

Higher Ground

Religion and mainstream commercial cinema have never been an easy fit. Outside of religious material produced on film or video by churches for their own adherents, Hollywood has mostly avoided the subject, except for the lampooning or castigating of religious extremists. Serious religion content or earnest faith is seen as just too controversial, guaranteed to turn some part of the audience off—something no producer likes to do. That's why it is so rare to see a picture like "Higher Ground" the new feature directed and starring Vera Farmiga. This is a serious—but not morose—story of faith, how it can be tested and how it can be sustained.

The period is the 1960's in an unnamed part of the East Coast (it was shot in New York state) where a small but tightly-knit religious community lives. While the specific denomination of the religious group is never named, it has overlays of evangelical practices, especially in their strict adherence to the Bible and Jesus' teachings. Further, their demeanor and dress might be called Mennonite Lite. Men make the family and community decisions, and women know their place. Though their practices are traditional, they are not averse to the earthy (one amusing scene has the men of the congregation being gingerly versed in how to pleasure a woman).

Within this world is Corinne Walker (Vera Farmiga), at ease in her marriage to Ethan (Joshua Leonard) and warm with her family and co-religionists. We witness her younger self (played by Taissa Farmiga, Vera's real-life sister) in flashbacks, when she first meets and falls for the young Ethan (Boyd Holbrook), a rocker wanna-be. Still, within her group, Corinne is not a stolid believer but a seeker, eager to embrace Jesus more fully and even anxious to speak in tongues. She seeks "higher ground;" a true touch of the Lord.

When Corinne tries to testify in church, she is gently rebuked by the group's leader as "preaching" and obeys. Some of her more animal spirits she can share with her best friend, Annika (Dagmara Dominczyk), a lively member of the flock who is just this side of lusty. But, when Annika suffers a brain tumor and is left crippled and mute, Corinne's faith wavers as she questions why God has left her friend so enfeebled. Her doubts infect her relationship with her unquestioning husband, and they separate for a time. She does, however, return to the fold, her spiritual home, and does get another chance to "bear witness."

"Higher Ground" is based on a recent memoir called "This Dark World" written by Carolyn Briggs, who also co-wrote the film screenplay with Tim Metcalfe. It is this world that Farmiga has plumbed to make a most distinctive motion picture.

In both her skillful and unflashy direction and her leading performance, Farmiga avoids condescension and aloofness in depicting a striving religious community. The fundamentalism shown in the film is heartfelt and numinous, not fire-breathing or brainless. What Farmiga and her writers overcome is the almost inevitable tone of mocking that "religion" so often receives in our smart popular culture. "Higher Ground" might make the jaundiced and the self-righteous uncomfortable because of its bald, unadorned presentation of church language and practice, but that is precisely why it so unusual in our current entertainment climate.

Farmiga surrounds herself with a cast of solid, unaffected actors, each flavored with down-home style and presence. Bill Irwin may be slightly over the top as Pastor Bud in one scene, but most of the cast is standout. Joshua Leonard as Corinne's husband is earnest and dogged, and he shines in a sequence where, under great stress, he attacks this wife he cannot understand. Nina Arianda, as Corrine's reckless sister Wendy, adds a bracing, contrasting dose of disorderliness to the tranquil Walker home. Norman Leo Butz is both brotherly and intimidating in his role as leader of his flock. Dominczyk embodies such a hearty and vital soul that it makes her conversion to a crumpled state the more poignant. Hiring Taissa to play her younger self also works well for Farmiga; she's a teenager as natural as water in a stream.

Then there is Vera Farmiga herself, directing, very effectively, for the first time. While "Higher Ground" is, indeed, her character's story, she does not dominate the film but rather shares its narrative generously with her colleagues. She has such a striking on-screen presence—especially those arresting ice-blue eyes—but that is not emphasized here (to help insure that this film does not approach a vanity project, she is always seen—like the others—in a throwback wardrobe). One feels that Farmiga is, like her character itself, testing and probing as a director, too, trying to find out where life—and her film—will lead her.

(The film is rated "R" for mature themes and runs 109 minutes.)

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