

DOCUMENTARY



Jennifer Fox and Niels Pagh Andersen at work on "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman."

DOC COLUMN | Flying: Confessions of International Co-Production

by Agnes Varnum (May 31, 2007)

The phrase "international co-production" sparks a variety of responses from US independent filmmakers. Some think "essential strategy to fund a film," or "I wish I knew how to do that," while others (probably the lion's share) think "international what?" After watching Jennifer Fox's opus "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman", a 6-hour series that uses Fox's personal life (her indecision between two lovers) as the springboard for a prescient discussion with women from around the world about modern womens' issues, I understood that this film couldn't have been made relying on American financing. But the "why" was more elusive. Style? Length? Subject matter?

The narrative thread of Fox's personal drama with all its sexy bits is the through-line with a serial quality that might appeal to US broadcasters, but the magic of the film is revealed in the intimate conversations between her and her friends on all topics on their minds and using Fox's "passing the camera" technique. The film reveals not only a multitude of challenges facing women today but also how women handle their problems, including Fox whose own turmoil eventually settles due in no small part to the making of the film. It is a rare opportunity for women to really see themselves on screen but it has no single obvious hook.

In Europe and increasingly in other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Asia, money is made available by governments as well as broadcasters for media production and producers are leveraging their access to funds to partner abroad and garner additional funding. Yet it is a

seemingly small number of US producers who complete their work through these types of partnerships. "Flying", with funding from broadcast presales, to the BBC, Britain; ARTE, France/Germany; TV2, Denmark; YLE, Finland; SVT, Sweden; Dutch ICON & The Humanist Channel, SBS, Australia and HBO, USA (as a feature) as well as a grant from the Ira and Mirna Brind Foundation and a Creative Capital artist grant, is a true international co-production.

"The film, on paper, didn't fit into typical funding categories in America," said Fox. "It was not a politically correct concept, and within a short period I got feedback that made it clear I wasn't going to get American foundation money." Instead, Flying got its wings as a Danish co-production. She notes that in thinking through the aesthetics of the project, she was inspired by work that she had seen coming from filmmakers in Denmark, particularly "Family", which won at IDFA in 2002. She later met Claus Ladagaard of Easy Film A/S, who would come on board as producer and bring a Danish Film Institute grant to the project.

First tip from Fox: "Get out there! What films do you like? What trends do you see?" A trip to an international event is a crash course in the community of buyers that license completed work and many looking to enter into co-pro deals. Last month at the Toronto Documentary Forum, which runs over 2 days during the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, there were rookies alongside the seasoned pros pitching their pre-selected projects to the 143 broadcasters, distributors and sales agents. Others participate as observers to gather needed market information.

"It can seem daunting at first – a mystery and puzzle as to how to approach and meet these elusive Commissioning Editors," said Robin Hessman, who was there as an observer and in search of funding for her project "Russia's Pepsi Generation" which now has about 70% in place from her frequent visits to the markets, "But here I can't stress enough how important our fellow allies are—filmmaker friends and colleagues who already know some of the people and help make the introductions and ease the way."

TDF, like the Forum at International Documentary Festival Amsterdam and others that have sprung up around Europe, saw 31 films pitched. Cathryne Czubek, a first-timer pitching her project "A Girl and A Gun", about the complex subject of American women and guns, said, "15 minutes saved me a lot of time and blind soliciting in the long run. I knew exactly which CE's could possibly program my film into their strand, would be interested, and at what capacity they would be interested."

Fox warns that while introducing your project at a public pitching forum can be a great way to get on the radar of commissioning editors and to begin conversations that you can follow up, pitching a film that they will have no interest in can backfire. She advises considering whether a private pitch or the public pitch will be best for your particular project. Another tip from this seasoned filmmaker, she never sends trailers or puts them up online. Instead she sits with potential buyers while they watch her samples so that she can react to their thoughts and be sure her work gets full consideration.

Other options for entering into the world of international co-pros include the IFP Market in the New York, Cinema du Reel and Sunnyside of the Doc in France. Fox notes that her earlier film "American Love Story", had universal themes that took it on to win at Cinema du Reel, and eventual distribution in 17 countries. The film had been primarily financed in the US but its international success gave her entree to becoming an international producer, which is how she sees herself today.

Organizations like The D-Word, European Documentary Network, Shooting People and Documentary Organization of Canada are some of the professional groups whose aims are to help producers around the globe get to know one another. For those instances where money is only available to filmmakers of a specific national origin or films that are made, at least in part, within a certain geographic area, it becomes essential to find producing partners.

"Being a Danish co-production meant that we had to base our editing in Denmark and the key personnel had to be Danish, including our editor, the wonderful Niels Pagh Andersen," says Fox. This relates back to making her desire to have a particular aesthetic found in Danish films a reality.

Another US director pitching at TDF, Kimberly Reed with her film "Prodigal Sons", which follows her complicated relationship to her adoptive brother who it turns out is Orson Wells' grandson, said afterwards, "Honing your pitch is a lot like finding your film in the editing room, and each process aids the other." But Fox warns that effective pitching also stems from understanding who you are pitching to – for example, the Fins appreciate politics, representation and political correctness while BBC prefers a strong funny story or ones with a journalistic sensibility and they won't be as interested in politics.

Fox ultimately takes a long view of her work, seeing being a successful filmmaker as not only being an artist of film but also being a good salesperson. "Selling is a process," she said, "My father is a great salesman, and he used to say if you put time limits on success, you will always fail. But, if you have open time limits, you can always win."

"Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman" opens theatrically at Film Forum in New York on July 4th.

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