

## Interview: Vera Farmiga Ascends to 'Higher Ground'

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CHICAGO – As an actress, Vera Farmiga broke out big in 2009 with her Oscar nominated performance in “Up in the Air.” Farmiga is now taking a total filmmaker’s role, playing the lead character and directing the new film, “Higher Ground.”

Farmiga began her career in the late 1990s, scoring a featured role in the TV series “Roar.” After working some supporting parts in TV and film, including HBO’s “Iron Jawed Angels” and “Touching Evil” (both 2004), she began to appear in more prominent feature films like “The Manchurian Candidate” (2004), “The Departed” (2006) and “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” (2008). More attention came in 2009 opposite George Clooney with her Oscar nominated role in “Up in the Air.”

“Higher Ground” is her first film as a director, and she also plays the lead character named Corinne, a circumstantial convert to Evangelical Christianity. The film explores the phases of her faith and the life associated with it, and also deals with the role of extreme religiosity in everyday existence.



Vera Farmiga (right) as Corinne and Dagmara Dominczyk as Annika in 'Higher Ground'  
*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic*

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Vera Farmiga on a recent promotional swing through Chicago for Higher Ground. The candid actress explained the bigger picture of the subject matter of her directorial debut.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** As an actress, and in this case a director, you have to absorb a lot of the inner spiritual traits that the religion brought to Corinne and the rest of the characters. How did this immersion effect your own personal spirituality?

**Vera Farmiga:** Yes, the material came at me. You do absorb it, there is so much joy and wisdom in that realm. That is what I strived for as a storyteller and director, approaching it with reverence and respect, not trying to figure out whether God does or does not exist. I was just

looking for what it means to trek spiritually. The ups and downs, the ebbs and flows, the highs and lows, it's a rocky road. But it is a trek toward heaven, whether it's a concrete idea or abstract one.

I was effected by it. I did what touched me in this woman's journey, and also what the power was that touched others. No matter what your path is or what your spiritual tenets are, the film examines at the core what it means to be holy, and what it takes to achieve that.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the issues I thought the film raised was about the self and personal growth of the soul versus the church, family and community. Was that an issue for you and the character you played in the film?

**Farmiga:** Sure, it's a big issue when you're portraying a faith-based community. According to sources, there are thousands of Christian denominations, and within these rules and regulations there are manmade interpretations of the word of God. There is a mystery and mystique that made the film easier to make than to talk about, because people experience it in many different ways. You can talk about it in the belief community with a certain vernacular, but outside of that it's different. The way I talk about faith is making this film. It's not about what I think, it's how other people experience it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Higher Ground is a obvious statement about women's roles in Evangelical Christianity. What does the film express about the danger of religious sects that rely heavily on patriarchal leadership, either diminishing or dismissing it's feminine side?

**Farmiga:** My personal experience in my time spent in churches and within different denominations, it is not something they're contending with as much. The film was set in a very specific time period in the 1960s through the '80s, where women were struggling to find their voices. This was second wave feminism, and what was happening in church, was happening in politics and was also happening in society. This is the experience of Carolyn Briggs [author of the book and screenplay], I am not making a statement about how Christianity confines women. It depends on who is preaching that verse, and how we obtain wisdom from it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In your portrayal of what is essentially Carolyn Briggs' story, how did you make sure it was about her, than maybe your experiences in organized religion?

**Farmiga:** It wasn't a problem, I bleed into every character I play, you have to use your own instrument, which includes your emotions and memories. It is very much me, but not me at all. It combines the kinetic energies of the two of us. We forged the narrative from there. In order to touch people in a personal way, you have to come from a personal place. It challenges me, inspires me and I'm still trying to figure it out.

The story to me simply was about a woman who was trying to live a passionate existence, and have intimacy in all her relationships, but not to sacrifice her authenticity or sense of genuine self. It was easy to relate to that idea.



Vera Farmiga in Chicago, August 10th, 2011  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have referenced the 1997 Robert Duvall film, 'The Apostle' in the press as a template for your film. Did you as well want to show all sides of religion as The Apostle did?

**Farmiga:** The Apostle is one of my top five favorite films, I would say. And Duvall was a case study in both his acting and directing. One of my favorite scenes is when Duvall screams at God, 'I'm angry at you! I'm angry at you, Lord!'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Is that the idea in your film that religion and faith is powered by anger, frustration and crisis?



**Farmiga:** From personal experience, that is what makes us fall on our knees, we are in crisis, we need help or we are grateful. It is the restless moments of our souls that elicit prayer. Prayer shouldn't be limited to religion, it is a powerful utensil to tap into our strengths, abilities and potential. It's hard enough to do it in your own presence, but to actually vocalize it is wild.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the greatest change in your career once the attention started to culminate regarding your Oscar nominated role in ‘Up in the Air?’

**Farmiga:** Personally I didn't see how acclaim and awards changed much. I was still attracted a certain kind of storyteller before the nomination, and didn't see much of a change afterward. Maybe there was a slightly greater household name, but when I offer to someone I've just met that I was in Up in the Air, they will ask me who I was. [laughs] It's hard to gauge because also I took my second maternity leave just as the Oscars were announced. So afterward I took action, I wanted to experiment with creating interesting roles for women.

During awards season, you inevitably get these articles saying ‘look at all the great roles for women,’ but it's always the same five women, playing the same five roles. For the guys, there is more of variety as to who and what get nominated. I just get tired answering that question in the same way without saying ‘it sucks.’ [laughs] I simply found the dream role for myself.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you've worked with some pretty high level and famous directors, what specific trait did you pick up from them when you directed?

**Farmiga:** What my favorite directors – Debra Granik, Martin Scorsese and Anthony Minghella – all have in common is joy. The good cheer that they spread on the set. Their zeal goes all the way down to the production assistants. It's about their passion, and I want to be that person. I want to live a passionate life, exude that and pass it along to other people.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Ultimately the film seems to be a cautionary tale about obsessing in a faith. In your opinion, at what point as human beings do we have more of a responsibility for our individual growth over and above a belief in a higher power?

**Farmiga:** That is for you and me to decide. I find abominable ‘holier than thou’ attitudes, but what one person labels obsession might also be defined as passion. If it comes from a good place, where religion is and should be, and ultimately it is for self awareness and self transcendence, for the betterment of self. And that's a good thing. That was the direction I came from as a storyteller.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You've really had to answer some pretty deep questions in association with this film...

**Farmiga:** Yes, and in a very direct way. It's making me miss questions such as, ‘what was it like to kiss George Clooney?’ [laughs]

*“Higher Ground” continues its limited release in Chicago on September 2nd. See local listings for theater and show times. Featuring Vera Farmiga, Joshua Leonard, Dagmara Dominczyk, Taissa Farmiga and Bill Irwin. Screenplay by Carolyn S. Briggs (from her memoir) and Tim Metcalfe. Directed by Vera Farmiga. Rated “R”*



[16]

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]

Senior Staff Writer

[HollywoodChicago.com](http://HollywoodChicago.com)

[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [16]

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