

A REAL STANDOUT

Vera Farmiga, the only woman in 'The Departed,' holds her own BY MICHAEL GILTZ



HER ARRIVAL New Jersey's Vera Farmiga in the upcoming drama "Breaking and Entering" (far l.) and in "The Departed" (above, with Matt Damon), in which she plays a conflicted police psychologist.

The cast of Martin Scorsese's "The Departed" — Matt Damon, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jack Nicholson, Mark Wahlberg, Alec Baldwin — have been in the cross hairs of critical praise. But Vera Farmiga, who plays a shrink dating apparent straight-arrow cop Damon but drawn to bad-boy undercover mole DiCaprio, can't help but stand out, even among all that talent. She's the only gal in sight.

"It never really dawned on me until I actually saw the film," laughs Farmiga about taking on the lone major female character in the testosterone-heavy crime drama. "It's not till now that I realize the tremendous responsibility I had in this film. It was going to be a representation of my gender! But I never felt that pressure."

With Scorsese back on the mean streets — this time in Boston — the film opened at No. 1 and looks set to become the acclaimed director's biggest hit. And it's the first box-office success for New Jersey-born Farmiga, who's spent the last decade working steadily.

The actress, whose looks and performance in "The Departed" have drawn comparisons to Cate Blanchett and even early-career Meryl Streep, is certainly not a generic hottie-of-the-moment, but she is definitely enjoying her first Big Moment.

"I've never been part of a huge hit," says Farmiga, 33. "I'm excited. But then it takes very little for me to get excited — I get excited about earthworms. I get excited over hydrangeas. But I'm also excited for myself because hopefully it gives some visibility to some other projects I really care about."

Indeed, Farmiga's labor of love, the

2004 drama "Down to the Bone" comes out on DVD next week. Though it was here-and-gone in theaters, it garnered Farmiga the best-actress award from the L.A. Film Critics Association and was a favorite at that year's Sundance Film Festival. And while some actors might carefully follow a movie like "The Departed" with another big-budget Hollywood project, Farmiga describes a string of intriguing independent films due out in the next year or so.

In "Quid Pro Quo," which co-stars Nick Stahl, she plays a woman suffering from an illness that makes her feel like a paraplegic trapped in an able-bodied woman's body. In "Joshua," she plays a woman scared that she and her husband (Sam Rockwell) raised a sociopath. "In Tranzit" finds Farmiga playing a Russian nurse during World War II who may be falling in love with a high-ranking Nazi. "Never Forever" has Farmiga married to a Korean-American man but planning an adulterous affair with another so she can get pregnant and, she believes, save her marriage.

A more high-profile project comes this January, when she co-stars opposite Jude

Law, Juliette Binoche and Robin Wright Penn in director Anthony Minghella's drama "Breaking and Entering."

"It's not a matter of Hollywood or independent film," says Farmiga, who was raised in a tightly knit Ukrainian community in Passaic County. "I'm going to go for where the most interesting characters are and I'm going to go for where the most interesting and unique story lines are, and risky filmmakers, filmmakers who have a vision, an undiluted vision. That's what I'm drawn to."

She's also drawn to hard rock. Living now in upstate New York, Farmiga talks up a Japanese thrash band called Dir En Gray and mentions she's dating a member of the hard rock group Deadsyde. Living away from the city lets her play her music loud and keep the hype of Hollywood in check.

"I live upstate and it gives me a good perspective," she says. "I have a steady vantage where I can clearly see the business and the industry and a gorgeous view, the beautiful arch of the sky — and that's where my answers lie."

A dream project is turning Milan Kundera's 1999 novel "Identity" into a film, but Farmiga is happy to have an identity of her own as an actress devoted to challenging roles.

"The way I choose my projects now is different," says Farmiga, whose early break, in 1997, was the cheesy summer TV series "Roar," a "Braveheart" wannabe co-starring Heath Ledger. "I can truly pick the stories I feel compelled by." ♦

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