

'Sweet Land' hits pay dirt

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Movie Rating: (PG) | Critic: B+

The feature-length debut of Minneapolis-born writer-director Ali Selim, "Sweet Land" is a modest effort packing a powerful punch. The film is a period romance set in the American heartland and featuring a mail-order bride from the Old World.

The film's power comes from its sincerity and the beauty of cinematographer David Tumblety's images, but most of all from the strong, natural performances Selim gets from his cast. This is especially true of leading lady Elizabeth Reaser (TV's "Saved"), who delivers a career-boosting turn as the heroine.

Newly arrived in 1920s Minnesota from Germany with a large gramophone in her arms, Inge (Reaser) cannot commu-

nicate with Olaf (Tim Guinee), her tight-lipped, hard-working Norwegian farmer husband-to-be. Olaf's friend Frandsen (a surprisingly well-cast Alan Cumming), who is about to be evicted from his farm, speaks German. But the local Lutheran minister (John Heard) frowns upon them speaking to one another in that language because of anti-German sentiment. He does this in spite of being reminded of Martin Luther's origins.

A stranger in strange land, Inge, whose storehouse of English consists almost entirely of the expression "I could eat a horse," must learn a new language as soon as possible while alone and surrounded by strangers and their children.

That gramophone comes to represent the grace and love she brings into this strange, new community. Reaser and Guinee have strong chemistry as romantic leads dancing ever so slowly and delightfully in one another's direc-

tion. Selim's story is seeped in the American immigrant experience, although the film may be too deliriously romantic for some tastes. As a ruthless and mean-spirited village elder, Ned Beatty is also memorable.

The film also features scenes set in 1968, when an aged and frail Inge (Lois Smith) tells her story to her grandson, which gives the period sequences even more emotional weight. A favorite on the festival circuit and multiple winner of audience awards, "Sweet Land" is a miraculous first effort, given its low-budget origins. Selim is someone to watch.
