

Flying higher

Having received an Oscar nomination for her role in 2009's *Up in the Air*, Vera Farmiga could have rested on her laurels. Instead, she's making her directorial debut with – and starring in – *Higher Ground*

BY MATT MUELLER

I don't think *Up in the Air* changed things. I feel like fun, inspiring and bizarre opportunities have always presented themselves to me." So reflects Vera Farmiga on whether her acclaimed performance as George Clooney's sexy, sharp-eyed corporate counterpart has supercharged her film career.

Following last year's awards-season hoopla, in which Farmiga found herself swept up courtesy of her Oscar- and BAFTA-nominated turn in Jason Reitman's stylish romantic comedy, the actress discovered she was pregnant with her second child with husband Renn Hawkey; thus, she dropped out of the opportunity to play Wallis Simpson in *W.E.*, directed by Madonna. But soon another opportunity presented itself: the chance to direct her first film, *Higher Ground*, which tackles the topic of religious fundamentalism, and in which she also stars.

"That was huge," says Farmiga. "And I shot it during my

second trimester of pregnancy, which was great, because you feel invincible." She also managed to squeeze in a supporting role in the techno-thriller *Source Code*, playing the controller of a military mission in which a soldier (Jake Gyllenhaal) is forced to solve a Chicago commuter-train bombing by reliving the lead-up to the event. "Yes, 2010 was intense," she says with a smile. "I really don't remember most of it."

As for missing the *W.E.* boat, Farmiga is fairly sanguine. "Wallis Simpson was a notorious size zero, and I would have been four months pregnant by the time Madonna wanted to start shooting, so it wouldn't have worked," she says. "But I found the love story really compelling, and if Ewan McGregor – who was attached at the time – had been my king, it would have been great. But it wasn't meant to be."

Clearly, Farmiga's attitude towards work is fairly Zen. "It's apparent to me when I want to do something. If things aren't so apparent, I don't jump on it," she says. She lets her

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INTERVIEW

agents find suitable roles, and then shoots her own audition tapes for the roles she wants. Although she could have capitalised on the career heat generated by *Up in the Air*, she instead committed herself to *Higher Ground*, a low-budget drama about a mother who joins a fundamentalist community only to find herself grappling with her faith. She was originally only due to star, but when she found she wasn't "creatively gelling" with the director, his suggestion that she take the reins herself proved irresistible. "The subject matter of the film compelled me," she says. "I don't know if I'll ever direct again, but I had a great time doing it."

Higher Ground was accepted into the US Dramatic Competition at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival – no small achievement for a first-time filmmaker. "Religion is a taboo subject matter in movies – and I love taboo subject matter," says Farmiga, who describes herself as deeply spiritual and was raised in a strict Ukrainian-Catholic household. "I've grown up in this world. I was raised to believe in God, but it's a quest for me. I'm still figuring it out. And I will be figuring it out for the rest of my life."

Growing up in New Jersey's Ukrainian community, Farmiga didn't speak English until she was six; she maintains a deep appreciation for her heritage. "I am European," she says. "I have very European sensibilities, even in the American films I choose to do." She says her decision to become an actress was "just one of those forks in the road. I really wanted to be an ophthalmologist, but I don't know what happened; I just switched gears in high school."

After high school, Farmiga studied performing arts at Syracuse University, in New York state, and then spent a few years doing off-Broadway plays. She has been acting in films for over a decade, playing opposite the likes of Richard Gere (*Autumn in New York*) and Denzel Washington (*The Manchurian Candidate*), as well as in the 2004 US indie *Down to the Bone*, for which she won critical acclaim as a working-class mother struggling to conceal her drug addiction. For a long time, however, Farmiga was "the best American actress you've never heard of". She began to receive wider attention in 2006, as a prostitute in the late Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering* and as Matt Damon's police-psychiatrist girlfriend in Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*, which won four Oscars.

But – if further proof were needed that the glitz of Farmiga's profession doesn't drive her decisions – the project she hopped into straight after wrapping on *Up in the Air* was *Henry's Crime*, co-starring Keanu Reeves and James Caan. The film offered her the chance to play a zany heroine – a volatile actress doing Chekhov in a grubby American town who is as smitten with her own talents as she is deeply insecure.

"I love contradiction in the women that I play," Farmiga says. "It's the most consistent thing about the women who turn my head in scripts. In *Henry's Crime*, my character, Julie, is one part fragility and one part strength; one part drama and one part comedienne. She reminded me of the madcap



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ABOVE Farmiga and co-star Dagmara Dominczyk in 2011's *Higher Ground*, which Farmiga also directed

heroines from the 1930s and 1940s, who could be as sexy as they were silly."

Equally, she opted to play the mission controller in *Source Code* in the thick of her pregnancy because she adored its director's acclaimed debut, *Moon*. "Duncan's such a unique talent, especially working in a genre where I don't often feel compelled by the characters," she says of David Bowie's filmmaker son. "He's got a very special touch, making you empathise with the characters in his films. *Source Code* was a no-brainer, and I also think Jake Gyllenhaal's going to be very special in the film."

Just as Farmiga's brains and moxie guide her towards playing flawed but fiercely intelligent women, those same attributes mean she refuses to stand in the shadows of her more famous co-stars. "Intimidated by George Clooney? Never!" she hoots. "There's nothing intimidating about him – he's charm personified. I think that's his biggest talent: there's no ego there. And I don't intimidate easily. That's just a quality I possess."

Farmiga's intelligent choices and Zen attitude make her equally unlikely to fall victim to the dog-eat-dog culture of Hollywood. "I spend very little time there, and I always keep one leg in the independent world," she says. "I kind of do my own thing, and I'm happy doing it. No regrets so far. It's been too good a ride." o

Source Code opens on 22nd April in the UK

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian