

# Newsday



★★★★

## “Harvesting emotions with a mail-order bride”

BY GENE SEYMOUR  
Newsday Staff Writer

October 20, 2006

“Sweet Land” seems on the surface to be one of those movies we’ve all seen before and don’t necessarily need to see again. But this debut feature from veteran advertisement director Ali Selim turns out to be the kind of humane, absorbing, subtly powerful film that we keep wishing for and never expect to see

anywhere, except, perhaps, on a premium cable station. (Emphasis on “perhaps.”)

Adapted from Will Weavers story, “A Gravestone Made of Wheat,” “Sweet Land” begins with the death of Inge Torvik (Lois Smith) and her grandson’s subsequent agonies over selling the family farm. The story flashes back to the 1920s when the younger Inge (Elizabeth Reaser), a mail-order bride from Germany, arrives in a small Minnesota town to marry a taciturn Norwegian farmer named Olaf (Tim Guinee).

In any other time, such a transaction would be cut-and-dried. But since this is the almost immediate aftermath of the First World War, lingering suspicions towards Germany keep Olaf and Inge from becoming a legally wedded couple. They set up house at Olaf’s farm anyway, bringing down suspicions from everyone except a neighboring household of

many children headed by a genial, -looking couple (Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston).

Stories of emotional and physical hardship are tempting to overplay. But Selim, cinematographer David Tumblety and a superb cast work together to create a believable, poignant and haunting evocation of a long-lost way of life.

Any cast that boasts Cumming, Smith, Kingston, John Heard and the redoubtable Ned Beatty, bringing dimension to the customarily infamous role of the mortgage-holding banker, can only speak well of the enterprise. But it’s the relative newcomers Guinee and, most especially, Reaser as a bewildered, yet deeply passionate immigrant grasping for understanding, that give “Sweet Land” its deep, true jolts of humanity.