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SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

# HIGHER GROUND

A film by Vera Farmiga

**Official Selection:**

2011 Sundance Film Festival  
2011 Tribeca Film Festival  
2011 Los Angeles Film Festival

[www.higherground-movie.com](http://www.higherground-movie.com)

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## SYNOPSIS

Vera Farmiga's directorial debut, **HIGHER GROUND**, depicts the landscape of a tight-knit spiritual community thrown off-kilter when one of their own begins to question her faith. Inspired by Carolyn S. Briggs' memoir, [This Dark World](#) (screenplay by Carolyn S. Briggs and Tim Metcalfe & Carolyn S. Briggs), the film tells the story of a thoughtful woman's struggles with belief, love, and trust—in human relationships as well as in God.

As a young girl growing up on a Midwest farm, Corinne (McKENZIE TURNER) experiences both the warmth of a loving family and the unease of a household frayed by conflict. Her father CW (JOHN HAWKES)—wiry and funny—and her mother Kathleen (DONNA MURPHY)—beautiful and very pregnant—clearly love each other. But when Kathleen's baby dies at birth, her grief turns to sour discontentment, and CW turns to angry drinking. Corinne and her younger sister Wendy (TAYLOR SCHWENCKE) witness the marriage as it unravels.

Religion makes its first imprint on Corinne at Vacation Bible School, where Corinne is moved (perhaps more by a spirit of experimentation than by the Holy Spirit) to proclaim herself Saved. Pastor Bud (BILL IRWIN) seems to be equally moved by the sight of Corinne's mother in shorts and a low-cut top.

As the years pass, teenaged Corinne (TAISSA FARMIGA) becomes a high school poet, while Wendy (KAITLYN RAE KING) becomes a track star. Quiet and self-contained though she is, Corinne captures the interest of Ethan (BOYD HOLBROOK), the handsome front man of the school rock band, The Renegades. From writing songs together to making love, the two are a soul match, and soon Corinne finds herself in a maternity wedding dress, with Baby Abby arriving shortly after. The newlyweds struggle with their radically altered fates: would-be writer Corinne cares for Abby while would-be rock star Ethan literally splits rocks as a stone worker. Their shared love for Abby helps their bond persevere.

One night, driving the Renegades band bus to a gig with Corinne and Abby on board, Ethan swerves off the road, and tragedy is narrowly averted. In the aftermath of the close call, Ethan and Corinne feel that God has saved them, and is calling on them to change their lives. They find their way to a religious community of evangelical Christians, a small, intimate church group whose worship seems joyous and open-hearted. As comfortable praying in nature as inside a church, the community, with their long-haired men and peasant-bloused women, has a welcoming, unconventional vibe. Adult Corinne (VERA FARMIGA) and Ethan (JOSHUA LEONARD) embrace the loving new family their community provides.

For Corinne, her close friendship with Annika (DAGMARA DOMINCZYK) opens her up to a whole new way of being in the world. Rapturous about Jesus, Annika is also wholeheartedly alive to earthly delights; striking, sexy, brash and passionate, Annika is equally at ease talking about carnality and conversing in tongues with the Holy Spirit.

But for all the seeming openness of the church, Corinne rubs up against strictures: when she stands up in church to talk about her spiritual insights, she is gently but firmly rebuked for

“coming dangerously close to preaching” – the woman’s place is to hold back and leave the teachings to the men. When she wears a dress that draws a church brother’s compliment, she is told to be careful not to tempt the menfolk. Throughout the years and two more babies, Annika is Corinne’s confidante and fellow spirit, while Ethan seems to relate to her more through the orthodoxy of church teachings.

The Christian zeal that permeates every moment of Corinne and Ethan’s life is uncomfortable for Corinne’s divorced parents and feckless sister Wendy, whose life has gone a bit off the rails into bad relationships and druggie associates. Nevertheless, they all make efforts in their own ways to maintain the connection; Corinne’s little daughter wonders aloud how they can be such kind and loving people without having been saved by Jesus.

While these everyday frictions wear away at Corinne’s devotion, a tragedy deeply undermines her faith. Annika is diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor; though she survives surgery, she is left mute and curled within herself in a wheelchair, wearing a grimace that could be pain and despair or merely neurological after-effects. It’s impossible for Corinne to know if the Annika she loves is still trapped within her wracked body or gone forever. The church community’s prayers and thanks for Annika’s survival ring hollow to Corinne.

As she withdraws from her faith, Corinne withdraws from Ethan, as well. Conflicts that could be seen as average marital discontentment are magnified by the church’s doctrine of wifely subservience. Ethan explodes in rage at Corinne’s show of independence. A Christian marriage counselor intones darkly that Corinne is “worshipping at the altar of yourself.” And when Corinne leaves the marriage and the home, she is cut off and shut out by the church community.

Still, the possibility of compassionate grace and forgiveness survives in Corinne. She visits the church and speaks eloquently about her loss of faith and her envy of their certainty. She is still the loving mother, daughter, and sister. And she reaches across the rift in her marriage to show Ethan her love if not reconciliation.

