

# FILM-FORWARD

Reviews of Recent Independent, Foreign, & Documentary Films in Theaters and DVD/Home Video



Elizabeth Reaser  
(David Tumblety)

## SWEET LAND

Written & Directed by: Ali Selim, based on the short story "A Grave-stone Made of Wheat," by Will Weaver.

Produced by: Jim Bigham, Alan Cumming & Selim.

Director of Photography: David Tumblety.

Edited by: James R. Stanger.

Music by: Mark Orton.

Released by: SenArt.

Country of Origin: USA. 110 min.

Rated: PG.

With: Elizabeth Reaser, Tim Guinee, Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, Ned Beatty & John Heard.

This is the real A Prairie Home Companion. You can practically hear Garrison Keillor's voice as an implicit narrator. Fans of the radio program will recognize the film's Norwegian Americans of the Minnesotan plains: a bachelor taciturn to the point of being mute and his emotionally guarded, suspicious community.

After the introductory credit, "Let us hope that we are all preceded in this world by a love story," Ali Selim's film delivers its initial promise. The sentimental film begins with the death of the matriarch Inge Altenberg,

played by the wonderful Lois Smith, an actress whose name may not ring a bell but whose face is instantly recognizable. (When will she get a film of her own?) Her grandson, sorting through his grandmother's belongings, stumbles upon a photograph of a wind-blown young Inge, taken shortly after her arrival in America, triggering a flashback of his grandparents' peculiar courtship.

Traveling with her suitcases and one giant Victrola, Inge (now played by Elizabeth Reaser) speaks very little English ("I could eat a horse") and has only a photo of her intended, but folded in the middle, the man's face is indecipherable. She's picked up at the train station by two men, the lanky Frandsen (Alan Cumming) and the stolid Olaf (Tim Guinee, a vulnerable Aaron Eckhart look-alike), and mistakes the perpetually smiling Frandsen as her husband-to-be. It's not until they are at the church's doorsteps that she realizes her groom will actually be Olaf. But after this comedy of errors, the town's minister won't pronounce Olaf and Inge man and wife. Although she has emigrated from Norway, she's actually German. According to the law at the time, she has to be the same nationality as her fiancé, who is already an American. Not helping Inge's cause is that America has just fought Germany in the First World War. Minister Sorrensen (John Heard) knows German, but refuses to speak it; she's in America now, she must learn English. (Later, the minister will denounce the foreigner from the pulpit: "Your German

is a disruption to my community.") With no friends or relations, the befuddled Inge is on her own.

The analogy to today's political climate surrounding immigration is more than conspicuous, but Sweet Land's focus is almost entirely on Inge and Olaf's relationship. The conventional story steadily ratchets up the sexual tension between the odd couple: the furtive glances at church, Olaf catching a quick glance at her exposed ankle. Well acted and beautifully photographed, this is like a well-made Hallmark film in the mode of the Emmy-Award winning Sarah Plain and Tall, with Glenn Close as another mail-order bride on the prairie, the type of film that could draw in audiences who ordinarily don't go to the movies, like the hordes who flocked to the homespun foibles of My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Perhaps unintended, even the name is a throwback to the not-so-distant past, 1979's Heartland, an understated indie set during the same time period in the Wyoming wilderness.

Practically unrecognizable from her turn in the comedic ensemble The Family Stone, Elizabeth Reaser's obvious resemblance to Julia Roberts goes beyond the physical. Beside her long, curly auburn hair, the role of the determined outsider has more than enough gumption and vulnerability for two films. Considering Roberts hasn't had a hit vehicle in years, this should fulfill her fans' need for a fix.

Kent Turner  
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