the film so as not to upset younger viewers. We also simplified the content of the film so that it could be understood by a wider audience.

In telling the story, we used actors' voices to allow the audience to instantly recognise the male, the female and their baby. This was an artistic choice, and opinions about this decision may vary. Personally, I am convinced that it was best way to connect with the audience. An external narration would not have had the same effect on children. This is the heart of the dilemma about trying to appeal to an audience of all ages. This dialogue was used in every country except the United States where Morgan Freeman narrates the entire story.

**Q. :** *You have not mentioned the music in the film which is very important.*

**Y. D. :** Yes. It is also an artistic choice. Some people liked it, others hated it, but it was part of the process of transporting the audience to another world. Because the Antarctic is an unexplored area, we thought it was important to create a specific atmosphere of sounds. It was a real opportunity for creative talent. I was already aware of Émilie Simon's musical creative talent and I thought that the types of sounds which she proposed could really match the cold environment. It was totally by chance that when I contacted her, she was in the Alps recording snow sounds for her song 'Ice Girl'. Our project appealed to her at once. The music she composed is very important because it permeates the film. It gives depth to the story and is a hallmark of the film.

**Q. :** *To go back to the scientific humility of the film which I greatly appreciated, there are still some topics which remain unclear. For example, the audience is not given all the details about the penguin's reproductive cycle. Is this a deliberate commercial strategy ?*

**Y. D. :** It is an artistic choice. Since the subject is fascinating, we produced a 52 minutes documentary entitled *Des manchots et des hommes (Of Penguins and Men)* which tells the behind-the-scenes story of the filming and gives additional scientific information. This documentary is featured on the DVD.

**Q. :** *I happened to see your film in a small town in the United States where it received rapturous applause and I am upset that it was 'hijacked' by creationists. Do you have the financial means to retaliate against this sort of misappropriation ?*

**Y. D. :** Several articles were written about this in the United States. Of course, we took a firm position and denounced the absurdity of this hijacking. Unfortunately, we cannot do very much more. It is very difficult to control this sort of phenomenon. In China, feminists have used the film as a pretext to defend their cause ; in other countries it is the homosexuals. This goes to prove once again to what extent people identify with this story !

**Q. :** *What is your policy regarding spin-off products from the film ?*

**Y. D. :** Penguins belong to everyone, but in fact we did not have the time to get involved in this aspect as we were preoccupied by more pressing problems. However, we are not at all against spin-off products and we were able to anticipate this aspect much better with our next film, *The fox and the child (Le Renard et l'enfant)*. Nonetheless, we prefer to sell products which bear some relationship to the subject matter and intentions behind the film. We see these products more as a means of communication rather than a source of revenue. This sets us apart from important American production companies for whom spin-off products are an activity in their own right.

### **What next ?**

**Q. :** *Several months after their release, even successful films are often forgotten. Is *The March of the Penguins* still making money today ?*

**Y. D. :** Considering the number of films which are released every week, a film's fate can be decided in a few days ! If the film does not sell enough tickets between the Wednesday when it goes on general release and the following Sunday night, its run is ended. A film's life depends purely on the numbers of tickets sold.

*The March of the Penguins* sold 473,000 tickets in its first week which was unhopped for. Thanks to word-of-mouth, it ran for a further eight weeks. The DVD came out six months later when the film was successful in the United States. The press helped to publicise the success of the film and this enabled us to sell a considerable number of DVDs. Success at the *Césars*, the *Victoire de la musique* for Émilie Simon, and the Oscars, made sure that the film stayed in people's mind for a year-and-a-half. Penguins were used in numerous advertisements and were the stars of the cartoon film *Happy Feet*. The film left its mark on children and became a reference for many people. All in all, it is enjoying an unusual lease of life !

**Q. :** *After the lean years, how did you manage the flood of billions of dollars generated by the film's success ?*

**Y. D. :** We were all forty years old and therefore capable of standing back from the situation and putting its success into perspective. We were convinced that luck played a very large part in this success. We also knew that success like this does not happen twice. So we were happy. With regard to the revenues which the film generated, they were substantial because they amounted to millions of Euros, but they also were used to pay intermediaries such as the distributors, cinema owners, sales teams and royalties owners. In the United States, the revenues remain outstanding. Americans are not used to transferring money and even less so to French producers. We are currently looking at the legal situation using the American methods. This will certainly be resolved over the course of the next three years.

Most importantly, the international success of *The March of the Penguins* brought us credibility as producers. Our second film for cinema, which was equally unexpected, had nothing to do with animals. *Dans la peau de Jacques Chirac*, by Karl Zéro and Michel Royer, came out last year and is an unusual documentary film which uses archive film. In October 2005, when we were looking for partners for this film, we encountered the same lack of comprehension and cautiousness as we had for our first film. We ended up financing the film almost by ourselves. It registered 150,000 cinema entrances which is very reasonable for a film documentary. The microcosm of Parisian cinema was taken aback by our methods. Once again, we were poised between two different genres : having created a film documentary in the form of a story, we were now producing a documentary which was like a comedy. It was *The March of the Penguins* which allowed us to take this risk. For an independent production company like ours, it is important to establish and gain credibility with unusual subjects.

Bonne Pioche's third film for cinema and Luc Jacquet's second film is *The fox and the child* (*Le Renard et l'enfant*), an ambitious project with a theme from nature. Financing was easy despite a large budget of 11 million Euros. We have a lot of hope for this film. We pre-sold it throughout the world, including the United States where 700 copies will be released at Christmas, which is very promising. Regarding this new project, we have worked to the level of credibility which we earned from *The March of the Penguins* and *Dans la peau de Jacques Chirac*. We now have potential partners who want to work with us from the very beginning !

We have other projects in production which are very different, including a musical animation film due to be released in three years' time, and a comedy-documentary with a small budget whose release is programmed for next year. This is an original project, a road movie, in which the director, who is also the cameraman and the actor, invites himself to stay the night with Americans. We are also working in television and producing documentaries (lasting 52 or 90 minutes) and shorter programmes (13 or 26 minutes) about various topics. Lastly, we opened an office in New York in order to be closer to the American market and sources of new talent. We are still a small company : we currently have fifteen employees and our aim is to produce one or two films each year, no more. We are producers who love working in their chosen field, and artisans who are enthusiastic about *haute couture* as opposed to *prêt à porter*.

Presentation of the speaker :

Yves Darondeau : born in Dunkerque. After his *baccalauréat*, he studied at the École supérieure de réalisation audiovisuelle (ESRA) in Paris from 1984 to 1986. It was here, in his first year, that he met Christophe Lioud and Émmanuel Priou, his future associates. From 1986 to the end of 1993, he was a contract worker in the entertainment business, both as assistant director and production director. At the end of 1993, he and his two friends from film school created the Bonne Pioche production company which they still manage today.

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