



# THE PENGUIN

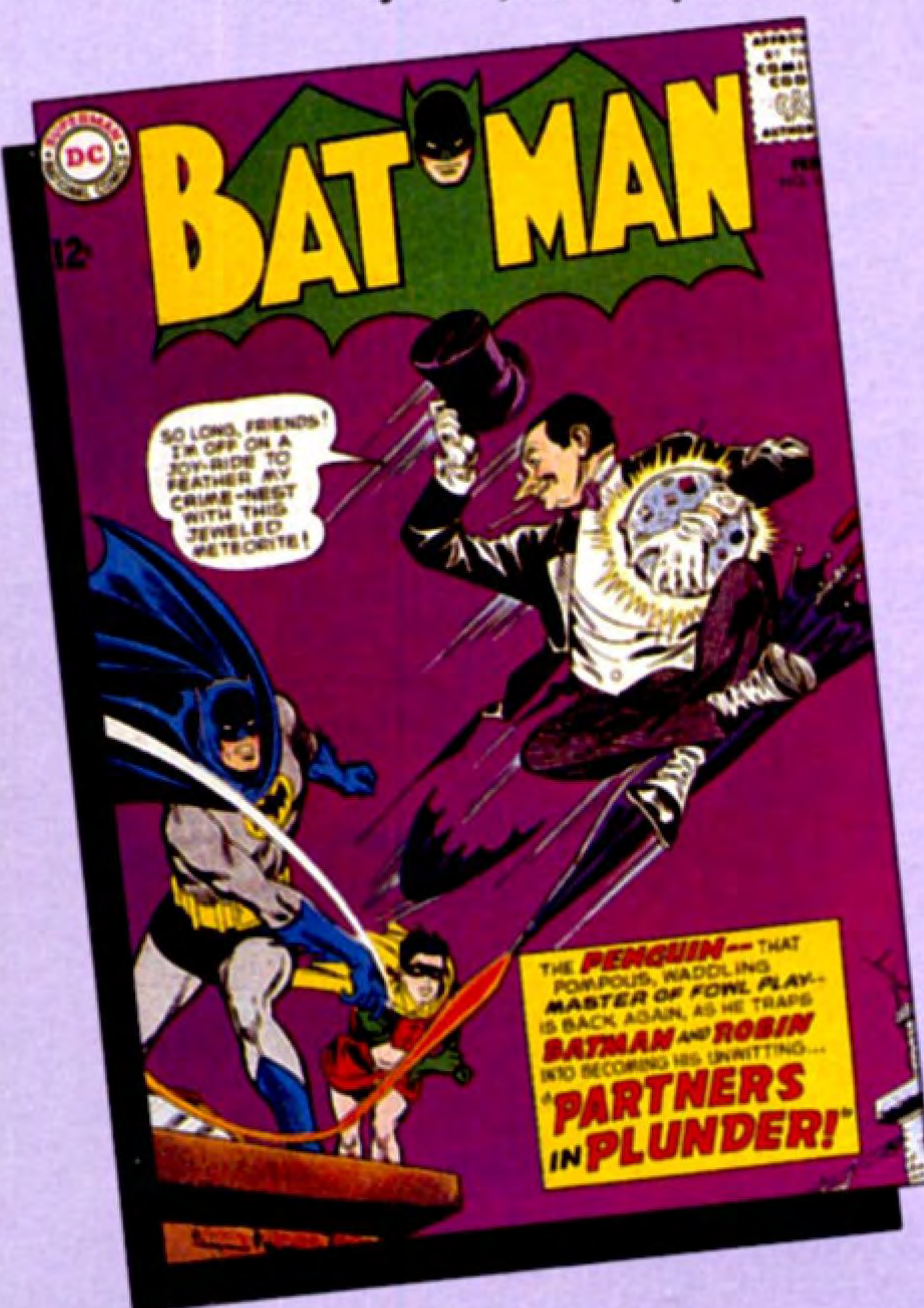
*Burgess Meredith was a consummate supervillain.*

By Bob Garcia

Ephraim Katz, in *The Film Encyclopedia*, called Burgess Meredith the man who brought the Penguin to life: "One of the most gifted and versatile performers of the American stage and screen."

