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MOVIE REVIEW

Charming 'Land' is a deceptively light romance

By Wesley Morris, Globe Staff
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Ali Selim's "Sweet Land" is a lovely, old-fashioned farm romance quietly doubling as a comment on immigration and American identity. While that might sound heavy, the movie isn't, and its lightness is part of its charm. Set predominately in 1920 and told in flashbacks from 2004, the film concerns a young woman named Inge (Elizabeth Reaser) who arrives in northern Minnesota from Europe engaged to be married to Olaf (Tim Guinee), a Norwegian farmer, whom she's never met.

She comes with a suitcase or two, an enormous gramophone, and terrible English. The war's been over for several years, but the community is intensely leery of Inge's

German heritage and socialist background. Her presence in this small community becomes a crucible for its temperance and a window onto its hypocrisy -- who among thee doesn't have a funny accent?

Nonetheless, after some struggle, the town minister (John Heard) decrees he can't marry Inge and Olaf until her immigration papers arrive. They wind up risking neighborly scorn by sharing Olaf's house anyway, and the tension between these two is the source of all the romantic comedy. She's headstrong. He embarrasses with ease. So the initial sight of her in his living room (she's just bathed in his tub) nearly gives him a heart attack. Based on stories by Will Weaver, Selim's film prizes the suspense built over their chastity. Rarely has so much romanticism been wrung from something so inevitable.

The cast, which includes Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, and Lois Smith as Inge decades

later, complements Selim's smart, deceptive levity. Reaser handles Inge's amusement and bewilderment with great emotional intelligence. A duller actor would have made the character an automaton, but Reaser has a hungry, aggressive presence. Her face tells you what the language barrier prohibits her from saying.

"Sweet Land" is also gorgeously photographed. The shots are long and wide in the alluring manner of an Andrew Wyeth painting. The open landscapes, with their blue skies and rolling hills, are meant to evoke something grandly, if generically, American. The beauty of using so many panoramic shots is that everybody looks majestic standing in them.

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