Faith, love and honesty are the cornerstones of this story of a woman who learns that no matter how many times she loses her footing, she has within herself all that’s necessary to get to a higher place.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Vera Farmiga

*I'm pressing on the upward way,  
New heights I'm gaining every day;  
Still praying as I'm onward bound,  
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."*

*I want to scale the utmost height  
And catch a gleam of glory bright;  
But still I'll pray till heav'n I've found,  
"Lord plant my feet on higher ground."*

Lyrics to the hymn "Higher Ground," written by Johnson Oatman, Jr.  
(Bible reference, Philippians 3:14)

Becoming a mother has changed me as an artist and storyteller. Now that I am asked so many questions by my children, I have never been more sure of not knowing the answers. I read Carolyn S. Briggs' memoir, [This Dark World](#), and was touched by her testimony, its candor, humor, and honesty about the very topic of "not knowing." Her journey of self-discovery resonated with me on every level as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a friend, and a mother.

I am also a sucker for a good love story. Our story follows a twenty-year span of all the love relationships in Corinne's life. It stacks and studies the four tiers of love: *agape*, *eros*, *philia* and *storge* [unconditional love, romantic love, love of family and friends, fond affection]. It was especially relevant and unique to me in the way it represents female friendship—as a refuge in harmony, not conflict or competition, as is often represented between women in film. While the men in the story are also full, rich characters, the story stresses that love between women is important. We see in each other the woman that we would love to be.

I thought this had the makings of an unusual and important film. The choices and truths it explores are universal: we're all seekers, longing for meaning. We all want a better sense of self. We all, on some level or another, experience moments full of doubt and questioning, feeling disappointed or disillusioned, in need of clarity. Why not throw all these notions up on the screen and see what sticks?

The film asks: is it possible for faith and doubt to coexist? What is a healthy soul? What holds us back from inner growth? Christianity is the "location" of the film, not the subject, concern, or issue. The film could have been set just as easily in a variety of faiths or cultures. I have a deep respect for all religions; I'm most familiar with Christianity. I did not want to make a film about the rights and wrongs of religion. I wanted to be reverent and respectful, and I did not want to infect the story with bias. It is about those moments in life where you lose sight of who you are, what you believe, and where you are going. Those moments of stumbling. The film is about finding your footing, finding higher ground.

*"Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart. And try to love the questions themselves." - Rainer Maria Rilke*

## **DIRECTOR Q&A**

### ***What made you want to direct this script?***

The thing that hitched me to directing it was its tricky tone. As the script evolved, it became a genre-defying film—a story of self-discovery, a romance, a dark comedy, a tender account of female friendship, and even a musical exploring the complex themes of faith and doubt.

I was attached to the project as an actress with honestly no intention of directing. After three years of script development with Tim Metcalf and an intense year of reshaping and rewrites with Carolyn S. Briggs and my husband Renn Hawkey, my heart was invested in a new and profound way. I'd never been a part of script evolution before. In the process, my own psyche, perceptions, and in particular, sense of humor entered the equation. Carolyn and I aimed to insert as much comedy and lightness into Corinne's journey as we could, with tact and diplomacy—not poking fun of the characters, but allowing them to have fun. Mixing spirituality and humor was going to be a tall, delicate order.

Carolyn was the real life model for Corinne. She believed I understood the spirit of the film, the complexities of the character's struggles and search. With her validation and plea, I knew I should direct.

### ***How did the subject matter allow you to explore or challenge some of your own thoughts on religion and faith?***

This film explores a notion I've experienced my whole life—that the spiritual life is hard to master. Great faith requires great striving. Whether we call it religion or faith, we all battle for a balanced, integrated soul. The protagonist in my film is searching for an authentic faith. The film examines her struggles within all the love relationships in her life—with her parents, her children, her friends, her community, and in her marriage, her relationship to God, and her relationship to self. The examination proves just how porous and murky a spiritual path can be at times. It embraces the gray of black-and-white religion.

### ***It can't be that easy to just jump in and start directing without experience—have you been learning on the job as an actor?***

I've had the great fortune of working with the finest directors, both heavyweight champions of cinema and rookies. They've all rubbed off on me in one positive way or another; in particular, Debra Granik [*Down to the Bone*, 2004] and Anthony Minghella [*Breaking and Entering*, 2006].

From them I learned the importance of kind and affectionate leadership. Even the not-so-great experiences, being directed (and limited) by the occasional egotistical know-it-all, have been helpful.

Honestly, it was pretty easy to jump in and take control. I think most anybody with vision, ideas, taste, awareness, instinct, and the will, can direct. I don't think an extensive film education or film history is compulsory. I had rock stars for department heads to bolster my vision; Michael McDonough, director of photography; Sharon Lomofsky, production designer; and Amela Baksic, costumes. With their creative contributions came certitude that I could direct without experience.

***What was the most challenging part of the process as a director?***

Most challenging was self-editing. Editing is not a part of the filmmaking process I've ever been privy to as an actress. Editing yourself is like an irksome coin toss. You've got to strip yourself of super ego and operate from the id. (Maybe I've got my Freud mixed up.) It's just hard to trade a beauty shot for the performance with truth and a brightly lit zit.

***Did also being the director affect the way you performed on camera in any way?***

I sincerely don't think so. Normally I rely heavily on my director to massage me out of my actor comfort zones. I relied instead on my scene partners, my script supervisor, my focus puller, and my husband/producer for feedback. We didn't always have time for playback and review, so I went by the affirmation or sheepishness of their gaze. I never moved on without their thumbs up. But I'd like to think that most often my instinct and bullshit meter told me when to cut and print.

***It sounds like a tight crew in every sense of the word.***

It required herculean effort on the part of my producers to meet the budget. We started off with 58 shooting locations that, by production, were reduced to 38. There were 21 live music performances. Lots of principle actors, lots of extras, many non-actors. Different eras which required frequent costume and hair changes. Animals. Children. Bus crashes. Epic stuff, for minimal funds.

I sacrificed things like actor creature comforts in exchange for sufficient and capable crew. My crew was nonpareil. I worked them like mules. My own 5-month pregnancy was a good damper for complaints. No matter how bad the crew ever had it, they knew I had it worse.

My husband, as creative producer and music director, was the jewel in my crown. I feel supremely and equally yoked to the guy. I value his opinion and perspective above any; he was my resounding sounding board. He has extraordinary diplomacy, savoir faire, and charm that make him an excellent producer and communicator with actors. If anybody had a problem with

anything, I'd sic Renn on them and he'd cajole them out of their misery.

*This film goes to unusual places in American culture and psyche—it's not mainstream storytelling. Have any other filmmakers or artists especially influenced you?*

I would say key influences in general would be Jon Cassavetes for his realism, Luis Buñuel for his surrealism, Debra Granik for her honesty, precision and non-bias, Ingmar Bergman for heartache, and Pedro Almodóvar for his themes of passion, desire, family and identity. *The Apostle* (1997) is my number one reference film for this project. Robert Duvall's performance and direction was a case study for me.

## THE ACTORS

### VERA FARMIGA – Corinne Walker

An Oscar®-nominated and award-winning actress, Vera Farmiga continues to captivate audiences with her ability to embody each of her diverse and engaging roles. Farmiga makes her directorial debut with **HIGHER GROUND**, which she also stars in, opposite John Hawkes, Joshua Leonard, and Dagmara Dominczyk.

Farmiga starred in Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air*, opposite George Clooney, for which she received a nomination for an Academy Award®, BAFTA, Broadcast Film Critics' Award, Screen Actors Guild Award®, and Golden Globe®. Farmiga can be seen in Duncan Jones's *Source Code* alongside Jake Gyllenhaal and Jeffrey Wright and in the upcoming romantic comedy *Henry's Crime* with Keanu Reeves and James Caan.

Farmiga won the Best Actress Award from the Los Angeles Film Critics' Association for her highly acclaimed performance in the independent film *Down to the Bone* directed by Debra Granik, for which she also won Best Actress Awards from the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and the Marrakech Film Festival. She also earned an Independent Spirit Award nomination for the role.

Among her other film credits, she starred in the dark thriller *Orphan* opposite Peter Sarsgaard; Miramax's Holocaust drama *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*; and was awarded the Best Actress Award from the British Independent Film Awards. Her role in Rod Lurie's political drama *Nothing But the Truth* earned her a nomination for Broadcast Film Critics' Award. Other films include Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*; Anthony Minghella's *Breaking & Entering*; *The Manchurian Candidate*; *Joshua*; *Quid Pro Quo*; and *Never Forever*. She recently wrapped the independent comedy *GOATS* opposite David Duchovny.

## **NORBERT LEO BUTZ – Pastor Bill**

Norbert Leo Butz is a Tony® Award-winning stage actor, whose Broadway credits include *Rent* (Original Cast); *Wicked* (Original Cast); *Thou Shalt Not*, for which he received Tony® Award, Drama Desk and Outer Critics nominations; and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, for which he won a Tony® Award, Drama Desk Award, and Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Actor in a Musical.

In addition to starring in Vera Farmiga's **HIGHER GROUND**, Butz's previous film projects include *Dan in Real Life* with Steve Carrell and *Fair Game* with Sean Penn and Naomi Watts.

On television, he has appeared on ABC's "The Deep End"; "The Good Wife" starring Julianna Margulies and Chris Noth; and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent". He also starred in the CBS miniseries "Comanche Moon," alongside Elizabeth Banks and Val Kilmer.

Currently, Butz can be seen on Broadway starring as 'Carl Hanratty' in *Catch Me if You Can*, for which he has won both a Tony® Award and Drama Desk Award, as well as an Outer Critics Circle nomination for Outstanding Actor in a Musical.

