

Sweet Land

Bottom Line:
A sweet gem.

Kirk Honeycutt
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Demonstrating a mastery of the medium that belies his status as a first-time feature filmmaker, writer-director Ali Selim has crafted in “Sweet Land” a tale of pure Americana that speaks both to the immigrant experience and the nature of love. The film has played the festival circuit, where it understandably won two audience awards. It opens Oct. 13 in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., and five days later in New York, followed by a national rollout.

Taking off from a short story by Minnesota writer Will Weaver, Selim tells the simple but emotion-packed story of a mail-order bride who arrives in a close-knit Norwegian farming community in Minnesota after World War I. There is only one problem. One major problem. Inge Altenberg (Elizabeth Reaser) is Germ. Nothing could be more of an anathema to these hardworking, jingoistic farmers than a young woman from the country the U.S. fought so bitterly a couple of years earlier.

The minister (John Heard) refuses to marry Inge to Olaf (Tim Guinee). A law clerk shakes his head over missing paperwork. In the meanwhile, Inge settles into the community, making friends and perhaps an enemy in the minister, then finds the time to size up her husband-to-be, allowing the two to fall deeply in love.

The story is set up with a triple time frame. In the opening scene, an elderly Inge (played by the marvelous Lois Smith) passes on, leaving her grandson to face a decision about selling the family homestead to a developer. He in turn remembers back to Olaf’s passing in the late ‘60s, when his grandmother recounted to him her first days in her new country.

What a sight she makes when she arrives at the train station! She carries two suitcases and, improbably, a huge gramophone. Nevertheless, this family heirloom makes her the bringer of music to this community cut off from so much art and culture.

Reaser, who played a vastly different role as the commitment-phobic woman in “Puccini for Beginners” at Sundance this year, breathes fire into this character. She speaks little English—she holds two fingers close together to indicate how little it really is—but can read faces and body language with supreme literacy. She

occasionally bursts forth with angry, sputtering German, which Selim wisely doesn’t bother to subtitle. We more than get her point.

Guinee, in a pitch-perfect Norwegian-American accent, gives this farm boy a backbone of decency and morality without anything feeling forced or phony. His character is a man of few words, but Guinee plays the subtext to perfection.

Alan Cumming (who also produces) is wonderfully cast as Olaf’s best pal Frandsen, a loving father and husband who is almost childlike in his embrace of life. Unfortunately, Frandsen has fallen hopelessly behind in his mortgage payments. His banker (Ned Beatty) can’t wait to foreclose, not at all put off by the fact that Frandsen is his third cousin.

Selim and cinematographer David Tumblety create one memorable composition after another, often framing the actors tightly so we might read their expressions, then pulling back for long shots of the flat landscape and the one farmhouse that dominates the fields. Mark Orton’s music and James R. Bakkom’s design feel authentically period with nary a false step.