

'Flying': Stimulating confessions fuel six-hour movie

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Who has time for a six-hour movie like "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman," which follows the trials and tribulations of an ordinary, angst-ridden, romantically challenged, middle-class woman? The short answer is nobody.

Except, didn't the approximately 5 million of you who bought Elizabeth Gilbert's hugely successful memoir "Eat Pray Love" (more than a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list) spend at least six hours reading it? I certainly did. And in those six hours, on multiple occasions, I wanted to heave Gilbert's book across the room for various offenses, not the least of which was navel gazing to the nth degree.

Watching Episodes 1 and 2 of "Flying," director Jennifer Fox's six-part documentary miniseries on DVD screeners at home, I also felt that urge. But two things stopped me. First, the TV is too big to throw (and the finale of "Project Runway" was coming up); and second, Fox, who stars in as well as directs the film, is a talented, inquisitive and vivid storyteller. Like Gilbert, she captivates and annoys in equal measure.

"Flying" has been described as a real-life "Sex and the City," although maybe "Sex and the City for PBS" might be more apt. Fox, an award-winning filmmaker who directed the PBS series "An American Love Story," starts the story when she is 42 and embarking on an intriguing and complicated romantic situation.

She has a longtime lover, a married man from South Africa, and in the course of Episode 1, acquires a second named Patrick.

He is Swiss, a filmmaker, seemingly very nice and not psyched to have his post-coital moments interrupted by a woman holding a camera. This makes for some uncomfortable scenes in which we find ourselves thinking that what Fox is doing by documenting her life may not be particularly healthy. On the other hand, she's been making films for 25 years and, apparently, going to therapy steadily as well. At a certain point, you can see why she'd throw up her hands and combine the two.

Her questions for herself include: Should I have a child? Is it too late? Is this independent, urban life I've chosen, surrounded by lively friends, jet-setting around the world to make smart-minded, politically relevant films, the right one? (My question, unanswered so far, is how did she manage to get a gorgeous loft in New York on a documentary filmmakers income? Shallow I know, but the acquisition of money is definitely a life issue.)

The answers aren't easily conjured up, either in life or in these first two episodes. But the topics do need to be batted around, which is precisely what Fox does with her friends. As they share details of their own lives, the story quickly evolves from the Jennifer Fox story into a broader piece about womanhood. Among the most compelling characters are: L'Dawn, who is struggling to get child support out of her ex-husband; Pat, who has a brain tumor; and Mindy, a naive twentysomething with big romantic expectations.

The camera gets passed back and forth between Fox and her interview subjects, a technique that, though perhaps not as revolutionary as she makes it out to be, enhances the sense of a conversation. (One of her friends is particularly clumsy at the hand-off, which is amusing.) These conversations Fox has with her urban tribe members turn out to be as essential to her life as any actions she takes or the men she sleeps with. I'd mark how effective "Flying" is by the fact that I'm under no obligation to watch the rest of the series, but I'm eager to do so.

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'FLYING: CONFESSIONS OF A FREE WOMAN'

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Starring: Jennifer Fox

Director: Jennifer Fox

Rated: NR

Now playing: At S.F.'s Yerba Buena Center through March 9 (www.ybca.org/film)

Running time: 5 hours, 53 minutes