## **DAGMARA DOMINCZYK – Annika**

Dagmara Dominczyk is a television, theatre and film actress. Originally from Poland, Dominczyk pursued the arts in New York City, first at Laguardia High School of Performing Arts as a teenager and later at Carnegie Mellon University. On Broadway, she has performed in such productions as *Closer*, *The Violet Hour* and *Enchanted*, and Off-Broadway productions such as *There Are No More Big Secrets* and *Red Angel* with Eric Bogosian at Williamstown Film.

Dominczyk's television appearances include "24"; "Five People You Meet in Heaven"; "Bedford Diaries"; and "Law & Order: SVU." In addition to her role as Annika in **HIGHER GROUND**, she has also acted in films such as *Trust the Man* with David Duchovny; *Lonely Hearts* opposite Salma Hayek; *The Count of Monte Cristo*; *Rock Star*; and Ryan Murphy's *Running with Scissors*.

Currently, Dominczyk is balancing motherhood with acting work, and is finishing her first novel.

## **JOHN HAWKES – CW Walker**

John Hawkes has been working non-stop since his critically acclaimed performance as *Teardrop* in *Winter's Bone*. The role which earned him an Independent Spirit Award win and an Academy Award® nomination for Best Supporting Actor, along with nominations from the Screen Actors Guild and several film critic groups, also garnered him the Virtuoso Award from the Santa Barbara Film Festival. Next up for release is **HIGHER GROUND** with Vera Farmiga; Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* and the Sundance hit *Martha Marcy May Marlene*. Hawkes also

completed production on the indie features *The Playroom* and *Surrogate*. Later this year, he'll go into production on Steven Spielberg's highly anticipated feature project *Lincoln*.

Hawkes previously starred in *Me and You and Everyone We Know* which won a Special Jury Prize at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. It shared Camera d'Or honors and won the Critics Week sidebar at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival and received two 2006 Independent Spirit Awards nominations. He also starred in and co-produced the independent film, *Buttleman* for which he received a Breakout Performance Award at the 2004 Sedona Film Festival. Additional credits include *American Gangster*, *Miami Vice*, *Identity*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Small Town Saturday Night*, *Hardball*, *Wristcutters: A Love Story*, *The Amateurs*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and *A Slipping-Down Life*.

On television, Hawkes has starred in two acclaimed series for HBO. He portrayed 'Sol Star' in the critically lauded drama "Deadwood" and now plays Danny McBride's brother 'Dustin' in the comedy "Eastbound and Down."

Born and raised in rural Minnesota, Hawkes moved to Austin, Texas where he began his career as an actor and musician. He co-founded the Big State Productions theater company and appeared in the group's original play, *In the West* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. He also starred in the national touring company production of the play *Greater Tuna* including extended engagements in Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco. Hawkes wrote and performed the solo play *Nimrod Soul* at the Theatre at the Improv and appeared on Broadway in the *24 Hour Plays* alongside Sam Rockwell.

Hawkes has penned several songs featured in films and television shows. His song 'Bred and Buttered' appears on the *Winter's Bone* soundtrack. With his band King Straggler he performed at the Sundance Film Festival, SXSW Music Festival and numerous clubs across the U.S. He is currently writing and recording a new full length CD due for release in 2012.

## **BILL IRWIN – Pastor Bud**

A Tony® Award-winner for his role in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Bill Irwin has starred in many Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional productions, including *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*, opposite Sally Field; *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*; *Waiting For Godot* with Nathan Lane, for which Irwin was nominated in 2009 for a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actor in a Play; *The Tempest* opposite Patrick Stewart; *Garden of Earthly Delights*; *Texts for Nothing*, and the Tony® Award winning *Fool Moon* which he created with David Shiner.

On television, he has most recently appeared on "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation", FX's "Lights Out" and *The Good Wife*. He has also appeared on "Saturday Night Live"; "The @Tonight Show"; "The Cosby Show"; "3<sup>rd</sup> Rock from the Sun"; HBO's "Bette Midler, Mondo Beyondo"; CBS's "Northern Exposure"; PBS's "Great Performances"; and, with great pride, on "Sesame Street" in one of his most famous roles, Mr. Noodle.

In addition to his role in **HIGHER GROUND**, Irwin had an award-winning role in the Jonathan

Demme film *Rachel Getting Married*, and appeared in such films as Robert Altman's *Popeye*; John Sayles' *Eight Men Out*; Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Ron Howard's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*; *Igby Goes Down*, starring Kieran Culkin, Susan Sarandon and Jeff Goldblum; M. Night Shyamalan's *Lady in the Water*; *Dark Matter*, starring Meryl Streep; Julia Stiles' *Raving* (short) starring Zooey Deschanel; and Julie Taymor's *Across The Universe*, among others.

Irwin was an original member of Kraken, a theatre company directed by Herbert Blau, and was also an original member of the Pickle Family Circus of San Francisco where he worked with Larry Pisoni and Geoff Hoyle. He has won many awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Choreographer's Fellowship, and Guggenheim, Fulbright and MacArthur Fellowships.

