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Ladies Fly Free: Don't Miss This Film!

Those of you in the Los Angeles area will not want to miss a thought-provoking offering on at Grauman's Chinese theater this weekend. In three two-hour installments, don't miss Jennifer Fox's series, *flying*: confessions of a free woman. Whether you are a woman, date women, or just see them around, this film is asking questions and considering issues that need more air time.

I had the opportunity to discuss the film with Jennifer recently and thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the process of making such an ambitious series as well as hearing what is next for her method of "passing the camera."

Jennifer's career as a filmmaker is inspiring to learn about, from its early conception and her path of creating work that satisfies what she is passionate about, fox certainly embodies the Remabulous.

It is a strange thing to interview the maker and subject of a film you've spent six hours immersed in. I had watched the entire screener copy that Jennifer Fox sent me when we were finally able to find a chunk of time when our crazy schedules overlapped. Fox's puts my planner to shame: globe-hopping, extensive traveling, working and teaching as well as keeping up a hefty festival promotion schedule, I was amazed to find an articulate and collected voice on the other end of the phone.

And it was a voice that I now recognized immediately. Fox narrates throughout the series, keeping track of the extensive plots and characters as well as providing enough information that someone jumping in just for episodes three and four wouldn't be completely lost. I recognized her dog's bark in the background and could picture her beautiful loft that is featured in many conversations in the film.

This was a film that came to me at an important point in my life. just after turning thirty and not having been in the traditional 9-to-5 track, seeking promotion and corporate recognition, nor married off and ensconced in the process of creating a family, I was delighted to hear about someone else who had not taken the common "adult" path. Fox's questions, about what it means to be a woman who has followed creative work as a passion and who hasn't had one partner throughout adulthood are questions I wish more women would ask. it was even more of a delight to see someone a decade older than me still scratching her head about what other options are available to women that feel more real. Are we really only allowed to be princesses who grow up to be mommies or women who throw everything about that out the window? Fox is not satisfied with these two choices, and neither are most women I know.

Each episode of the series begins with fox's explanation that, when growing up, she didn't want to be a girl with all the weight that identity carried. She felt more connected to her father and his ability to pursue his hopes and dreams outside the home. She associated these options with freedom, and preserved it through her life to build a career she was happy with, sometimes at the expense of ongoing or traditional relationships. Still, there is a question of what else is given up through these choices. Fox struggles throughout the film with the simultaneous desire and fear of having children as well as the painful reality that it may not be possible – I did not ask her what the status was currently on that issue. It seemed too personal to question her on the issues of her life shown so openly by the film.

Which brings me to the other aspect of this film that struck me: how personal it truly is. While, as fox clarified, all film is necessarily a construction, she still manages to have herself wide and vulnerable out on the screen, open to whatever judgment the audience may throw. I am completely impressed by this bravery and am certain of its truth, as our conversation on the phone, complete with dog barking and interruption of friend arriving from out of town, was one I could easily envision happening among the people she included in the film.

This film is, primarily, a catalyst. It is the story of a woman struggling with her own choices and trying to determine how that story fits into the global idea of the feminine. It is not meant to be the whole conversation. Rather, my impression is that Fox dearly wishes that the conversation she has sparked will continue long after the making of this film. Criticism I have read about the film and its limitations seems to imply that one film on a topic long neglected should serve to cover it completely. That kind of critique denigrates both the topic and the purpose of the film. What Fox has openly professed to do is to open up her own life in the context of the women's lives she encounters throughout her travels and adventures.

Her encounters with women range from her life-long friends, her family, the women she has met in the course of working all over the world to women she had never met before traveling to their homes in India or Russia to learn more deeply what their worlds were about. If there is one thing that is made clear, it is that there is no one woman's story. They are all unique, and yet their lessons are ones that everyone can benefit from. Fox functions as the everywoman, trying to seek wisdom and guidance on her life and love – she has both a married lover as well as a boyfriend at various points in the film, each of whom knows about the other- in order to gain some sense of what it means to be a woman outside the tiny little box our gender often gives us.

I asked Fox what it was like to feature herself in the film, having never done something like that before and how that process was for her.

