

# 'I always play a strong woman

## I don't know how to play weak'

America's Greatest Living Actress, the frank and funny **Jodie Foster**, talks *Taxi Driver*, Princess Leia and new thriller *Flightplan*.

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**J**odie Foster loves France, so it's very appropriate *Total Film's* meeting her in Paris to discuss her new thriller and a career that's spanned four decades since she was first cast in an ad for suntan-lotion at the tender age of three. "I like walking around the city and writing letters in cafés," says Foster, who's owned an apartment here since she was 15 and speaks the language like a native. "There's a part of me that can escape who I am when I come here." No need for escape today: Foster's in a buoyant mood and for good reason. *Flightplan*, her first film since David Fincher's *Panic Room* (a French-speaking cameo in *A Very Long Engagement* aside), has defied expectations by opening at the top of the US box office, proving once again that despite her infrequent screen forays, the 42-year-old actress still has a dedicated following. Audiences get a buzz watching Foster launch into a steel-jawed, action-woman frenzy.

"Every film I do, even though it may not relate to me autobiographically, I have some very personal fault in there," says Foster, who radiates intelligence from her smart-person glasses to her insightful replies. "I don't know that I'm a very brave person, even though I play brave characters. Films are a safe way for me to find the brave part of myself and keep in touch with it."

With *Flightplan*, Foster takes a role originally penned for a man (Sean Penn, in fact) and turns in

another of her trademark resilient toughies. Set on a humungous passenger jet, the film bears more than a passing resemblance to *Panic Room*, at least as far as her role is concerned – another single mum (a widow in this case) whose fierce protective instincts kick into action when she wakes up from an in-flight nap and finds her daughter is missing. Thing is, no one else recalls the kid ever having been on the plane.

*Flightplan's* airborne tosh, cheesily enjoyable but with cavernous plot holes its city-block-sized jumbo could manoeuvre through. As she has throughout her career, however, Foster elevates the movie above its B-movie underpinnings with another satisfyingly complex characterisation. Even *The Silence Of The Lambs* might not have steered its path to Oscar-winning glory without Foster in the lead.

One of the only actors in Hollywood you actually believe could do the jobs she has on screen – whether it be *Lambs'* FBI agent, the jet-propulsion engineer in *Flightplan* or *Contact's* brilliant scientist (we're not following the argument through to *Taxi Driver*, mind) – Foster still won't discuss her personal life. But she is noticeably less guarded these days. As she says herself, with nearly 40 films (including her two directorial efforts, *Little Man Tate* and *Home For The Holidays*) and two Best Actress statuettes to her name, she's got nothing left to prove. Which may explain why she's making popcorn thrillers for Disney these days... >>







Flight club: Foster follows Fincher's *Panic Room* with the taut airborne thrill-ride, *Flightplan*.

**I**t's been three years since *Panic Room*. Why the wait? You know, your life changes when you have kids — in ways you don't anticipate. I've been working for 38 years, so it's been a long road and there's a lot of things I've already done. I don't really feel like I need to do another 100,000 films. I didn't feel like I was waiting and I didn't feel like it was a long time.

**So why make another mum-and-daughter, confined-space actioner, then?**

Yeah, I thought about that before I started. But *Panic Room* is pretty different in style to *Flightplan*. It's a much more visually stylish thriller that's really about camera moves, whereas *Flightplan* is about one person's journey. The woman in *Panic Room* has kind of lost herself. She doesn't have a clear idea of who she is anymore and through the course of the film she finds that strength. Whereas this character is the opposite: she's a strong person that everybody keeps projecting hysteria and desperation on to and she's holding it all together until she finally slips into the desperation herself.

***Flightplan* suggests that it's possible to be so grief-stricken, you could actually doubt your own sanity...**

That was totally what I was drawn to in the film. It was really that one scene where I read it and was like, "I gotta make this movie." It was originally written for a man and when I got to that scene, I said, "This is not a man's scene! This is so not right!" Because when he loses his daughter and goes through all this, I just didn't believe that man would ever question his sanity. He'd point his finger and say, "You did it!" But he wouldn't say, "Oh... Maybe I did it?" Men point outwards, they don't destroy themselves.

