



## BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

### **THE PENGUIN LESSONS (12A)**

Director: Peter Cattaneo

Starring: Steve Coogan, Björn Gustafsson, David Herrero, Jonathan Pryce  
UK/Spain, 2024, 1 hour 50 minutes, English/Spanish + English subtitles

"You don't often see penguins in films about human rights abuses", Steve Coogan, star of *The Penguin Lessons*, observed in an interview with *Variety*. But they're front and centre in Cattaneo's film. So much so that they had their own green room + pool on set. *The Penguin Lessons* is based on Tom Michell's memoir of his time as an English teacher at an elite Buenos Aires private school during Argentina's 1976 military coup d'état, and the penguin he accidentally adopted over the border in Uruguay whilst trying to impress a girl. It's a comedy drama, which attempts to pull off the same humanizing feat Cattaneo achieved in spades with *The Full Monty* for those trapped in the industrial depression of Sheffield, for those crushed by a coup which is estimated to have killed or disappeared between 22,000 and 30,000 people. As Jonathan Pryce, who plays the headteacher, observes on Tom/Coogan's arrival 'Argentina is in chaos'....

On its appearance at the Toronto Film Festival in 2024, Ryan Gilbey had this to say in *The Guardian*: "*Tom vows to stay out of all that until one morning when a woman he is trying to impress cajoles him into rescuing a Magellanic penguin stranded on the beach in an oil slick. He hoses it down and then the blighter won't stop following him. Before long, it not only has a name (Juan Salvador, after the Spanish version of the hippy-dippy bestseller Jonathan Livingston Seagull) but it is living in Tom's bath and becoming a confidant to everyone at the school. Having told himself '...there's nothing we can do' when he first encountered the stricken bird, he wakes up to the fact that – hey! – one guy can make a difference. Inspired by his relationship with Juan Salvador, Tom becomes the mouse that roars, or at least raises its voice every now and then.*

*Before you can say 'O Penguin! My Penguin!', he is inspiring his pupils to lie beneath their desks to see life from another perspective, using poetry to teach resistance – cue more harrumphing from the school head – and even standing up to a military bullyboy."*

Well, it's not *Rojo* or *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. And it doesn't aspire to *The Hour of the Furnaces*, which at any rate predates the coup, but in humanising and thereby making accessible to a wider audience, *The Penguin Lessons* gets a message out there. And with Javier Milei, Argentina's new leader, sharing a chain saw on stage with Elon Musk, it couldn't be more timely.

Notes compiled by Stephen Hopkins

If you like this, you may enjoy

### **TWO TO ONE**

A heist comedy set in East Germany 1990, the final hot summer before reunification, hinges on the tiny six-day exchange window before the Ostmark becomes obsolete.

### **I'M STILL HERE**

Accomplished storytelling from Walter Salles (*Central Station*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*) in this stirring, visually rich account of 1970s family life during Brazil's military junta.