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FLYING: CONFESSIONS OF A FREE WOMAN



Directed by: Jennifer Fox.

Edited by: Niels Pagh Andersen.

Produced by: Fox & Claus Ladegaard.

Directors of Photography: Fox & Women All Over the World

Music by: Jan Tilman Schade.

Released by: Artistic License Films.

Language: English & various languages with English subtitles.

Country of Origin: Denmark/USA. 350 minutes. Not Rated.

Jennifer Fox had a mid-life crisis in her 40s. As friends faced tribulations of mortality and relationships, she questioned modern female life. In a six-part series filmed over four years, she turned her camera on herself and the women she meets in over 17 countries. Their consciousness-raising conversations are so frank and intimate they could be an update for a global */Our Bodies, Ourselves/*.

Fox goes beyond the interviews that were the basis for Eve Ensler's */The Vagina Monologues/* and Rosanna Arquette's documentary */Searching for Debra Winger/*, which explored some of the same feminist territory. Recalling how Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman gave cameras to the participants in their Oscar-winning documentary */Born Into Brothels/*, Fox creates a you-are-there intimacy by passing the camera around. Her gregarious openness about her own sexual experiences infectiously draws women in for the most private conversations within bedrooms, women's centers, and over kitchen tables. The participants are virgins, wives, and widows; separated, divorced; single

mothers with children of all ages; educated or illiterate; community activists, sex workers, a blues singer, and more.

Fox's reflections and their conversations roam over abortion, child abuse, aging, AIDS, birth control, commitment, genital mutilation, honor killings, in vitro fertilization, pornography, virginity, and then some, concluding that modern women everywhere still have to deal with the universal dichotomy of mother vs. whore.

Each one-hour episode opens with a metaphorical allusion to Erica Jong's celebration of the liberation of women's sexuality, */Fear of Flying/*, while connecting Fox's peripatetic life style of filming around the world with her father's career as a pilot: chapter 1: No Fear of Flying, chapter 2: Test Piloting, chapter 3: Experiencing Turbulence, etc.

As she constantly reiterates, her upbringing by her mother, spinster aunt, and strict grandmother (but under her father's thumb) helps her to relate to women who live in the pressure cooker of extended families, including Somali and Bosnian refugees in England, post-apartheid survivors in Soweto, burka-swathed wives in Pakistan, and involuntary brides in Cambodia. A wary woman traveler, she spontaneously saves a very naive British teenager from an apparently dangerous situation in Harlem. While some of her West vs. East intercultural communication conundrums recall Liz Mermin's */The Beauty Academy of Kabul/*, there are women who can shut Fox up abused sex workers in Cambodia and, at the other emotional extreme, young widows in India who, despite discrimination that makes their lives only marginally better than the women depicted in Deepa Mehta's historical drama */Water/*, explode with laughter at her untranslatable questions about masturbation.

Fox's passing the camera is in sharp contrast to her own video blogging and emotional monologues in her downtown Manhattan loft and on her travels, which do become tiresomely repetitive, exhibitionist celebrations of her sexuality. Any number of criticisms can be leveled at her including that she's still acts like a rebellious teen or that she's a selfish home wrecker with her married South African lover. But wait an hour and somebody will forcefully tell her so. Just when it seems she's let it all hang out, the other women force her to reexamine herself and her family in wholly different ways.

Like the best reality television, the camera catches raw moments of love and loss among her friends and family who we have come to know over time. But also visible is the subtlety of the double messages from her mother and that Fox doesn't listen to her friends' advice. But in the last three episodes, Fox begins to look at her mother as a person and reach out to her. She even learns the healing properties of shopping.

Danish editor Niels Pagh Andersen's involvement is key, not just as a male eye for balance, but in keeping the storytelling engrossing. A man on-screen makes the superficial */Sex and the City/* comparison, but the episodes are thematically structured for entertainment, with cliff-hangers at each conclusion to whet viewers' voyeurism, supported by Jan Tilman Schad's lighthearted score inspired by Fox's mother's early career as an accordionist.

With plenty of attention to women's complicity, Fox isn't just male-bashing. She includes evolved guys who eventually come through for their women, including her tolerant Swiss boyfriend. It's of continual amusement, though, how the men are shown to be as uncomfortable in front of the camera's eye, either avoiding it, making faces or diatribes, self-consciously posing, or insisting the machine be shut off. As the women talk on, */Flying/* viscerally demonstrates the futility of demanding men to discuss their feelings. Any curious man who sees this with his significant other will get pokes of recognition in the ribs along with eye-opening revelations.

While */Flying/* is being screened in theaters in two three-hour sittings, it's being shown episodically on many TV channels around the world, including on the Sundance Channel in 2008. */Nora Lee Mandel/*

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