**Are the roles you play in some ways statements about women in society?**

It's true, if there's one stereotype that I have, it's that I always play strong women. I've played dumb blondes but they were strong dumb blondes. I've played bad characters

but they were *strong* bad characters. I'm not sure I know how to play weak. I really don't know how.

**Can you look back at your early career with any degree of objectivity or does it feel like watching home movies?**

Almost the only memories I have from that time are of making films, because I started so young. They're the highlights of my childhood. I don't know if I can be objective. I think whenever you look back at yourself in your adolescence, you just cringe in horror — you can't really see anything good about it.

**Is it true George Lucas wanted you for *Princess Leia*?**

Yes, but I was doing two films back-to-back at the time. It would have been fun. But my career would have been different and I'm happy with the one I've got so I don't really regret it. And honestly, I was 14 or 15 at the time and it was when they were still conceiving those characters as very young. By the time they got to making it, they had a totally different conception of the film.

## 'I really liked Red Dragon. I like Manhunter too. But Hannibal? No comment'

**When you did *Taxi Driver* and were simultaneously making Disney films, were people trying to talk you out of playing Iris?**

Well, I did *Taxi Driver* before I did *Freaky Friday*, but, yeah, there were lots of people that told my mother — cos I wasn't that involved in my career at that point — "What are you doing? She shouldn't do that movie." But my mom is a big film fan and we were always seeing European movies, whether it was Jean-Luc Godard or Fellini. She was a big fan of Martin Scorsese and she wanted me to be in films where I was taken seriously and that were about important topics. That was a great choice on her part.

**How did Scorsese and De Niro behave around you?**

I remember them feeling like they had to have a conversation with me about what each scene was. >>

## FILM CHOICE

From child prostitutes to lamb-fearing Feds, the laugh-riot that is Foster's filmography...



### TAXI DRIVER (1976)

The former suntan-lotus star tackles prostitution, aged 14. Foster had to see a shrink to prove she could handle the role of Iris — and do time with Robert De Niro as preparation. "In his Method way," she says, "he'd just kind of sit there and go, 'Yeah.'" Foster was a talker, though: a graduate of the Lycee Francais de Los Angeles, she translated French for Scorsese in Cannes. In return, the film taught her acting could be an art: "I first understood it, first felt it, on *Taxi Driver*." ★★★★★



### BUGSY MALONE (1976)

"Ludicrous" and "ridiculous" are two words that director Alan Parker has for his mini-musical kiddie gangster flick, in which the machine-guns that splurge ice cream almost outsize the brats firing them. Foster gives a broad turn as Tallulah, a dinky dame who likes her men at her feet. Crazy, but it kinda works. ★★★



### THE ACCUSED (1988)

Post-John-Hinckley, Foster wrestled with trouble on- and off-screen as Sarah Tobias, a white-trash gal trying to bring a group of men to trial for a gang-rape many felt you didn't need to see. Earning the role was a trial in itself: director Jonathan Kaplan, Foster says, "begged, borrowed and stole" to get her. Having given a "sweet and sappy" audition to convince the studio, she was cast partly because Kaplan and co-star Kelly McGillis threatened to quit if >>



<< she didn't get the role. Foster thought her performance "stunk"; Oscar didn't. ★★★★★



## THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS (1991)

One step up from poor white trash and it's take two, Oscar-wise – all before Foster turned 30. Foster's professional persona peaked in the clipped tones of Clarice Starling, an FBI agent forced to face her fears in order to progress. Given the themes of incomplete families in Foster's work (single parents, absent fathers, orphans), her shrink-wrapped grilling from Dr Lecter straddles the gap between character and star image. Jonathan Demme was amazed when he asked for a Southern accent and she delivered on the spot. "Phenomenal," he gushed. ★★★★★

## LITTLE MAN TATE (1991)

A film Foster made because, she says, "I understood it so much." You don't need to be a genius to see the dash of autobiography in her decent debut directorial effort, about the genius child of a single mother. Foster makes a good fist of the mother, Dede Tate, but squaring off her "emotional" character with a more intellectual child psychologist feels schematic, keeping the film from being any more than solid. Still, she enjoyed it: "I love the stress of directing." ★★★



