

Arthouse films

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BY BILL STAMETS

Opening this weekend on the art-house circuit:

'Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman' ★★★

"I never wanted to be a girl the way girls were supposed to be," announces filmmaker Jennifer Fox in the opening voiceover of her moving diary/documentary, told in six chapters. She seeks her own way of being a woman -- lover, mother and filmmaker -- by talking to female friends around the world. For all their differences in culture and class, these women have lots to talk about.

Over a five-year period, the 42-year-old single New Yorker shares her concerns with 15 women in the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France, Germany, Pakistan, India and Cambodia. They, too, want sex, kids and careers on their own terms. Fox finds that the feminist mantra "the personal is the political" is global. She encounters activists lobbying against female genital mutilation and trafficking of girls as prostitutes in the Third World.

This verite essay explores female sexuality as a key part of female freedom. Fox scrupulously chronicles her own day-to-day life. It's a credit to her artistry that this doc never veers into icky narcissism.

"I had a lover and a boyfriend, but I wanted a child," Fox explains. At first she does not tell her sexual partners she's off the pill. Later she tries in vitro fertilization. Fox records the aftermath of a miscarriage by shooting herself crying in the back seat of a cab after leaving the hospital.

Fox aims for similar intimacy with her female friends by handing them her camera so they can shoot her. It's their story, too. Fox departs from the more traditional style of her earlier documentaries: "Beirut: The Last Home Movie" (1990) and "An American Love Story" (1999), a 10-hour PBS series about a bi-racial family in Queens, N.Y. There viewers heard her voice off-camera on a few occasions. Now she's a confidante and companion for her viewers. "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman" turns her own life into an affecting and absorbing lens.

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