

Movie review: 'Sweet Land' is sweet and subtle

The story of a mail-order bride and her Minnesota farmer husband hits just the right notes -- all of them high.



Tim Guinee as Olaf in Ali Selim's "Sweet Land" (David Tumblety)

Sweet Land



The setup: In 1920s Minnesota, a German mail-order bride arrives to marry a Norwegian farmer.

What works: Deftly layered performances bring the characters to full-blown life.

What doesn't: The gentle pacing might turn off viewers who are addicted to special-effects-driven hysteria.

Great scene: One of the standards the local Scandinavians use in judging the newcomer is her ability to make coffee the way they like it.

Rating: PG for partial nudity involving a bath and a sprinkling of profanity.

The Minnesota-made romantic drama "Sweet Land" reflects its title admirably. The land plays a major role in the plot, and the story is undeniably sweet.

The story takes place on a post-World War I Minnesota farm, where a mail-order bride from Germany

confronts confusion and bigotry but battles through it with a steely resolve and faith in the goodness of people and the power of love.

The film is based on the short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat" by local author Will Weaver. It's the first feature from Twin Cities writer/director Ali Selim, an award-winning director of TV commercials and music videos.

If the last reference makes you flash on MTV, forget it. This is an intelligently told story that relies on intriguing characters and enticingly mellow pacing that reflects the story's setting. It's about as far removed from the frenetic, over-caf-feinated world of rock videos as it can get.

The strong supporting cast includes Alan Cumming (who also gets a producing credit), Ned Beatty, John Heard and veteran stage actress Lois Smith (a multiple nominee for Broadway's Tony Award).

The plot has an atypical flashback-within-a-flashback format, but once viewers get their bearings, it's not difficult to follow the chronology. The story opens in modern day with a man trying to decide whether to sell his grandparents' farm; that decision leads to a flashback to his boyhood, listening to his grandmother (Smith) tell the story of how she came to Minnesota in the 1920s -- the second flashback and the time frame in which most of the movie takes place.

Inge (Elizabeth Reaser, TV's "Saved") arrives in Minnesota to marry Olaf (Tim Guinee, "Ladder 49"), carrying her most prized

possession: a gramophone. The locals are mildly bemused until they discover her German roots. With many in the community still mourning the deaths of sons in World War I, they turn as cold as the north wind that buffets Olaf's clapboard farmhouse.

Although both Inge and Olaf assume they are already betrothed, they still embark on a cautious mating ritual, hindered by a language barrier. Inge's English consists of a handful of memorized phrases -- "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse" -- that she tries to work into the conversation when she gets a chance. Not that Olaf minds. He's the traditional taciturn Scandinavian, a hard-working man who doesn't engage in a lot of chitchat. Gradually, they fall in love, a relationship based on mutual respect and a shared survival instinct.

Cumming plays Olaf's best friend, one of the few people around who can't wait to trade his plow horses for a tractor. Heard plays the look-down-his-nose preacher, and Beatty is the banker who holds the note on Olaf's farm. On paper, at least, all these roles could turn into stereotypes. But the actors infuse them with shadings that bring the characters to life.

Selim directs with a confident hand, letting the images and the acting tell the story rather than relying on flashy distractions. It's a gutsy move because most of the landscape is stark and many of the characters are stoic. But it turns out to be just the right touch. This is not a typical love story, nor is it a typical Hollywood movie. And that's good on both counts.

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