## SOMMERSBY (1993)

A rare romantic lead for Foster, in period clobber alongside that old schmooze-ball Richard Gere for Jon Amiel's reasonable remake of the French imposter-husband flick *The Return Of Martin Guerre*. Foster wasn't fazed about playing Laurel: "You look at some tintypes [photos], you wear a hoop skirt for a week and it will come to you," she said. The script was reworked on her request, though, turning Laurel from a naive, duped woman into "somebody who chose to deceive herself." Notably, she hatched Egg Pictures while making it. ★★★

## MAVERICK (1994)

An only partially persuasive comic lead for Foster, as a poker-playing pickpocket trying to spark with >>

In the scene where I basically pull down his zipper and give him a blow job, I remember the two of them were trying to talk about how they were going to discuss it with me, and then one of them started laughing. And the other one was like, [whispering] "Shut up, shut up!" And then he started giggling too, and then he would be admonishing himself. And the other one would start laughing again. I finally just walked up and said, "What, so you want me to unzip his pants? I mean... So what?" I think they quickly realised they didn't have to make such a big deal out of it.

## Did it have a big impact on your career?

That film really changed my career and it changed me. Up until then, people would only ask me to act natural. I thought that's what actors did: read the lines and act natural. That just didn't seem like a very intelligent job, you know? I felt like, "I'm not gonna do that when I get older cos it's not very interesting." And through De Niro working with me and trying to do improv and have me understand the process of creating a character, it was like smelling salts. I woke up and was like, "Oh wow, this is way more satisfying than I thought!" It's up to the actor to bring that stimulation to a part and I didn't realise that before *Taxi Driver*.

## 'I walked up to Scorsese and said, What? You want me to unzip his pants? So what?'

## Do you think that's part of the reason why you went through the '80s avoiding Brat Pack roles?

A lot of that was my mom's influence. Before the Brat Pack arrived, she made a conscious effort for me not to be associated with all the other child actors, so I didn't do movies with a bunch of other kids. Well, except for *Bugsy Malone*, but I didn't do *Bad News Bears* or *Little Darlings*. She was careful – she wanted my career to stand apart so that when the whole trend of young child actresses was over, I would still be standing. We had some conversations about that when I was an adolescent, about the Brat Pack era. At the same time, I was in college and, yeah, it was hard because I saw them ascending and me kind of petering out, and I was like, "I don't want to make those movies but am I making the right choice?"

## Then along came *The Accused*. You refused to make your character, a rape victim, more sympathetic – even though the studio, the producers and the director all wanted you to...

I just really couldn't play it any other way. I felt I knew who that character was and my body just couldn't play it any other way, my voice couldn't play it any other way. At the time I was really frustrated by that. I thought, "You need to quit because you can't give people what they want. You should be able to change your performance when somebody says, 'I want it this way.'" And I just couldn't. Eventually I realised that was a good thing but at the time I was ready to pack it in.

## Was it the film itself that changed your mind or the fact you won the Oscar?

The funny thing is it did take the success of the movie, because when I first saw *The Accused* I thought, "This is just awful." Not the movie, but my performance in it. I felt like, "I really missed the boat – she's brash and loud and... not polite!" [Laughs] I couldn't relate to her. Now I think that's very interesting that somebody from my background would judge somebody like her. >>





**You won another Oscar three years later, yet you really had to battle to convince Jonathan Demme to cast you as Clarice Starling in *The Silence Of The Lambs*...**

And I'd just won an Academy Award, too! But I read the book when it came out and immediately tried to track it down. It had already been bought by a studio, who gave it to Jonathan Demme. He'd just made a movie with Michelle Pfeiffer and I knew that she would be his first choice, which is exactly what happened. So I flew myself to New York and made an appointment with Jonathan and said, "I know you've made your decision but I would like to be your second choice. And these are the reasons why I think I'm right for this." Then left his office and figured I would never hear from him again.

**Then she dropped out and the rest is history... What was it like making the film?**

It was really satisfying. The stuff with Lecter especially was just fun. And even though I didn't know whether the movie would be any good, I knew that each one of us had done some of the best work of our life, because we were so inspired by that book. That screenwriter, Ted Tally, he's a wonderful writer, but honestly? He's never done anything as good as that. Tak Fujimoto, Anthony Hopkins...

**Does that include your own performance?**

Clarice is a special character because she is really unflashy; she talks softly and she's earnest and all those things. So it wasn't the most challenging part of my life. But that character is so beautifully drawn because she's so beautifully drawn in the book.

