

Photographer: Ekaterina Belinskaya
Stylist: Sydney Lopez
Styling Assistants: Lauren Jeworski + Michael Mauriello
Makeup: Fiona Stiles at Starworks
Hair: Dritan at Forward Artists using Sachajuan
Interview: Katie McGehee
Writer: Sonya Singh
Location: The Line Lofts @ Wilshire

TAISSA FARMIGA

skirt and top by Victoria Hayes
shoes by Stella Luna
earrings by Laura Lombardi

Just as Taissa Farmiga wrapped a film shoot in Ireland in 2016, she received a phone call. It was *American Horror Story* co-creator Ryan Murphy, curious about whether she would be interested in a quick cameo for one episode of season six, *Roanoke* — it films tomorrow. She considered the depth of her exhaustion and eyed her imminent jet lag.

Still, it wasn't much of a question. Her role in the first season of the FX anthology series launched her career: Of course she'd return to a set so special to her. She didn't know much about the episode yet, but a cameo should be manageable. Less than 24 hours after touching down, she found herself on a grueling night shoot, secured in a harness, suspended in air, patiently waiting to be impaled and burned alive.

The whole day is a tidy microcosm of Farmiga's game-for-anything career, in which she has traded the familiar for less certain paths, one of which led her straight into the murder house that altered the course of her life — *American Horror Story*, where a quick impaling is all in a day's work.

Born into a large Ukrainian family in rural New Jersey, there is little about Farmiga that would suggest she's well-suited for a series of roles draped in darkness, from several seasons of *AHS* to *The Nun* [2018], the latest installment in the *Conjuring/Annabelle* universe. She is slight and poised, expressive and light, yet unfazed by a photo shoot that co-stars a suitcase full of dismembered mannequins, a pile of their arms and legs trailing behind her. Before discovering she enjoyed acting in horror projects, she had to discover her desire to act in the first place.

"I was always someone who loved math and numbers. I have a very, very logical brain," says Farmiga, the youngest of seven children, over tea near her home in Los Angeles. She thought more about coding than acting. A creative career was the domain of her older sister, Vera Farmiga, who is no stranger to haunted houses, either, garnering acclaim for her roles in *Bates Motel*, *Orphan* and *The Conjuring* films.

When Vera was making her directorial debut with the 2011 drama *Higher Ground*, a gracefully guided exploration of skepticism and faith, she wanted her teenage sister, 21 years her junior, to play the younger version of her own character.

"When she asked me to do it, it was like, 'OK, if you want me to, whatever' — very super moody teenager," says Farmiga, now 24. "Then we did the movie and people always asked me, 'How did you know you could do it? Weren't you scared?' And I realized that had never crossed my mind. It wasn't, 'Can I act?' It was, 'I hope whatever I do makes my sister happy. I hope she's OK with it.'"

After filming *Higher Ground*, Farmiga went back to her normal life. Fascinated when her sister-in-law spoke of her work as an accountant, Farmiga began looking into courses at the local community college.

"But then Vera invited me to Sundance, and people expressed interest," she says. Her performance in *Higher Ground* had turned heads. "They saw the movie and wondered if I was acting, and Vera encouraged me to see where it goes. When we filmed, I loved being on set and I loved the camaraderie of the crew. I loved getting to play someone else and be someone else for a moment. I was a very shy teenager, so I didn't like talking to people. I didn't like

expressing myself. It was just a way to be that wasn't being me. So then I said, 'Yeah, OK. I guess I'll see where it goes.'"

A few months later, her first TV audition led to a role in FX's new supernatural horror series starring Connie Britton, Dylan McDermott, Evan Peters and Jessica Lange — Jessica Lange! Farmiga catches herself when talking about her co-star, as if saying her name aloud brings a fresh realization of how unreal it's all been. Subsequent seasons would bring Angela Bassett, Kathy Bates and Stevie Nicks — could any self-respecting storyline about a coven of witches who twirl along to 'Rhiannon' leave her out?

"I've been so lucky in my career," she says. "I've always been a person who loves to observe. I love people-watching, and when I'm on set, that's the best place to do it because I'm working with actors who have been doing this for years and years, and they have so much history and experience, even in how they walk into a room and the way they present themselves and hold themselves. One of the first times I worked with Jessica Lange, I remember just staring."

And then there's Sam Shepard. Farmiga took a break from the screen in early 2016 to make her Off-Broadway debut in the revival of his 1978 play *Buried Child*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Shepard, who died a year after the revival closed, was present during the production, making line edits in rehearsals.

"The first time we did a rehearsal reading all the way through Act II, Sam was there and I was just a blubbing mess," she recalls. "I ripped my script accidentally because I was trying to act big enough for the stage. I just love watching and silently taking in [artists like Lange and Shepard] and absorbing whatever I can."

Her love of observation was an asset while surrounded by the seasoned professionals she was meeting in her career, especially considering she didn't grow up a film buff with lifelong dreams of acting. She didn't pore over great performances, and her idea of a good night never involved watching a movie through her fingers. "I hate being scared. I hate watching dark things. If I'm picking a movie or TV show to watch, I go comedy all the way, but I love playing that stuff," she says.

"I don't like feeling weighed down by heavy things, by emotional and dark things, which is funny because that's the stuff I love to play. So [on set], I have to let it go. I shrug it off and I'm joking with the crew and cracking jokes until they say, all right, we're about to roll. Then, I'm like, 'OK, got to go cry, one second,' but that's me," she proclaims. "I've worked with actors who have to sit in it for the entire duration of filming, and I can't do that. I feel things really intensely, so if I sit with it, then it's just too much for me. That's the hardest thing I've learned about myself recently: I empathize too much, too hard. As soon as someone starts talking to me, I feel what I think they're feeling. It can be draining. When I'm playing a character, it's the exact same thing. I take on what they're feeling, so I just let it go and joke around. That's how I get through the kinds of movies and shows that require it."