### **JOSHUA LEONARD – Ethan Miller**

Joshua Leonard is a Los Angeles based actor and filmmaker who first garnered attention for his memorable role in 1999's lo-fi thriller *The Blair Witch Project*. Leonard has continued to work in projects that push the envelope, including 2009's Independent Spirit Award-winning *Humpday*, HBO's acclaimed series "Hung" and Showtime's "United States of Tara."

Leonard had two films that premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival: As an actor, starring in Vera Farmiga's directorial debut **HIGHER GROUND**, Leonard played a man at odds with his wife (Farmiga). He also directed and starred in *The Lie*, a devilish morality tale adapted from the story by acclaimed author, T.C. Boyle. The project co-stars indie darlings Mark Webber, Jess Weixler, and Jane Adams.

Most recently, he completed filming *The Motel Life*, an adaptation of Willy Vlautin's novel, starring opposite Emile Hirsch and Kris Kristofferson.

Leonard directed the short film *The Youth in Us* (Sundance '05). The art doc, *Beautiful Losers* followed, winning the Grand Jury prize at Cinevegas in 2008. He has also directed music videos for many popular acts, such as Morcheeba, Harper Simon, and Fitz and the Tantrums.

### **EBON MOSS-BACHRACH - Luke**

Ebon Moss-Bachrach was raised in Amherst, Massachusetts and attended Columbia University. He has acted in a wide range of film, television, and theater productions.

His feature film credits include Vera Farmiga's **HIGHER GROUND**; Alejandro Agresti's *The Lake House*; Rob Cohen's *Stealth*; and Mike Newell's *Mona Lisa Smile*. He has also appeared in numerous independent projects, such as Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman's *American Splendor*; Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*; and Lajos Koltai's *Evening*.

On television, Ebon was ADA Nick Sallenger on season three of FX's "Damages", as well as recurring roles on AMC's "Rubicon" and on the Fox series "Fringe." He portrayed John Quincy

Adams in the Emmy®-winning HBO miniseries “John Adams.” He also has starred in the NBC dramas “Kidnapped”; “Law & Order: SVU,” “Law & Order: Trial by Jury,” and “Law & Order: Criminal Intent”; and CBS’s “Medium”.

Ebon’s stage work includes *On the Mountain* at Playwright Horizons; *36 Views* at the Public Theater; *Ten Unknowns* at Lincoln Center Theatre; Horton Foote’s *When They Spoke of Rita* at Primary Stages; and multiple appearances at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. Most recently, Ebon played opposite Amy Irving in *The Glass Menagerie* (John Drew Theatre) and appeared as Baron Tuzenbach in CSC’s acclaimed production of *Three Sisters*, directed by Austin Pendleton.

### **DONNA MURPHY – Kathleen Walker**

Award-winning actress/singer Donna Murphy continues to build a career of striking range and diversity in the theater and on the large and small screens. This “seductive actress of major transformative powers” (*New York Times*) has impressed both critics and audiences with her depth and skill. Since starring in Vera Farmiga’s **HIGHER GROUND**, Donna recently completed filming a leading role in award-winning filmmaker Todd Solondz’s *Dark Horse*, also starring Christopher Walken, Mia Farrow and Selma Blair. And this past year, she treaded new ground in her first animated film, Disney’s box office hit *Tangled*, drawing international acclaim for her scene stealing performance as the voice of ‘Mother Gothel’.

This spring Murphy returned to the Broadway stage, starring in a new musical, *The People in the Picture*, produced by the Roundabout Theater Company. She garnered rave reviews and has received Tony®, Drama Desk, Drama League, and Outer Critics Circle Award nominations for her performance.

Murphy received the first of two Tony® Awards for Best Actress in a Musical, along with the Drama Desk and Drama League Awards, for her role in *Passion*. She was also awarded Tony® and Drama League Awards, as well as Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle nominations, for her performance in the 1996 Tony® Award-winning revival of *The King and I*. Additionally, in 2004 she was honored with the Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, Astaire, and Drama League Outstanding Achievement award for her work in Musical Theater, as well as another Tony® nomination for her role in the Broadway Revival of *Wonderful Town*. In 2007 she received Drama Desk, Drama League, and Outer Critics Circle Awards, and a Tony® nomination for her portrayal of Lotte Lenya in *LoveMusik*.

Murphy’s film credits include: *The Nanny Diaries*; *World Trade Center*; *The Fountain*; *Spiderman 2*; *The Door in the Floor*; *Center Stage*; *Star Trek: Insurrection*; *The Astronaut’s Wife*; and *Jade*. Murphy’s first television film, HBO’s *Someone Had to be Benny*, earned her a Cable Ace Award as Best Actress in a Drama Special or Series, as well as a Daytime Emmy®.

Other television work includes, TNT’s “Trust Me”; ABC’s “What About Joan”; Showtime’s political drama “The Last Debate”; Mary Todd Lincoln in “The Day Lincoln Was Shot” (TNT); Stephen Bochco’s “Murder One” (ABC); “Leonard Bernstein’s New York” and “Abigail Adams in Liberty!” for PBS; the 2000 and 2002 “Kennedy Center Honors” (CBS); and guest

appearances on “Ugly Betty”; “Law & Order,” “Law & Order: Criminal Intent” and “Law & Order: SVU”; “Damages”; “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip”; “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation”; “The Practice”; and “Ally McBeal.”

