

## Sex and the cities

**Jennifer Fox filmed women all over the world – and discovered there's a little Carrie Bradshaw in all of us. By Liz Hoggard**

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A 42-year-old woman is discussing dating in New York. She agonises about whether or not to stay with her married South African lover or commit to a new relationship with a Swiss film-maker called Patrick. Sound familiar? The show has already been described by Candace Bushnell of *Sex and the City* fame as "required viewing for every woman".

But *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* is not a drama or soap opera; rather the two-parter, filmed over the course of five years by the American director Jennifer Fox, is going out tonight as part of BBC4's Storyville documentary strand.

At the start of the film Fox is living the carefree, privileged life she thought she'd always wanted. But when her best friend, Pat, is diagnosed with a brain tumour, she is forced to reassess her decision to stay unmarried and childless. In order to make sense of the sexual triangle she's got herself into, she takes her camera out on the road to talk to women about their lives. It's raw, compelling TV. But is it just soap opera dressed up as a feature documentary? Fox knows the risk she is running. "In a way I'm saying: 'Look at me, I'm a self-centred, narcissistic Western woman'," she tells me, laughing. "But I'm allowing the audience to see that. I do it on purpose in order to shift the game a bit."

Fox is a serious film-maker. She won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance for her film *Beirut: the Last Home Movie*. For the TV series *An American Love Story* she lived with a mixed-race couple and their children for two years. And in *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*, she doesn't just hang out in her Tribeca loft with her *Sex and the City*

girlfriends. She visits women around the world, from New York to South Africa, Britain to Cambodia, Russia to Pakistan.

The series marks new ground for Fox. Originally she never intended to be on camera; the documentary was supposed to explore the way contemporary women speak - "and whether we speak the same language across cultures and nationalities". But as filming went on, she found it impossible to pretend she was invisible. "Having made very intimate films about other people in the past, I began to think: 'with this film, I cannot pretend to be out of the story.'"

Fox dissects her own relationships, as well as her friends' sex lives, families, pregnancies, miscarriages, birthdays, births, divorces and medical treatments, bringing the camera everywhere from bedroom to hospital to taxi to aeroplane. "After 20 years of psychotherapy," she says, "filming myself suddenly seemed like the only way out of my depression. What's a more perfect mirror than a video camera?"

She calls it "radical honesty". There could be no preparation: no make-up, no fixing up clothing, or adjusting her emotional state. When, in the middle of filming, she found herself in a deep personal crisis, it had to be reflected on screen. "I thought: 'OK, I will use myself as a guinea pig.' After all, how could I ask another woman to go on the line if I wasn't prepared to go on the line myself?"

According to the publicity, Flying tackles questions that are at once personal and universal. Does choice equal happiness? What does it mean to be a free woman today? I'm not quite convinced. Yes, there are moving moments - when Fox films Pat in remission; or visits a Berlin-based film-maker who has fallen in love again during treatment for ovarian cancer - but they often feel pretty incidental to Jennifer's Big Love Story. When she meets two women in rural Pakistan - who humbly have given up the chance of marriage in order to study and campaign - you think, "Oh God, she's not going to bang on about her love triangle again, is she?"

But this is indeed how women talk - gossipy, self-revelatory, switching from trivial to profound in an instant. Fox laughs when I confess my discomfort, but insists it was essential to show that her own private story was really a universal, female story. Plus, she argues, women respond well to someone else's secrets - it really does encourage them to talk honestly. "We say: 'let me share, let me tell, let me listen to something about you'."

This is not to deny that the film has depth: Fox tackles real sociopolitical issues - from frank discussions about female sexuality to abuse, rape, and prostitution. But Fox's point is that audiences might never have bothered to watch the film if it had been billed as worthy. "We have seen many, many films about those poor women in Pakistan. And those poor Somali women and those poor Cambodian prostitutes without the film-maker in. What I wanted to say, even if I do it crudely, even if I'm not entirely successful, is that it's a lie to say there's no connection to us. I wanted to say it's about 'us' - not 'them'. It's not true that that a woman in Pakistan has no connection to me in New York or you in Britain."

And indeed there are great levelling moments in *Flying* that stop us being cultural tourists. Many of the women she interviews around the world, especially those in poor rural areas, give her tough-love advice about flaky married lover, Kai. And Fox likes the fact that many of them laugh about her obsession with being a free, hyper-sexual woman. There are other things to worry about - work, family, survival - not just orgasms, they remind her. Researching the whole issue of sex trafficking, too, makes Fox confront the fact that she herself was pressured into having sex by a sports coach when she was only 13.

Fox says she found it genuinely liberating to put herself on screen. Certainly the moment when she finally realises that Kai, however liberal, has totally reactionary ideas about women, has the emotional punch of a thriller. "Sometimes one should be incredibly distant, and sometimes you should merge with your material, which is what I've done, but even when one is incredibly distant I really believe that most authored documentaries are incredibly autobiographical," she says. "It's a lie to say that we're objective. We all strive for it, but there is no such thing."

Nick Fraser, series editor of *Storyville*, who co-commissioned Fox's film, enjoys the fact that confessional documentaries upset people because they're messy and partisan. "I like the way male, middle-aged TV executives are embarrassed by them. I find it deeply gratifying to see them squirming in their seats when they're watching them."

He argues that we need more confessional documentaries, not fewer. "I think you could do good confessions or bad confessions. Documentary isn't de facto worthy. We always try to buck this trend: in fact, we say you should enjoy *Storyville* as you would *Grazia* or *The Independent*, there's no difference." He argues that the slot is a place for any sort of programme - different styles, different attitudes,

different subjects - the only requirement being that they should all be strongly narrative. And he points out that the most powerful section of the film - the death of Fox's grandmother and her rapprochement with her mother and aunt - doesn't have a single boyfriend in shot.

Fox admits that this is the one and only time she will put herself on screen. But she doesn't regret it. "It changed me and my relationship with the women in my family, because ironically from the narcissism of self-observation, what I actually got was a larger picture of the world. I suddenly wasn't unique in looking at my navel."