

Private Lives in Public Forums

by Andrea Gronvall

"Write what you know" is sound advice for fledgling authors, but it can apply at any stage in an artist's career. This month, two Jewish directors do just that with films reflecting on their personal life experiences.

The first is Jennifer Fox, a New Yorker whose six-hour tour-de-force, *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*, soars above most of the quickie digital nonfiction movies that have saturated the market of late; over five years in the making, this work is ambitious and innovative. Fox is no stranger to the long form; the last project she directed, *An American Love Story*, was a 1999 PBS 10-hour miniseries about an interracial family. This time around, she's the subject, as much in front of the camera as behind it, as she travels through a dozen countries to document the status and concerns of women today.

"I never wanted to be a girl the way girls were supposed to be," begins Fox, a vivacious single now in her 40's. As a child, her role model was the father she adored, a developer and pilot who treated her like a boy, encouraging athletic prowess and a fearless assertiveness strongly at odds with her mother, aunt and grandmother's efforts to subdue her into a compliant "good girl." In the first chapter, we see Fox observe Passover in her loft, where she proudly notes that she, not a man, leads the Seder. Other Jewish life events occur later, including a *ketubah* signing by two of her closest friends (where Fox is struck by the ritual selling of the bride for \$1), but sexual politics and ethnicity preoccupy her more than religious practice.

The most striking evidence of this is the dilemma at the heart of the film: Fox's concurrent long-distance affairs with two foreigners, a married South African and a Swiss cinematographer. Because she grew up in a home where her parents continually fought and women were bitterly resigned to domesticity— with five children, her mother abandoned all previous outside interests— Fox came to see monogamous marriage as a surefire way to kill love. Freedom to be herself, to control her own body, to take off at a moment's notice for a job anywhere in the world had long driven Fox's lifestyle. But, at 42, the prospect of having a baby makes her question her definition of freedom— so she hops a plane in search of answers.

One of her stops is Russia, where she meets Svetlana, a Jewish activist who, for years during the Soviet housing shortage, continued to share an apartment with her husband even though she was openly involved with another man. In India, Fox follows Paromita, a community organizer who introduces her to a group of women shunned because they're widows. She tours Cambodia in the company of Chanthol, who runs a shelter for women forced into prostitution after being raped. But there are also lighter moments, like visits with Fox's resourceful Parisian friend Gihan, a journalist whose husband puts in equal time at home caring for their kids.

Throughout her travels, Fox evinces warmth, candor, humor, intelligence, sensitivity and spontaneity, qualities she helps bring out in her subjects by her technique of passing the camera, thus ensuring that everyone she films also has the opportunity to turn the lens on her. What emerges on screen is genuine conversation, mirroring the way women really talk to each other in private. This style of filmmaking encourages generosity, reflection and revelation, and, among other things, leads to Fox's rapprochement with her family. Her willingness to bare all shows her at her most vulnerable, but she's a spirited fighter, too, as when she rescues a naïve British visitor from a sexual predator. It's one of the film's most telling scenes because, as we eventually learn, a protector was someone Fox lacked at a shocking turning point when she was 13.

Just as *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* was cathartic for the director and her participants to make, it may also prove liberating for viewers. On the heels of the movie's successful premiere at New York's Film Forum, Artistic License Films continues the national rollout with an engagement this month at Chicago's Gene Siskel Film Center. Don't miss it.