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MOVIE REVIEW

Jennifer Fox's long -- very long -- journey of discovery

In 'Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman,' she examines what it means to be a woman today.

By Carina Chocano, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Jennifer Fox defies categorization -- obsessively, internationally, in painstaking detail, for six solid hours. In "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman," she examines what it means to be a woman today, mainly by examining what it means to be Jennifer Fox. But enough about her. What do women across the globe think of her? In the grip of an early midlife crisis brought on by a complicated love life, she embarks on a 17-nation voyage to find out. And this after 20 years in therapy.

But, funny story: As maddening and sometimes embarrassing as her approach is, it works. Fox travels the globe to talk sex, marriage, babies, divorce, work, identity, oppression, socialization and abuse with her fascinating, far-flung friends. And their combined stories add up to something remarkable: a kaleidoscopic meditation on gender-as-destiny.

A few minutes into the first chapter you fear you'll never make it. By the third, you're addicted.

Fox is an odd duck even by throwback standards. A New York-based filmmaker ("Beirut: The Last Home Movie") and teacher, she appears to have sprung from 1970s and '80s bohemia directly into the present, bypassing the '90s and the early '00s. She lives in an expansive loft and uses the word "lover" without a shred of embarrassment. Most surprisingly, she appears to have completely missed the homebound movement of middle-class women in the past decade or so, holding her never-married, childless, multiple-partnered self as a contemporary American norm.

At 42, Fox found herself in love with a married South African father of young children, halfheartedly dating an understanding Swiss man and wondering if she'd failed to make a life for herself. Confused, she begins an investigation into "this modern woman's life" by asking herself -- and anyone else who crosses her path -- what they make of her conundrum.

For three years, Fox documents her life for the camera. She urinates on a pregnancy test and films herself worrying. She fights with her boyfriend and despairs for the lens. She gives us her gynecologist from the stirrup's-eye-view. Throughout it all, she asks herself where this female identity came from, narrating the proceedings in the simple, disingenuous tone of a kindergarten teacher. Whether she's describing her lover's loveless marriage (one story she's apparently never heard before), or asking a group of Indian women if they masturbate (they don't, they think she's nuts for asking), she manages to sound like Mr. Rogers channeling Carrie Bradshaw.

Recalling her upbringing as the only daughter of a large, affluent family in which the father, a builder and amateur pilot, enjoyed an exciting, independent life while her mother, aunt and grandmother seemed consumed with anger, fear and frustration, Fox meditates on her childhood decision never to marry or have children but instead to be "free" like her father.

The more she analyzes this decision, the more she questions assumptions behind it, recalling her father's harsh treatment of her mother and revealing a secret about her first sexual experience at the age of 13.

Determined never to see herself as a victim, she is genuinely surprised to begin to see a connection between her own free but complicated life and the lives of women in more oppressive societies. As

her personal life unravels, she travels to South Africa, Russia, England, Cambodia, Pakistan, China, France and other countries, and her perspective on her own choices shifts. Is she as free as she thinks?

Talking to an England-based Somali activist about the parallels between female genital mutilation and childhood sexual abuse, Fox discovers that their grandmothers had similar attitudes about raising girls. "The funny thing is that your grandmother was trying to protect you from what happened to me," she says.

These small epiphanies are what make "Flying" worth the slog. They also make Fox's own difficulties – confronting the reality (and morality) of dating a married man, trying to become pregnant with increasingly complicated technology -- more compelling. After watching Fox sit around enacting her life for the camera, the moments of revelation pay off. You only wish she'd have thought to expand the representative sample of Western women to include the ones -- unlike their crusading Indian, Somali and Pakistani counterparts -- who are choosing to abandon the public sphere to return to a purely domestic arena.

Fox, whose gaze so naturally returns to her own navel, extrapolates from her experience and gives us American women as Bridget Jones meets Gloria Steinem.

Maybe someone should tell her about "Desperate Housewives."

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"Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman." MPAA rating: Not rated. Running time: 6 hours total, screening in two-hour segments. Limited engagement today-Sept. 29 at the Aero Theatre, 1328 Montana Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 260-1528, and Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., L.A., (323) 467-0414.