



THOMPSON ON HOLLYWOOD

Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman

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New York doc vet Jennifer Fox debuted her six-hour Danish-funded documentary *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* at Sundance in January. (Here's John Anderson's *Variety* review and NYT feature.) She's been taking the six one-hour segments to 15 cities around the country in advance of their showing on the Sundance Channel next spring. She just finished a swing through L.A., where the docu about women, sex, relationships and family showed at the American Cinematheque.

I watched the six episodes two at a time, three nights running. (I had admired Fox's 80s doc *Beirut: The Last Home Movie*.) I was fascinated. Fox took five years of her own life and turned it into the narrative through-line for a survey of women and their life choices in different cultures. As she pursues her career as a documentarian, flying around the globe, she interviews women about their lives, from South Africa and Cambodia to India and Pakistan. As she faces her mid-40s, she juggles two long-distance relationships and struggles with issues of fertility and monogamy. "I wasn't filming to film," she said. "I was filming to discover something. A lot of the reasons I went on the journey were answered. Then it was time to stop."



Fox takes the docu form to a new place as she carries a lightweight Sony PDX 10 DV cam around with her, passing it to other people in conversation and filming herself. The filmmaker got into the habit of shooting herself every day, and diarizing, even though she wound up using mostly the spaces between the words--the moments that silently captured emotion. She worked hard to strip herself down, lose self-consciousness, and tried to foster that naturalism in her interviewees, from her parents and lovers to her friends and complete strangers. "I had to be naive, to be in it without being too judgmental," she said. "I cultivated equanimity, a stance of acceptance. I was a character in crisis, and I didn't know what I was going to do. It was daunting being a one-person crew."

When she first pitched the idea of the doc, distributors were skeptical that the passing of the camera would work, so Fox sent them some footage. That was no longer an issue. Denmark wound up producing the film, partly because her work falls easily into their docu tradition. She set her own list of Dogme-like rules: shoot every day, no makeup, shoot as you enter scenes, no tripods, no radio mikes, the camera has to be passed. "The purpose was to watch the way women speak when there isn't a camera around," she said. "I found a way to use the camera that doesn't hurt conversation. The person brings presence to the conversation."

During the film, this vulnerable attractive western woman is gawked at by groups of men in cultures that find independent single women strange. Yet Fox found a wide range of articulate women of different classes and cultures, many of whom opened up about their hopes and limitations. Some of the women, while not ready to discuss such foreign issues as masturbation, are delaying arranged marriages and working outside the home. And it was clear that across cultures, women are dealing with the same issues. Even if western women are free of the strictures that oppress women in other societies, we know that many families are nonetheless dominated by men, and many women are abused.

Fox shot 1600 hours of footage, which was logged, digitized and edited by a Danish editor. After Fox showed the movie to her mother and father, they were upset and asked her to soften some things. Her mother said, "How could you be so stupid? All married women are going to hate you." But, said Fox, her mother "backed the film." In fact her parents insisted on going to Sundance, where they did a Q & A.

At the three Cinematheque Q & As I attended, Fox passed the camera, which has a lavalier mike lashed onto it with a hairband, through the audience, soliciting people to send their own material to her flyingconfessions.com website to participate in a possible 7th episode.