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Movies

Women's Stories, Including Her Own



The director Jennifer Fox, as she appears in her documentary "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman," after a positive pregnancy test.

By JOHN ANDERSON

LIFE, the director Jennifer Fox says, is like a layer cake: nonlinear, potentially messy and occasionally gravity-defying. And so, therefore, is her latest film.

"Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman," a documentary made for television in six one-hour segments, will open as a two-part film starting Wednesday at Film Forum in New York. The documentary is a delicate construction asking a delicate question: Is there anything in common between Ms. Fox, a liberal, middle-class Manhattanite, and, say, a prostitute in Cambodia?

"Flying" contends that there is.

Ms. Fox has long appeared allergic to the constraints of the 90-minute film — see "An American Love Story" of 1999, which was five hours long — and she also seems intent on reflecting something altogether outside movies. Or even nonfiction. Balzac, perhaps. Or George Eliot. With perhaps a little dash of "Days of Our Lives."

"I could really see this being a book," Ms. Fox, 47, said of her latest documentary, which is scheduled for several European television outlets late this summer. "Flying," made over five years, is part personal memoir, feminist manifesto and diagnosis of the state of Global Woman. It is also an eclectic mix of film languages, including *vérité*, self-shooting, diaries, narration and what Ms. Fox calls "passing the camera," in which her subjects shoot one another as well as her.

This highly personal film, produced by Ms. Fox and Claus Ladegaard, is not entirely autobiographical, though it was her life that ignited it. In 2002 this single, peripatetic New Yorker was deeply conflicted about marriage, babies and the affairs she was having with a married South African and a Swiss cinematographer. She decided to take her confusion on the road and began interviewing women around the world about the experiences of being female, wherever they happened to be.

Her subjects include Cambodian women forced into the sex trade, social activists in Russia and Pakistan, filmmaking friends in Berlin and London, and her own family members. While the content is unambiguously female, Ms. Fox believes that the form is as well.

“Honestly, I can’t explore what I want to explore in 90 minutes,” she said over coffee near her TriBeCa loft. “And the older I get, the more the feature form seems almost male — very conclusive, very ‘here it is,’ all summed up. The serial is more like life, with multiple stories, multiple conclusions. It’s a fabric, or a layer cake.” And, she said, the serial is more female.

For Ms. Fox’s subjects, the experience of working with her was overwhelming and transformative.

“Jennifer’s constant probing was exhausting, and when she left, I was very happy to see her go,” said Theresa Meyer, a South African who participated in the film. Once Ms. Fox was gone, though, Ms. Meyer was haunted, she said.

“We had talked about very deep, dark issues,” said Ms. Meyer, a filmmaker who was abused by a girlfriend’s father at age 11. “The issue of my sexual abuse was hard for me to talk about. But it was also quite liberating to do it so matter-of-factly, with the camera. It opened up a lot of wounds, and after she left it was with me constantly. The experience made me examine myself more closely, made me look more at the consequences — how it affected me and particularly how it affected my relationships.”

Men dominate much of the talk in “Flying,” whether the topic is new love, old love, child support or paternal influence. For her part Ms. Fox makes it clear throughout the film that as a girl she wanted a life like her father’s; he was a pilot, among other things, a man with a career and a life outside the home. Her mother, on the other hand, was busy rearing five children.

As she recreates it Ms. Fox’s childhood home echoed with parental argument.

After seeing the film, her father, Dick Fox, said: “I have to say that when I heard some of the words she used to describe what went on in our house, I said, ‘Jeez, that’s pretty rough.’ But I also understand that it’s her film, and her view.

“Words get heated,” he said, reflecting on family life. “There are differences people have about how to raise their children. But it makes you realize how things would have appeared to an 8- or 9-year-old child. I’m not uptight about it, and I’m fascinated by what Jennifer recalls.”

Her mother, Gerry Fox, said, “I was taken with the way she connects what happened in our family to women around the world.”

The elder Foxes have been married 54 years. Their daughter’s romantic life, as she freely admits throughout the documentary, has been more casual and well-populated. The biggest decision she makes in the film — outside of a decision to undergo in vitro fertilization — is whether to pursue the romance with the unnamed South African or one with Patrick Lindenmaier, the Swiss cinematographer with such an open and accepting attitude toward Ms. Fox’s erotic life that the choice seems obvious. That it’s not illuminates the jagged edges of human desire.

Mr. Lindenmaier was, and still is, conflicted about his participation in the film. “I always knew it could wind up on screen,” he said, “although I guess I was little surprised the relationship was such a prominent part of the film.”

Does it make him nervous? “It will make me more nervous,” he said, “when it plays in Switzerland.”

But even the people most intimately involved with “Flying” are surprised by Ms. Fox’s candor. “We shared intimacies in a very typically girl-talk way,” said Caroline Goldie, a Berlin filmmaker whose bout with cancer became a piece of the “Flying” fabric, “although I must be honest, I was a bit more guarded than Jen about what I was prepared to say on camera.”

For the purpose-driven filmmaker, message obliterates self-consciousness. “I’m not interested in George Bush,” Ms. Fox said. “I’m not interested in right or wrong, or film that says, ‘She’s like this because of that.’ I wanted a film that said, ‘She’s like this because her father is like this, because her mother is like this, because she went to a Quaker school, because she lived in a certain period of time in the history of women.’ ”

Should “Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman” be followed by a question mark?

“Absolutely,” Ms. Fox said with a smile. “Or we could call it ‘Confessions of an Imprisoned Woman Trying to be Free.’ ”