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MOVIE REVIEW

**'Sweet Land'**  
Delicate "Sweet Land" is a type of American independent we don't see often enough.



(David Tumblety )

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Think of "Sweet Land" as a gift, the kind of delicate but deeply emotional love story, both sincere and restrained, that, like love itself, is more sought after than found.

Directed by Ali Selim in the Minnesota farmland where its story takes place, "Sweet Land" is a type of American independent we don't see often enough, a beautifully photographed film (in 35-millimeter no less) that celebrates its regional identity. In addition, it's sure-footed enough to tread on the borders of sentimentality without falling into that ever-seductive trap.

"Sweet Land" begins with a resonant quotation — "Let us hope that we are all preceded in this world by a love story" — and proceeds to tell just such a tale with a sureness of touch that benefits from superb work by stars Elizabeth Reaser and Tim Guinee as well as a setting with an emotional charge of its own.

For the back story of "Sweet Land's" narrative about the eager hopes and complicated reality of a mail-order bride in 1920s rural Minnesota is the quintessentially American one of the immigrant experience, of the often forgotten, sometimes unimaginable difficulties new arrivals faced.

Before things get going, director Selim (who also wrote the screenplay based on a short story by Will Weaver) starts off with an intricate prologue that presents a dilemma: Should a man sell off the farm he's just inherited to a developer who wants to turn it into tract housing? We then flash back to his grandparents, Inge Altenberg (Reaser) and Olaf Torvik (Guinee), and their story.

We see Inge, the mail-order bride, first, getting off the train hanging onto an enormous, unwieldy gramophone she lugged from Europe and a command of English limited to a single phrase of doubtful utility: "I could eat a horse." Blessed with a face that easily conveys emotions, Reaser's Inge looks simultaneously tentative and bold, piercingly beautiful and scared stiff. That gramophone shows her determination and the rogue ringlets of hair that escape from under her hat indicate an unquenchable spirit.

Olaf shows up eventually with his already married friend Frandsen (the always showy Alan Cumming). Olaf seems gruff, but we can see that he is in reality simply nervous and shy. He can't believe either his good luck at having such a beautiful mail-order bride or the bad luck that immediately follows.

For though, like her potential husband, Inge has come from Norway, she is in fact German, a major problem in xenophobic, post-World

War I Minnesota. "We have a common language, background and culture, she is not one of us," says Minister Sorrensen (John Heard), who flatly refuses to marry them.

Although no one seems quite to know what to make of her presence, Inge will not give up. In Selim's carefully worked out script, these two end up frequently in each other's company (it wouldn't be fair to reveal exactly how) and this film provides us the pleasure of watching perfect strangers fall in love.

There are actors with bigger names in "Sweet Land" (besides Heard and Cumming, Ned Beatty and Lois Smith have cameos), but it is the two leads who make the film what it is. Guinee's ability to be stubborn as well as likable is essential, but few actresses own the camera with as much authority as Reaser does here.

Though "Sweet Land" is a story of intimate emotions, it has been shot by David Tumblety in a beautiful epic style that emphasizes the largeness and openness of Midwestern space. It's likely that filmmaker Selim, with a career as a director of commercials behind him, was unwilling to settle for anything less than a pristine look for his feature.

That Selim is the son of Egyptian immigrants clearly helped him convey the intensity and desperation of the immigrant experience, as well as what it means emotionally to be an American. Everyone who worked on "Sweet Land" seems to have understood why this story mattered, everyone felt its emotional power, and it's hard to imagine an audience member who won't feel it as well.