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A Foreign Bride in a Strange Land

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There's a tartness at the center of "Sweet Land," Ali Selim's unabashedly sentimental tale of a mail-order bride and the community that eventually comes to accept her. Unfolding primarily in flashbacks to 1920 Minnesota, the movie follows a strong-willed German immigrant named Inge (Elizabeth Reaser) as she arrives to marry Olaf (Tim Guinee), a farmer she has never seen.

Less than thrilled to have a German—and a Socialist—infiltrate his Norwegian flock, the local minister (John Heard) refuses to perform the marriage. As the locals follow his lead and ostracize the bewildered Inge, we're reminded that anti-immigrant sentiment is hardly new in America.

Yet "Sweet Land" never condemns, showing instead how basic decency prevails when survival depends on cooperation. The film's guileless, heartfelt style veers perilously close to corniness at times, but the superb cast (including an unusually restrained Alan Cumming as Olaf's alarmingly fertile best friend) dares you to mock.

Inspired by the Minnesota writer Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat," "Sweet Land" celebrates a gutsy, old-fashioned sort of love, one born of backbreaking work and shared difficulties. Inge brings Keats and music into Olaf's plain existence. In return, he offers her the land, which Mr. Selim lovingly presents in scene after scene of glorious 35-millimeter images, until the endless wheat fields and magnificent skyline seem reason enough to endure.

"Sweet Land" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has tasteful bathtub nudity.

SWEET LAND

Directed by Ali Selim; written by Mr. Selim, based on the short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat," by Will Weaver; director of photography, David Tumblety; edited by James R. Stanger; music by Mark Orton; production designer, James R. Bakkom; produced by Jim Bigham, Alan Cumming and Mr. Selim; released by Libero.

WITH: Elizabeth Reaser (Inge Altenberg), Tim Guinee (Olaf Torvik), Alan Cumming (Frandsen), Alex Kingston (Brownie), Ned Beatty (Harmo), John Heard (Minister Sorrensen), Robert Hogan (Olaf Torvik as an older man), Karen Landry (Rose Torvik) and Lois Smith (Inge as an older woman).

Running time: 110 minutes.