

Movies



Telling his Tale

Morgan Freeman can relate to debilitating injury that titular mammal suffers in *Dolphin Tale*

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Morgan Freeman painfully knows all too well about recovery and rehabilitation.

The Oscar-winning actor continues to cope with the aftermath of a 2008 car crash in which his left arm suffered fractured bones and debilitating nerve damage.

"The main problem now is atrophy," he says, referring to his arm and gloved left hand. "I've got atrophy all through here — there's no muscle. So what they're trying now is to get blood flow through there so you



can start to build muscle. I'm trying to keep active."

Two of his fingers have so little sensation, he explains, that he wouldn't even feel them if they were broken.

Considering the severity of the crash — he had to be cut loose from the wreckage

— and the lengthy healing process, does he feel the experience changed either him or his perspective?

"No, I'm the same guy I was before," he says in a beachfront hotel on the Florida coast.

"I wasn't driving particularly fast during the accident, so I haven't slowed down as a result. I just can't really do things I used to do. I'm not a good horseman, I can't sail my boat, I can't fly my plane because all those things take more than one hand ... Essentially

I have not changed my outlook on life. I just have a little bit less ability."

But no less energy. Case in point: The ever-prolific Freeman is here to discuss his latest, the family film *Dolphin Tale*.

Opening Friday, the movie is based on the true story of Winter, a dolphin who, after losing her tail in a crab trap, wound up at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, a hospital that rescues and recuperates injured sea life. There, she was fitted with a prosthetic to save her life.

Freeman plays a composite character based on the two men who designed the revolutionary apparatus — the technology for which is now aiding human amputees. Ashley Judd and Harry Connick, Jr. co-star.

The film is the latest in a string of projects for Freeman that reflect his own passion for ecological and scientific issues. In 2010, for example, he narrated Discovery Channel's science-themed *Through the Wormhole*. Earlier this

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Dolphin Tale



Morgan Freeman as Dr. McCarthy (second from left) shows off the prosthetic tail he made for a dolphin named Winter. Inset: Nathan Gamble and Harry Connick, Jr. feed Winter in *Dolphin Tale*.



year, he narrated *Born to be Wild*, a documentary about two women — one in Kenya, one in Borneo — who operate orphanages for elephants and orangutans, respectively.

Contributing to these productions, he adds, is his way of being involved “in some small way.”

Likewise, the story of *Winter* is an uplifting story about decent people interacting positively with another species. Freeman’s interest in the environment, he says, “has been there for awhile. I read a trilogy — *Ishmael, The Story of B and My Ishmael*. And (author Daniel Quinn) was speaking at length through this gorilla named Ishmael on the human impact on life. Do you realize that we’re turning everything on the planet into food for humans? Do you know what the ultimate outcome of that is? No more humans ... All of that weighs on you, if you think about it. You don’t know what you can do about it, but it certainly bears thinking about it. And if you’re going to change anything, you have to start with yourself.”

With *Dolphin Tale* about to open, Freeman is currently filming next summer’s *The Dark Knight Rises* — a sequel he declines to elaborate on

during an earlier roundtable discussion with journalists.

He’s more forthcoming about a career that has spanned decades. He recalls how, after he didn’t work for all of 1981, he considered becoming a limousine driver. Eventually he was hired in 1982 for a Paul Newman film. From there, his fortunes changed dramatically. By the end of the decade, he was Oscar nominated for *Driving Miss Daisy*. And since then, he has amassed credits ranging from dramas (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *Million Dollar Baby*) to blockbusters (*The Dark Knight*) to comedies (*The Bucket List*).

But if there were times when he doubted whether he could succeed, he never questioned what he should be doing.

“You’re never afraid when you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. I’m

doing what I was born to do.”

Now so many years later, he says his criteria for selecting roles is equally elementary.

“Who am I working with? Do I have a good story? Do I have a good part? And how much am I going to get paid?”

He pauses and smiles. “Or it’s in the opposite order.”

He’s similarly succinct about the value of research.

“I read the script, that’s it. You don’t have to do research. Someone asked me for *The Shawshank Redemption*: ‘Did you do research?’ I said, ‘No, what — like live in a prison?’ But some did. (But me) no. If it’s not in the script, you’re not likely to get it.”

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CREATURE FEATURES

Fur-covered stars have always been popular — look at Alec Baldwin — but this year, the other species that share our world have been especially plentiful on the big screen. Already, we’ve had Robert Pattinson fetching water for elephants, Jim Carrey dodging penguin poop, apes rising to take over the planet and Disney’s African cats. So with *Dolphin Tale* opening Friday, what better time to revisit these 10 other great four-legged (and fin-sporting) films?

OLD YELLER (1957)

The family tearjerker by which all family tearjerkers are judged. A boy in the old west bonds with a golden canine. But when Old Yeller contracts rabies while saving the boy, one hopes all dogs go to heaven.

BORN FREE (1966)

This fact-based film follows Joy Adamson and her game warden husband who realize the only way to truly save a lion cub they’ve raised — and give her the life she deserves — is to teach her how to be wild.

THE BLACK STALLION (1979)

A shipwrecked boy bonds with his only island companion: An Arabian stallion. After they’re rescued, they enter a championship horseracing event.

PHAR LAP (1983)

Also directed by Simon Wincer (*Free Willy*), this Australian period piece follows a racehorse who bucked the system *Down Under*.

FREE WILLY (1993)

A boy conspires to save a killer whale from an aquarium. Famous for its climatic scene in which Willy leaps to freedom. (Much cheerier than the “director’s cut” Homer Simpson watched in which the movie ends with a downbeat “splat.”)

BABE (1995)

You’ll never look at bacon the same way again. A pig named Babe is raised by border collies and

grows up to become a champion sheep herder in this live action/CG fantasy. Delightful in every way, it was followed by a sequel that was unfairly maligned for being needlessly dark and frightening. What fairy tale isn’t?

BEST IN SHOW (2000)

Another pitch-perfect satire from Christopher Guest (*Waiting for Guffman*), this time about all the curious, truly weird breeds of people who gather for a national dog show.

SEABISCUIT (2003)

Tobey Maguire, Jeff Bridges and Chris Cooper star in this period drama about the Depression-era horse who defied the odds to become a racing legend.

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS (2005)

Penguins always look dressed for dinner. But to such predators as seals, they always look dressed AS dinner. And that’s just one of your daily challenges when you’re an Emperor residing at the South Pole, as shown in this fascinating documentary.

THE COVE (2009)

You don’t have to see *Dolphin Tale* to know what intelligent and intuitive creatures dolphins are. Which makes their gruesome slaughter in Japan all the more appalling. This Oscar-winning documentary, shot with the energy of a thriller, is as wrenching as it is important.

— Kevin Williamson