She explained that she works in an organic way and that she knew from the beginning that a large part of the film would be her intimate story. "I knew I had to do that," she explained. "It was about part of me 'coming out of the closet' and owning my own life . . . nobody [I know] would think I didn't own it. I have an interesting life, but a lot of that was hidden."

She explained that in passing the camera with other women that both of their stories would become clearer. The technique of the film literally involves conversation in which both she and her subjects take turns filming the other as they discuss the nature of the woman's condition. She had a desire to expose her life on camera, as well as the desire to use this openness as a conduit for her subjects, who may not have been accustomed to speaking so openly. "In conversations [with other women] I couldn't ask others to reveal [themselves] if I wasn't willing to."

It is this dynamic of close conversation and confession among women that creates the intimacy of the film. For Fox, it is unique to this piece. The story that was being told demanded this process and her presence. As she pointed out to me, "story is everything. You adjust and create everything [around it]." and she does not feel that this will be the defining point for all future work. She has no plans to appear in her next film, but does have hopes for what flying will create next.

When we spoke, Fox was very excited that the website for the film, flyingconfessions.com, is preparing to undergo expansion. This expansion will include the ability to submit stories and pieces made passing the camera by women who saw the film. There will also be the possibility of including written stories and she plans to expand the materials associated with the film to include educational applications to help use the film in schools to generate dialog about women's issues and identity.

The final excitement was the possibility of a contest to pick a "seventh episode" that would be submitted and made by others. Fox has a great deal of interest in this idea and felt that it should not be her story that comprises this episode. She pointed out the fact that there had not been any storylines involving women of other sexual orientations and that she hoped that this could be rectified with the additional episode's including that part of women's experience.

Once the episode is chosen, Fox has hopes to pitch it to the Sundance channel so that it would reach a wider audience and continue the conversation.

I also spoke with Fox about her journey into film making and how she came to that work. Interestingly, it is not where she started out, nor where she ever thought she would find herself. I love these kinds of stories....

Fox began by studying international relations at Johns Hopkins University in my home town of Baltimore, and connecting with her passion for understanding other cultures. She hoped for work that would lead her to travel in many far off places and learn more about the people who lived there. A course in film ignited her love for the

medium and took her to NYU, where she studied until getting an opportunity to travel to Beirut and make her first major film there. She has not stopped working in the medium since.

Her love for film "is a combination of wanting to do art and work in social issues and to travel." documentary turned out to be the best way to engage all these interests, even though she always thought she'd end up working in narrative fiction films. It would be hard for her to go back now to narrative, although she certainly doesn't rule out the option. "It's hard once you make documentaries if you get a good one. I do my own filming. [In fiction films] you don't get the direct electricity to life. It's hard to give up."

She also describes her love of working with a small crew, which allows for a deeper connection to her subjects. The large crew necessary with major features would make this hard when her hope is that, "I am trying to understand the world and give it shape through story." Her love for this work only increases because the ways to tell story are always changing and evolving. It is a medium that she is delighted to find impossible to ever master. She could happily spend her whole life telling new stories.

In the case of "flying", the story being shaped is not only of the lives she encounters, but her own. for the years she worked on it, fox filmed friends, lovers, and her family, all of whom were willing to participate to varying degrees. She worked with these limits, knowing she would get the most complete story possible within people's comfort levels. She filmed with her Swiss boyfriend very little of the time they were together, and always within his comfort zone. With her married lover there was less discussion – there was no question of revealing his identity, so her boundaries were understood and maintained through the film.

This work did enhance relationships she had, she says, as it allowed her mother to ask her questions, since the camera's presence promised an answer. It was also freeing with her friend pat, who appears throughout the film. "The camera made us more open," Fox pointed out. "It provoked us and [somehow made] us have more interesting conversations." she said as well that she has the sense that both of them miss the filming sessions, which were an excuse to get together and talk frequently and openly.

I look forward to seeing the film on the big screen this weekend, and bringing friends with me to see what conversations come out of watching. There is a much longer conversation that needs to happen all over the world about what being a woman means today, and I thank fox for starting us off on such a strong and honest foot.

To see the film in Los Angeles the weekend of September 28-30, look up ticket bookings at the Mann Chinese theater.

If you are not in Los Angeles, check out the FLYING website and learn where the next screenings will be...