Born in Cleveland in 1908, Meredith worked as a merchant seaman and businessman before embarking on a stage career in 1929. Afterward, he went to Hollywood to star in numerous films, including *OF MICE AND MEN*, *ROCKY*, *TORTURE GARDEN* and *CLASH OF THE TITANS*. He directed the feature *THE MAN ON THE EIFFEL TOWER* and starred in innumerable television shows including episodes of *ROD SERLING'S THE TWILIGHT ZONE*, *SEARCH*, etc.. Meredith even pulled off what Julie Newmar

The Penguin of the comics, art by Carmine Infantino for *Batman* #169, February 1965, TV's inspiration.



did not, and starred in the third season of *BATMAN* while acting in *MACKENNA'S GOLD*.

Meredith's enthusiasm for the part of the Penguin was astounding. He enjoyed every minute of being that waddling, quacking, sarcastic genius. His contempt for the Dynamic Duo dripped with a venom that no other villain on the show quite matched.

"Burgess Meredith was absolutely brilliant," said associate producer William D'Angelo. "Lorenzo [Semple] created the character, but Burgess brought so much on top of what was on the paper; it was incredible to see. He absolutely loved doing that part. He called us every week to ask when the Penguin was coming back. He would have done every episode if we had enough of them for him."

Even the chore of hours in makeup didn't hinder Meredith's enthusiasm. "The minute he got that makeup on, he became the Penguin, and he was that character all day long, until all that came off," said Bruce Hutchinson, the show's makeup artist. "He was a laugh riot. He loved this character. He would kind of waddle around as the Penguin did on the show, with the umbrella, hat and monocle... He was another bizarre man. He had a razor-sharp sense of humor, and we had more fun with him... I think it was the first [character with which] he could just kick back and have a wonderful time, because he had always been a pretty serious actor. And that was the difference on that show that really made it. Either you had to be a very bad actor, or you had to be brilliant, to pull that stuff off."



Meredith as the Penguin in *BATMAN: THE MOVIE* (1966), wielding his cigarette-lighting umbrella, the epitome of the comic's waddling, quacking, sarcastic genius.

Jan Kemp, the costumer for the show, also loved working with Meredith. "Buzz Meredith was a charming man," said Kemp. "I always admired him, but to work with him was wonderful." Kemp told how he created the look of the character for Meredith. "The Penguin was relatively easy to produce," said Kemp. "Using an old-fashioned cutaway suit as the basis, I designed body pads to give him a portly look and found a fake fur fabric that resembled penguin feathers to make the vest and gloves. Burgess decided to walk with a waddle to imitate the penguin look, while the little quack sound was to actually disguise the fact that the cigarettes he used in the long holder were irritating his throat. Burgess was—and still is—a non-smoker."

Meredith also had to put up with having the monocle glued into his eye socket with spirit gum, and eventually had to dye his hair for the performance after a wig proved too much trouble. In spite of it all, he was, shall we say, unflappable.

Bob Butler, the director that first worked with Meredith as the Penguin, admired how well the

actor understood what he was doing in the part. "[The Penguin] was a man who enjoyed dressing up in clothing *a la* a penguin; who liked wearing a tuxedo all the time and walking like a little bird," said Butler. "That was the reality in the TV show, and Meredith got behind that instantly. He didn't worry about the psychology of a man who would be that way... He was exquisite. He was a formally trained actor and he knew that this whole thing wasn't too far from *com-media dell'arte*. You just get behind it. You just play this bizarre reality for all its worth."

And play it, he did. Each time Meredith's Penguin appeared on screen, everyone else would fade into the background. His cool, quick ad-libs would often be funnier than the script. For example, in the feature film, while he was stealing the show from three other villains, he reputedly ad-libbed the line (as Catwoman was sweeping their dehydrated henchmen into test tubes): "Remember each one has a mother."

Noted producer Charles FitzSimons, "Why he never won an Emmy for that performance, I'll never know." □