### **TAISSA FARMIGA – Young Corinne Walker**

Named one of the breakout stars of the Sundance Film Festival in 2011 by *The Daily Beast*, Taissa Farmiga is, at sixteen years old, at the beginning of what promises to be an outstanding career. **HIGHER GROUND** is Farmiga’s feature film debut. Farmiga resides in Whitehouse Station, NJ.

### **BOYD HOLBROOK – Young Ethan Miller**

Boyd Holbrook was raised in Prestonsberg, Kentucky where he had the opportunity to steal some peaceful down time learning to play guitar, sculpt, and ride horses. His creative interests sparked and he decided to move to New York City to pursue a career as an actor studying with famed acting teacher and coach, William Esper, and at the same time audited classes in screenwriting at Columbia University.

During the course of these acting pursuits, he was also evolving as a talented writer and on a whim sent a screenplay to Gus Van Sant who was so impressed with his talents that he gave him a role in the Academy Award®-winning film *Milk* starring Sean Penn (Oscars 2009). This led Boyd to other acting opportunities in films such as *Oranges* produced by Anthony Bregman; **HIGHER GROUND**, directed by Vera Farmiga; many other indies and most recently a role in Rob Reiner’s *Summer at Dog Daves*.

Boyd can also currently be seen in the Showtime series “The Big C” with Laura Linney and Oliver Platt. He has had his screenplay *Uncle Sam* optioned to be produced within the next year and looks forward to continuing his work as a solo sculptor, highlighting his exhibitions at galleries around Manhattan including his first solo art exhibition “Iscariot” at RARE Gallery followed by a group show at PPOW that took place in 2009.

### **MICHAEL CHERNUS - Ned**

Michael Chernus is a television, film and award-winning theatre actor who can be seen as ‘Jeffrey’ in Barry Sonnenfeld’s upcoming 3D film, *Men in Black 3* opposite Will Smith. His other recent film credits include Vera Farmiga’s **HIGHER GROUND**; Bradley Rust Gray’s *Jack and Diane*; Will Frears’ *Coach*, starring Hugh Dancy; Ed Zwick’s *Love and Other Drugs*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Anne Hathaway; and the indie comedy *Feed the Fish* opposite Tony Shaloub.

Chernus’ past film credits the Oren Moverman drama *The Messenger* (Academy Award® nomination for Best Screenplay) playing opposite Ben Foster, Woody Harrelson, and Jena

Malone and the Bart Freundlich comedy *The Rebound*, also starring Catherine Zeta-Jones. He also starred in Kirt Gunn's award-winning feature *Lovely By Surprise* (2007 Special Jury Prize Seattle Film Festival) alongside an exceptionally talented cast that includes Dallas Roberts, Reg Rogers, Austin Pendleton, Carrie Preston, and Kate Burton.

On television, he appeared in the Season One finale of "Bored To Death" as Zach Galifianskis' nemesis. He also had a notable recurring role as 'Ryan Flanagan' on the NBC hospital drama "Mercy".

Also an accomplished stage actor, Michael won a 2011 OBIE Award for his performance in Lisa Kron's *In The Wake* at The Public Theater. He also recently played the lead role of 'KJ' in Annie Baker's *The Aliens*, which Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* named the best play of 2010. Michael is a graduate of the Juilliard School's Drama Division. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, Chernus lives in Brooklyn and plays bass in the band Less the Band.

## **THE FILMMAKERS**

### **VERA FARMIGA – Director**

Please see above, page 7.

### **CAROLYN S. BRIGGS – Screenwriter, Author of the Memoir This Dark World**

Carolyn S. Briggs received her B.A. and M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas. As a graduate student, she won the Heartland Short Fiction Prize for Emerging Writers. She published her memoir *This Dark World* with Bloomsbury USA in 2002. She and screenwriter Tim Metcalfe adapted her short story "The Wife of Bath" into the screenplay *For Emily Whenever I May Find Her*. Shortly afterward, they collaborated again with the screenplay *This Dark World*. She is an Assistant Professor of English at Marshalltown Community College. Carolyn and her husband David live in Des Moines, Iowa.

### **TIM METCALFE – Screenwriter**

Writer-Director Tim Metcalfe was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. He attended both the University of Cincinnati and California Institute of the Arts.

His credits include such diverse films as *Revenge of the Nerds*; the Brad Pitt cult thriller *Kalifornia*; and the 2009 horror hit *Haunting in Connecticut*. For producers Ed Pressman and Oliver Stone, Metcalfe wrote the independent film *Iron Maze* starring Bridget Fonda; which won for him the best screenplay award at the Tokyo Film Festival.

