

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## They harvest, they dance in the fields and fall in love, but can't get married

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Friday, December 15, 2006

"Sweet Land" begins in the present with the descendant of a farming family forced to decide whether to sell his grandparents' land to a developer eager to build hundreds of homes on it. Thank goodness the story moves quickly from real estate to real love, showing in exquisitely shot flashbacks how the couple comes together against great odds 90 years ago to farm the country's Midlands.

It's an atypical subject for an independent film, a genre which is usually hip and of the moment. Writer-director Ali Selim proves that you don't need an enormous budget to evoke the past, just intriguing material -- in this instance a short story, "A Gravestone Made of Wheat" by Will Weaver; a strong sense of place -- southern Minnesota, parts of which appear to have hardly changed in nine decades; and a cast that can be made to look like immigrant settlers and convince us they really are.

Elizabeth Reaser, as a mail-order bride, Inge, and Tim Guinee as Olaf,

the Norwegian farmer who sent for her, both look as if they could have stepped out of the past. Their relative obscurity -- the actors have bounced around from one TV show to another and been in little-seen indies -- makes them believable in a way big stars rarely are in costume dramas.

When Inge is deposited at a train station in the middle of nowhere after an arduous journey across the Atlantic, she speaks no English. Reaser's dark, intense eyes communicate the confusion the young woman feels and also her spirit of adventure. Inge is game for anything. Given no time to clean up, she walks into a church with Olaf and his friend (Alan Cumming, whose high profile from "Spy Kids" and as the Night Crawler in "X2" gives you pause seeing him in a farmer's Sunday best), without knowing which of the two she's about to marry.

As it turns out, the answer is neither. Unknown to her fiance, Inge is of German descent, and the minister (John Heard, pulling off the difficult role of someone whose motives are suspect) isn't eager to have a native of a country America is at war with in his congregation. When Inge can't produce proper immigration papers, the wedding is hastily called off.

Inge comes to stay with Olaf anyway, a shocking living arrangement back then. Ostracized by most of the community, they're forced to bond.

Reaser and Guinee winningly show the two slowly adapting to each other's personalities. He's a loner, who must be prodded to talk once Inge has learned enough English to find his long silences spooky.

She loves all sounds, especially music. Among the few items she brought from Europe was a gramophone. Inge persuades the taciturn Olaf to dance with her in the open fields in broad daylight, a scene of haunting beauty. Soon she's helping him harvest wheat, a true partner even without a wedding ring.

Selim's decision to start "Sweet Land" in current times takes away any doubt about what happens to these two, although the precise way they become one remains a surprise. The marvelous Lois Smith (whose career began playing opposite James Dean) is completely credible as an elderly Inge. There's still a sparkle in her eyes.

"Sweet Land" is an unusual look at love and how it can unexpectedly develop. Those for whom the concept of an arranged marriage is foreign will get a little history lesson on the immigrant experience watching this sweetly engrossing film.

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