## 'Taxi Driver will go down in history as a great American classic'

**Ultimately, though, you passed on *Hannibal*. Is *Silence* tainted for you with the subsequent milking of the Lecter cash cow?**

I really liked *Red Dragon*. I liked the original, too – *Manhunter* – even though it had that kind of *Miami Vice* feeling to it. You know, I don't think you can ever take away what *Silence* was... The official reason I didn't do *Hannibal* is I was doing another movie, *Flora Plum* [a long-cherished project that has yet to be shot]. So I get to say, in a nice, dignified way, that I wasn't available when that movie was being shot. But Clarice meant so much to Jonathan and I, she really did, and I know it sounds kind of strange to say but there was no way that either of us could really trample on her.

**Did you see *Hannibal*?**

[Whispers] I saw *Hannibal*. I won't comment.

**Your next film is meant to be *Sugarland*, based on the *Vanity Fair* article about a sugar baron exploiting migrant workers. Are you planning to act and direct?**

Yes, with Robert De Niro playing the Cuban plantation owner. I still have to get the script right and he's in the middle of directing a big film [*The Good Shepherd*], but I want it to be the first thing he does after he finishes.

**What about *Flora Plum*? Will that movie ever get back off the ground?**

I hope so. Maybe it's one of those movies that takes 20 years to make.

**But not with Russell Crowe or Ewan McGregor?**

Definitely not with Russell or Ewan. We lost the actors both times. With Russell he had an accident two weeks before shooting so that was just really unfortunate. With Ewan, the actors dropped out before we went into prep.

**Do you feel any of your films or roles have had a social impact, in however small a fashion?**

Maybe in terms of the movie business. *Silence* changed a lot: the fact that a woman was at the head of the marquee, a woman playing a character that could have been written for a man, that her gender didn't really matter; the fact that a thriller action hero didn't have to be a woman with muscles, it could be a woman with a brain. I think it changed a lot. But I think *Taxi Driver* will be the film that goes down in history as a great American classic.

**Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions left?**

I've barely even started as a director. I still have a lot to learn, and I'm looking forward to that; I get excited about learning new things as a director. I sometimes wonder if I hadn't been an actor at all and if I had managed to figure out some way to become a director – which when I was young didn't really seem possible for women and certainly not for actresses – maybe I would have directed more movies by now.

**Any regrets, then?**

No. I have very, very few regrets when it comes to making movies. ☑

*Flightplan* opens on 9 November and is reviewed on page 39. Go to [totalfilm.com](http://totalfilm.com) for more with Jodie Foster.



« funny of Mel Gibbo in Richard Donner's Western romp. Duddy, they got on. "Jodie is a female Mel and Mel is a male Jodie," said Donner. "The reason we're so close," Foster says, "is that I always laugh at his stupid jokes." The film doesn't lack for yucks but comes dangerously close to proving it isn't always fun to watch other people having fun. ★★★

**NELL** (1994)

"Making this film was the biggest panic of my life," says Foster of her boldest struggle to cut loose on screen. The first movie made under the Egg banner was about the "wild woman" Nell, the sylph-like, orphaned offspring of a rape, found in the mountains by scientists. Foster lost 13lbs and showboated impressively, but the pure sap of the flick's "back-to-nature" flavour clogs it up. ★★



**CONTACT** (1997)

"The theme of abandonment is a big one for me," Foster says of Robert Zemeckis' orphan-themed follow-up to *Forrest Gump*. Her Ellie Arroway is a straight-shooting astrologer, propelled by memories of her father to find life in space and trying to square rationalism with a faith she will see her dead parents again. Then the aliens call... Foster hits her mark acting in front of a blue screen for the first time, but Zemeckis' home-baked, big-themed twists on Carl Sagan's novel prove anti-climactic rather than provocatively ambiguous. ★★★



**PANIC ROOM** (2002)

"She grew up playing the daughter of single mothers," said David Fincher. "Now she plays single mothers." After the anodyne *Anna And The King* and *Hannibal* bypass, Foster faced fear again in Fincher's *Fight Club* follow-up. As she says, Fincher "has a way of taking material like this to another level", turning a home-alone thriller into a (richly) subtextual rites-of-passage parable of safe spaces being no substitute for squaring up to what scares you. Despite being pregnant, Foster's quick-on-the-mark smarts also kept this taut tale on track. ★★★