

## Sweet Land

By Ronnie Scheib  
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In "Sweet Land," first-time helmer Ali Selim pulls off a complex and impressive hat-trick: fashioning a romance without whimsical pileups of contrivance, a historical costumer without excess baggage, and a heartland saga without heaviness. Intellectually written, brilliantly cast and thesped story of a German mail order bride in a Norwegian-American community in Minnesota just after WWI never hits a wrong note. With critical backing and proper handling, highly enjoyable, stunningly lensed indie, combining solid vets Lois Smith and Ned Beatty with rising stars Elizabeth Reaser ("Stay") and Tim Guinee, could snowball into a solid hit. Pic was co-winner of the Audience Award at Hamptons.

Pic layers three temporal levels. In the present, an old woman dies and her grandson Lars must decide whether or not to sell the ancestral farmland.

He flashes back to his teens and to his beloved grandmother (Smith) at the time of her husband's death.

The grandmother, in turn, flashes back by means of a memory-triggering photograph to her arrival in Minnesota as a young mail order bride, the latter narrative gradually taking over.

From the moment she appears lugging a huge gramophone, Inge Altenberg (Reaser), beautiful, spirited, citified, is not what anyone expected. Even her propensity to name and pet the farm animals rather than milking and slaughtering them might be overlooked were



**Inge Reaser is a German mail-order bride in post-WWI Minnesota who has a hard time getting locals such as Alan Cumming to accept her in 'Sweet Land.'**

it not for a shocking, overriding flaw -- she is German.

That fact is brought home every time she opens her mouth since she speaks little English, except for a few phrases painstakingly memorized from a book of idioms ("I could eat a horse," she politely intones every time someone asks if she is hungry). The farm folk all but cross themselves every time they hear the Devil's Teutonic tongue.

Propaganda dies hard and even after the end of the war, Germans are considered insidious spies by the local judge and corrupt influences by the minister (John Heard). Neither is ready to wed Inge to her prospective bridegroom, Olaf (Guinee).

The slow, organic process of mutual assimilation during which Inge and the congregation circle, repel and finally attract each other (via such improbable vehicles as the hit song "Let's Rub Noses Like the Eskimoses") is a triumph of inventive storytelling. It is counterpointed by a more intimate, interpersonal choreography tracing Inge and Olaf's chore-laden courtship dance.

Reaser's Inge is a marvel of strength, humor and sensuality, any hint of anachronism deftly sidestepped by

the fact that her emotional outbursts of enthusiasm or anger are delivered in an expressive but unsubtitled mix of German and Norwegian. As her taciturn, work-driven husband-to-be, Guinee affects a degree of hidden delight and shy vulnerability that renders the couple's chemistry completely believable.

Script was many years in the writing, its careful interweaving nowhere as evident as in the couple's interactions with the slightly off-center supporting players. The casting of Alan Cumming as Olaf's feckless, baby-producing best friend is inspired -- his cheerful embrace of all things modern (from slang to state-of-the-art tractors) implies he is a flamboyant exception to the rule.

His indefatigable, pixyish wife Brownie (Alex Kingston), the only one who can run the machines her clueless husband delights in purchasing, accepts him as one more child. And Beatty's rubicund Santa of a village elder is, in fact, a pitiless banker ready to foreclose on friend and relative alike.

No nostalgic throwback to simpler times, Selim's pastoral enclave exists in a realistic historical framework that carries its share of socio-economic tensions.

Tech credits are superlative, no strain or stretching of resources apparent in pic's extraordinary images of aurora borealis-lit skies over fields of grain at dawn.