The experience of filming horror is an odd one, indeed — actors must immerse themselves in the macabre for hours on end, conduits for our most unpleasant emotions. But unlike viewers, they also see the monster take off the mask after the camera stops rolling and joke around with him at craft services. There are a few exceptions, though, and for Farmiga, one may be her time working



skirt and top by Ellery
earrings by Laura Lombardi
necklace by Laura Lombardi



Full look by No. 21

on *The Nun*, released this Fall.

A spinoff of 2016's *The Conjuring 2*, the film finds Farmiga in a murder house of another sort, a castle in 1950s Romania, where she plays a nun in her novitiate who discovers something very, very unholy. As innocent Sister Irene, Farmiga shines, but it's Bonnie Aarons who, for good and terrifying reasons, steals the scene while reprising her role as the demon nun.

"We're filming in Romania in this dark castle, and you have Bonnie Aarons in full demon makeup and she's screeching in my face; she's right there. It's pitch black all around me, and I definitely feel real fear coursing through my body," Farmiga says. "But, usually, the moment I get freaked out is when I'm home alone later. Those things fester. They stay with you, and they dwell. It's there, and I can't get rid of it. That's why I don't like watching those things."

Buried Child carries a different kind of weight. Although its last lines are hopeful, Shepard's play deals in frustration and dysfunction, exploring the fragmentation of the family unit and disillusionment with the American Dream. On second thought, its painful realities may be harder to shake than any ghost story.

"When I went home in the first weeks of rehearsals, where it was eight-hour rehearsals for six days a week—that was intense—I would be so tired I couldn't even think about it," Farmiga says. "But once we got into doing stuff like previews and shows, I had so much fun on stage that it completely counteracted the weight of the show. I was working with

phenomenal actors, so I was just so excited to get up there and see what they're going to do differently this time and just be in the moment. I didn't have time to dwell."

While Farmiga tends to find herself in grim projects like these, she has also steadily appeared in films where absolutely no one is skewered on a stake — Sofia Coppola's bright, buzzing satirical crime film *The Bling Ring* [2013], for example, based on the real-life group of teenagers who burglarized celebrity homes in the Hollywood Hills in the late 2000s.

After *The Bling Ring*, Farmiga has worked nearly nonstop, appearing in more than a dozen films, including the 2016 *Western In the Valley of Violence*, opposite Ethan Hawke and John Travolta, and Warren Beatty's 2016 film *Rules Don't Apply*, starring Beatty, Annette Bening, Matthew Broderick, Lily Collins and Alden Ehrenreich.

She says she's looking forward to taking a few months off to decompress, take a break from back-to-back filming-promotion cycles and look after her health. This past year has been her busiest yet, with five films released and a return to *AHS* for its eighth installment, 'Apocalypse', where she reprised her roles as Violet Harmon from *Murder House* and Zoe Benson from 'Coven'. It was a mix of nostalgia and, unexpectedly, nerves.

"It was jarring, to be honest, [but] I was so happy," she says. "I was like, 'Oh, of course I know who Violet is. She's been in me this whole time. She hasn't gone anywhere. But I was so scared because I didn't want her to change. I didn't want her to be different than who she was eight years ago. I've changed. I've probably been 10 different people since then.'"

Just seven years after her television debut as Violet Harmon, she found herself being directed by Clint Eastwood in his crime drama *The Mule*, released December 2018, starring Eastwood, Bradley Cooper, and Andy Garcia. She worked with the latter in 2013's *At Middleton*, a romantic comedy starring Garcia and her older sister.

Vera has been a steadfast source of encouragement in her younger sister's career, from helping her make her first self-tape when Taissa didn't know what that was, to more intangible support, such as serving as Taissa's source of inspiration to do more theater or sit in the director's chair herself someday. "She's phenomenal. I know she's my sister, so I'm going to say that," she says with a laugh. "But she is honestly one of my favorite directors I've ever worked with."

Through Vera, Sarah Paulson and much of the *AHS* cast, particularly the all-female main cast of *Coven*, Farmiga sees a path blazed for her by strong women who overcame challenges she has not had to face, or at least not as often — a reminder to step back and celebrate progress where we can.

"I've come up as an actress in a time where I've had good experiences and lots of great opportunities to work with female directors," she says. She had two films at the 2018 LA Film Festival, both directed by women. "I try to hold onto those sorts of things and share my story by saying, yes, there's so much more we can be doing. Yes, there could be so much more equality, more room for women throughout — in the crew, in any part of a film. But I have been able to say I've had the opportunity to be surrounded by women in the workplace. So I see things are changing."

She grounds her worldview by comparing her own story to those Vera tells her. The world can always be better; it needs to be better, she says, but there's no denying she inhabits a fairer, more supportive world at age 24 than Vera did in her twenties.

"The fact that we're not letting the conversation drop, that we're not letting people say, 'Oh, OK, I'm sorry,' and then move on — that's incredibly important," Farmiga says. That we remark on all-female casts for nothing more interesting than the fact they're all female is evidence our perception problem persists. "That [Coven] didn't feel unique to me is good. Because it just is. It's going to keep changing, and we're not going to stop until it does. It's a difference of, 'Yeah, of course [this is normal], which is good. We're on the right path.'"



full look by Marc Jacobs
shoes by Giuseppe Zanotti
earrings by Beladora