

Sweet Land

A nutrient-rich slice of Americana



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Distributor: Libero

Cast: Elizabeth Reaser, Tim Guinee, Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, Ned Beatty, John Heard and Lois Smith

Director/Screenwriter: Ali Selim

Producers: Jim Bigham, Alan Cumming and Ali Selim

Genre: Drama

Rating: brief partial nudity and mild language

Running time: 110 min.

Release date: October 13

This engaging immigrant tale, adapted by first-time writer/director Ali Selim from Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat," benefits from a wonderful cast and superb production values. Winner of an audience award at the 2005 Hamptons International Film Festival, it demonstrates that a PG movie can be sexy and insightful about physical desire and will please moviegoers yearning for well told, wholesome but not prudish fare.

In addition to capturing the immigrant experience, *Sweet Land* describes the romantic origins of a family. Keyed by deaths and an old photograph, it tells of Inge (the radiant Elizabeth Reaser and, as an elderly woman, Lois Smith) and Olaf (Tim Guinee), whose fate is telegraphed by an un-credited opening title card: "Let us hope we are all preceded in this world by a love story." In 1920, Inge arrives in a southern Minnesota community of Norwegian-American farmers to marry Olaf, who doesn't realize she's of German extraction. Suspicion runs high given the recently ended war; besides, she has no papers. The Lutheran minister (John Heard) postpones their nuptials, and Inge stays at the farm of Olaf's neighbors (Alan Cumming and Alex Kingston), a couple coping with a large brood and the threat of foreclosure.

Necessity and physical attraction slowly draw Inge and Olaf together, and they risk violating propriety. Many points are finely made concerning assimilation (in the best sense); xenophobia; the virtues of frugality, frivolity and labor (working the harvest clinches their bond); prosperity and technological innovation; conformity; religion; and capitalism versus socialism. There's no attempt to psychoanalyze the characters, and the humor is irony-free. The community is represented by the firm if ultimately charitable minister and a fat-cat banker (Ned Beatty) with no patience for Olaf's motto -- "farming and banking don't mix."

Beautiful cinematography renders the prairie and its sturdy inhabitants more inviting than harsh. According to a producer's note, *Sweet Land* "is the first independently produced carbon neutral film," which apparently means great effort was made during the shoot to reduce pollution. This is the movie's only quality Nobel-prize-winning, Minnesota-born novelist Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) might not recognize.

- John P. McCarthy
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