In addition to his work on **HIGHER GROUND**, he wrote and directed *Killer: A Journal of Murder* starring James Woods. The film was also produced by Oliver Stone, and won for Woods two film festival Best Actor awards.

For cable television he wrote for “The Day Lincoln Was Shot,” for TNT, and the docudrama “44 Minutes: Shootout in North Hollywood,” which garnered the highest rating in the FX channel’s history.

He has written or co-written with partners screenplays for Steven Spielberg, Norman Lear, Spyglass, New Regency, Propaganda, Mandalay, Warners, Disney, Paramount and Lionsgate and Fox.

Married with two children, Metcalfe lives in Brattleboro, Vermont.

### **CARLY HUGO – Producer**

Carly Hugo is a founding partner of The Group Entertainment, an NYC film production and talent management company. She is the producer of **HIGHER GROUND**, directed by and starring Vera Farmiga, and the documentary *Hot Coffee*, both of which premiered in competition at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival. Her other producing credits include *Beautiful Darling* (Berlin & ND/NF ‘10), *Beware the Gonzo* (Tribeca ‘10), *Peter and Vandy* (Sundance ‘09), *Bass Ackwards* (Sundance ‘10), and *Loggerheads* (Sundance ‘05).

Carly has several films in post-production, including *The Art of Love*, which stars Virginia Madsen and Aidan Quinn. Carly is the Executive Director of At Play Productions, a theater company for emerging artists, and is the producer of the 24 Hour Plays Off-Broadway. She holds a B.A. in Film Studies from Columbia University.

### **CLAUDE DAL FARRA – Producer**

Claude Dal Farra, Ph.D., founded BCDF Pictures, a New York-based production company, in 2010 with his brother Brice Dal Farra and Lauren Munsch. They also created a film fund, Strategic Motion Ventures, to finance the pictures produced by BCDF. In its first year, BCDF produced four films: **HIGHER GROUND**; *Peace, Love, & Misunderstanding*; *The Art of Love* and *Rhymes with Bananas*. They are currently in pre-production on *Predisposed* and *Liberal Arts*, which will both shoot in the summer of 2011. Dal Farra pursued a doctorate in Biochemistry, and then served as Technical Director and Director of Research for a biotech company. He currently lives in New York and serves as Vice-President of Research & Development for an international chemical company.

### **MATT PARKER – Producer**

Matt was born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee where his love of film began with his weekly Sunday trip to the movies with his dad. Matt is a producer with The Group Entertainment. He was a producer of **HIGHER GROUND** (Sundance '11), *Restless City* (Sundance '11), and *The Art of Love* (in post-production); co-producer of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (in post-production), *Peter and Vandy* (Sundance '09) and *Beware the Gonzo* (Tribeca '10); associate producer of *Loggerheads* (Sundance '05); and producer on *Find Love* (Slamdance '06) and *Just Like the Son* (Tribeca '06). He was also an associate producer of *FLOW* (Sundance '08) and *Familiar Strangers* (LAIFF '08). He also produced the multi-award-winning short *Facechasers* and the independent television pilot, "Nicky's Game" starring Burt Young. Matt was also partnered with producer Gill Holland in sonaBLAST! Records (Mark Geary, Kelley McRae, The Old Ceremony), which saw its first two releases (Mark Geary's *Ghosts* and *3 1/3 Grand Street*) go gold in Ireland.

### **RENN HAWKEY – Producer**

Renn Hawkey is a founding member of the rock band Deadsy, and the producer and musical director of **HIGHER GROUND**. Currently living in the Hudson Valley with his wife Vera Farmiga and their two children, Renn has several projects in development, including a dark comedy about family grief called *Flying Squirrels*, which he wrote and is set to direct. He is also producing a film called *Uncle Sam*, starring **HIGHER GROUND** discovery Boyd Holbrook.

### **JON RUBINSTEIN – Producer**

Jon Rubinstein started Authentic Talent and Literary Management exactly six years ago this Sundance. With offices in New York and Los Angeles, Authentic is committed to empowering its clients to powerfully and positively impact the world through their work, knowing that by doing so, audiences are empowered in turn. Additionally, Authentic works with its clients and on its own to directly impact the world, in partnership with major nonprofit organizations. **HIGHER GROUND** represents Authentic's first foray into producing. Jon is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to work with such a staggeringly great group of people led by one of the most dedicated, passionate, talented and kind artists he's ever met.

Jon is on the board of The Interdependence Project, an organization dedicated to causing social change through the practice of meditation and the study of Buddhism. He is also a dedicated supporter of Peace First, which teaches children the skills of conflict resolution and civic engagement in the school environment, while working with educators to integrate social-emotional learning into schools. Jon is also proud of Authentic's partnership with Save the Children, the world's leading independent organization creating lasting change for children in need.

## **MICHAEL MCDONOUGH – Director of Photography**

Scottish born cinematographer Michael McDonough studied art at The Glasgow School of Art and The Royal College of Art in London, developing an interest in film during a Prix de Rome scholarship; later receiving a Master's from NYU's film program. He was recently nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Cinematography for his work on the Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner *Winter's Bone*.

