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HOLIDAY MOVIE REVIEW

Immigrant tale evokes a mood

'Sweet' explores Midwest of 1920s

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"Sweet Land" is a sometimes elegiac, sometimes joyous movie about an immigrant couple in the Midwestern farm belt in the 1920s and what happens to them during a time of national conservatism and clanishness. Based on Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat" (which was included in his collection "Sweet Land"), the film follows the fortunes of a young German woman, Inge (Elizabeth Reaser), who travels to America to marry a Norwegian immigrant farmer, Olaf (Tim Guinee), and suffers from the post-World War I prejudice against all things German.

The local Minnesota authorities won't allow their marriage because, in their absurd interpretation of events, Inge may be a spy or troublemaker. And, when Inge and Olaf live together, waiting for their wedding to be allowed, the couple are condemned by a pastor (John Heard) and his flock for immorality, recklessness -- and for Inge's brewing too-rich morning coffee. It takes a semi-catastrophe to alter hearts and change matters.

All this is recalled decades later in two successive flashbacks. In 2004, as the film begins, Inge's grandson Lars (Stephen Pelinski) must decide,

after her death, whether to sell the land. As Lars muses on the past, he recalls his grandmother in 1968 at the time of Olaf's death (in old age, she's played by Lois Smith, of "East of Eden" and "Five Easy Pieces"), and there the film shifts to Inge's point of view and her memories of the not-so-roaring '20s.

"Sweet Land," beautifully shot and acted as it may be, is slow, quiet and fixated on images of the past -- the old horn Victrola, the lively song "Eskimo Kisses" (about rubbing noses like the "Eskimoses") and the tiny church with its open door and wooden pews.

So the movie is a matter of taste, but it's a taste I share. Fascinatingly, even though "Sweet Land" is set in a Midwestern Scandinavian immigrant community -- like the one my grandparents came to in the 1920s in Wisconsin -- writer-director Ali Selim's ancestors are Egyptian. Yet Selim empathizes so completely with the characters and milieu here that "Sweet Land" never falls into contrived or phony-looking nostalgia.

Reaser as the feisty Inge and Guinee as the steadfast Olaf make a beautiful young couple, and the actors capture the mostly unspoken but full-hearted bond a besieged pair like this would need to survive. The movie has two excellent villains: Heard as the sometimes help-

ful, sometimes antagonistic pastor, Minister Sorrensen; and Ned Beatty, who's perfect as the piggy-faced Harmo, ostentatious churchgoer and wily, heartless banker.

The film's most memorable performance is in another supporting role, by Alan Cumming as hapless Frandsen, Olaf's sympathetic neighbor and a hopelessly inept farmer. Cumming, who is also one of "Sweet Land's" producers, is a famous showstopper on both stage ("Cabaret") and in film ("Eyes Wide Shut"). He steals the show here too. His sweet, childlike smile suggests Charlie Chaplin or Stan Laurel lost in the landscapes of Willa Cather's "My Antonia" or Terrence Malick's "Days of Heaven."

Selim nurtured this project for 15 years (with the help of Cumming and others), and his film lulls and soothes with its vast images of those Minnesota wheat fields, while also reminding us of prejudices that afflict almost any community. But, as "Sweet Land" demonstrates, bigotry is vulnerable, and love is universal. "Sweet Land" is a fervent movie poem to that love -- and to family, land, lost times and old beginnings.



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