

WOMEN & HOLLYWOOD

NEWS AND COMMENTARY ABOUT HOLLYWOOD FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

MAY 12, 2008

Interview with Jennifer Fox, Director, Producer and Subject of Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman

Parts 3 and 4 of the six part series Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman airs tonight (Monday) on the Sundance channel. The series focuses on Jennifer Fox's questions about gender issues, motherhood, marriage and in the parts airing tonight she asks these questions of women activists working on issues in countries around the world.

Women & Hollywood was able to ask Jennifer Fox about making the film and how it has changed her.

Women & Hollywood: Each episode starts off with the following resonant statement: "I never wanted to be a girl in the way a girl was supposed to be. I wanted to be a boy. They could do anything they wanted to do." Why was it important to begin each episode that way?

Jennifer Fox: I think it really sums up the dilemma of our lives -- boys can do everything and girls can do very little. Remember, I grew up in the late 50s but I have a feeling that girls grow up not so different today...the gender lines have not been broken. And on this iconographic issue of raising children in some ways its like we are back in the 50s.

W&H: In the beginning episodes you are focused on having a child after many years of ambivalence. You question whether you are real woman in our culture without having a child.

JF: We define women as being married mothers actually. It's marriage plus children.

W&H: Do you feel you are in a different place from where you started the film?

JF: You are looking at a woman who has run away screaming from a female identity, saying I will not be controlled by the rules, I will live as men live. At the beginning of the film I am a long way from being a feminist because I completely sided with my father. I arrive at the end of the film siding with my mother and realizing that I am a part of a fabric that I didn't know I was part of before. At the end of the film [which was two years ago] I was still much more focused on having a child than I am now. I certainly feel that you can be woman and not have children, but I don't think society feels that.

W&H: Do you think that if you would have had more of a feminist identity you have come to the film from a different place?

JF: Oh yeah, but I think the film would not have been as good. I think that if I would have talked as politically as I do now it wouldn't have made for a good film. What's good about the film is that I was in a crisis of identity; I couldn't speak the language because I couldn't identify. What you see is someone searching for who they are. That was real. The good news about the film is that you follow my journey and that made a better film and one that younger women highly identify with.

W&H: Because you are not self-identified as a feminist?

JF: Right, and just like when I was a kid a lot of people still see feminist as a bad word.

W&H: Your film is heterosexually focused. Did you think about having lesbian stories as part of the film?

JF: I did really want to have a lesbian story but all of my attempts failed. I always thought that at the end of the film I would break up with these 2 guys and go out with a woman as a way to investigate my bisexuality. It didn't happen. I think the problem is because there are so few films like this that we want it to cover everything. It's actually quite a narrow. It's about sexual freedom and control internationally. The main thing was that the film had to go around the world, not that it had to cover all female identities.

W&H: What was so interesting was that you are taking people on a journey and exposing them to the international women's movement that many people here in the US are so unfamiliar with.

JF: I think what's really important about Flying is issues of representation. We are used to looking at the third world in a kind of object-oriented way when the camera points at them and hides the filmmaker. What I was trying to do was to say that we (US) who think we are so different from them are actually in the same frame. That's why it was so important for me to put a white affluent, western woman in the same frame as a woman from Pakistan or Cambodia or India to visually shift the representation. I wanted to say these women are like us. That's why the issues of my sexual abuse and sexuality were so important to unravel in the film because they are so common and that totally breaks down the wall between us.

W&H: Your film was financed internationally? How did you make that happen?

JF: I have quite an international reputation in the documentary film scene. The reason why this was a Danish co-production is because the film making strategies -- the one person one camera -- and the intimacy is something they've done very successfully in Denmark. A producer approached me and we decided to partner. Doing a co-production is always quite hard. I lived in Denmark for a year and a half and my Danish editor was

here and its hard and always more expensive. In our case it was successful because there was a creative reason to work together.

W&H: Why do you think that women are drawn to documentaries?

JF: They are just so much fun to make and they are hands on. Of course politically, [docs are more welcoming to women because of the smaller crews, smaller budgets, and less power] but at the same time it's also about having direct contact with a subject and people and I think women thrive on that. We are relationship beings.

There are very few women making series and when I made American Love Story I was the only woman I knew in PBS land who made a series. I'm probably still the only woman to have directed and produced a ten-hour series for public TV. One of the issues I had to deal with [at the time] was how a thirty something woman could be trusted with the scope and the money this would take. Those issues of money, power and responsibility are always the same for women.

W&H: Why do you think your film is resonating with people?

JF: I see this film is resonating so differently and it generates profound dialogue. Women and men say to me: "this is my life and nobody has put it on screen before and it's such a relief." I don't think that I've made a film that speaks so universally and directly before. My films have been successful but this is something different. Screening after screening I see this other reaction. I see it as a movement. You have to let people talk.

W&H: Do you embrace feminism now?

JF: I do. A lot of the effort is to get people to talk about gender in a new way and to see that sexism and gender issues are so ingrained in us and you have to do the daily work. It means don't capitulate to the idea of giving up your job because you have kids. There is a point where we have to demand gender equality and you have to start with yourself.

Posted by Melissa Silverstein at 10:38 AM