McDonough's work on *Down to the Bone* (Dramatic Directing Award at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival) and *Winter's Bone*, were collaborations with director Debra Granik. His other credits include *New York, I Love You* with Allen Hughes, Randy Balsmeyer and Shunji Iwai; *Quid Pro Quo* and *Ravenous* with Carlos Brooks; and *Bowling for Columbine* with Michael Moore (2003 Academy Award® winner for Best Documentary). He recently finished *The Mortician* (in 3D) directed by Gareth Roberts, and *Darling Companion*, directed by Lawrence Kasdan.

## **SHARON LOMOFSKY – Production Designer**

Sharon Lomofsky started her career in South Africa in the 1980s, working on commercials with renowned directors Ian Gabriel, Keith Rose and Jonathan Taylor. After she moved to New York, she gained international recognition for her production design of Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain*, which won The Golden Lion in 1994 and was nominated for an Academy Award® in 1995.

She has continued to design critically acclaimed films such as *Manny and Lo*; *Claire Dolan*; *Piñero*; and *A Love Song For Bobby Long*, as well as international box office hits, such as *Bring it On*; *The King* (Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2005); *Stephanie Daley* (Winner of Waldo Salt Award, Sundance 2006); *El Cantante*, directed by Leon Ichaso; and *I Think I Love My Wife*, a Chris Rock comedy.

Her most recent films include the James Marsh documentary, *Man on Wire*, which won the Oscar® for Best Documentary in 2009; *Assassination of a High School President*; and *A Year in Mooring*. Most recently, she designed for Larry Blume's *Tiger Eyes*, starring Willa Holland, an adaptation of Judy Blume's novel of the same name.

## CAST

Ethan Miller	JOSHUA LEONARD
Pastor Bill	NORBERT LEO BUTZ
Ned	MICHAEL CHERNUS
Corinne Walker	VERA FARMIGA
Young Corinne Walker	MCKENZIE TURNER
Kathleen Walker	DONNA MURPHY
CW Walker	JOHN HAWKES
Salesman	MATTHEW DUBAS
Young Wendy Walker	TAYLOR SCHWENCKE
Mrs. Tuttle	JILLIAN LINDIG
Pastor Bud	BILL IRWIN
Tim	ALDEN ROSAKRANSE
Teenage Corinne Walker	TAISSA FARMIGA
Kirk	JAMES NOON
Teenage Wendy Walker	KAITLYN RAE KING
Teenage Ethan Miller	BOYD HOLBROOK
Mike	BRANDON BOYER
Renegades	HARRISON BASCH
	NOAH BOWMAN
Biology Teacher	BOOKER JAMES WINTER
Warren	WARREN HAYNES
Younger Abigail Miller	LUELLA ROCHE
Younger Lily Miller	SARAH BANKS
Annika	DAGMARA DOMINCZYK
Deborah	BARBARA TUTTLE
Molly	MOLLY HAWKEY
Luke	EBON MOSS-BACHRACH
Dr. Frank Barnes	FRANK GOODYEAR
Hope	REAGAN LEONARD
Woody	CHARLES GLASER
Joanna	LUCY OWEN
Wendy Walker	NINA ARIANDA
Cop	JOSEPH SINAGRA
Older Abigail Miller	SARAH LITTLE
Older Lily Miller	ZOE PIPA
Gabe Miller	MATHEW BILTONEN
Nurse	SONIA T. GITTENS
Seven Year Old Boy	ELI RUBINSTEIN
Amy	AMY HELM
Machan	MACHAN TAYLOR
Jorgen	JORGEN JORGENSON
Man in Counseling Office	TOM CHERWIN
Woman in Counseling Office	LAUREL S. ANDRETTA
Receptionist	KAREN KEEFE

Dr. Adams JACK GILPIN  
Oliver OLIVER WOOD  
Liam SEAN MAHON  
Liam's Wife NATALIE THOMAS  
Pawn Shop Worker TERRY MCKENNA  
Faye DEBORAH HEDWALL

## CREW

Directed by VERA FARMIGA  
Produced by CLAUDE DAL FARRA  
RENN HAWKEY  
CARLY HUGO  
MATT PARKER  
JON RUBINSTEIN  
Screenplay by CAROLYN S. BRIGGS and TIM METCALFE  
& CAROLYN S. BRIGGS  
Based on the memoir *This Dark World* by TIM METCALFE  
Executive Producers CAROLYN S. BRIGGS  
JONATHAN BURKHART  
BRICE DAL FARRA  
Casting Directors LAUREN MUNSCH  
KERRY BARDEN  
Director of Photography PAUL SCHNEE  
Production Designer MICHAEL McDONOUGH  
Costume Designer SHARON LOMOFSKY  
Key Makeup & Hair Artist AMELA BAKSIC  
Edited by ASHLEY FOX  
Sound Mixer COLLEEN SHARP  
Re-recording Mixer JAMES DEMER  
Music Composer ROBERT HEIN  
ALEC PURO