

A Journey to Sweet Land

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American films rarely seduce you with qualities like silence, authenticity and beauty. Instead, Hollywood bombards us with noisy and manipulative hi-tech films that ultimately fail to touch us. Then along comes *Sweet Land* out of nowhere – well, out of Minnesota of all places – and does just that. In the hands of first-time feature film director Ali Selim, *Sweet Land* is the little gem you tuck away and remember.

The story is simple: Young Inge travels from Europe during WWI to marry a man she has never met, a Norwegian farmer in Minnesota. Inge is the classic mail-order bride. But the people of the small town are suspicious of her German heritage and lack of proper immigration papers; she is forbidden to marry Olaf. This ill-fated start gives way to a warm, tentative love story. Naturally, Olaf falls in love with Inge. How could he not? Fresh and eager yet vulnerable, Inge is full of life and irresistible with her rich auburn hair and passionate eyes, always lugging along a giant phonograph to satisfy her appetite for music. Sturdy and quiet Olaf is the perfect match for Inge. Told against a backdrop of endless acres of fields and infinite Minnesota skies, *Sweet Land* is a sensitive and low-key love story.

When Ali Selim finished reading Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat" in 1990 he knew he had to make it into a movie. Little did he know



Director Ali Selim with Elizabeth Reaser and Tim Guinee

it was going to take him fifteen years. By then the Minneapolis native had an impressive career as a director of commercials for brands like Coke, McDonalds, and Reebok, but he'd always known he wanted to make feature films. Weaver's story spoke to Selim who probably read a bit of his own life into it, too. Ali Selim is the son of an American mother with German-Scandinavian roots and an Egyptian father, who, he says "came on the boat." These polar opposites shaped him.

"Scandinavians, at least the ones in Minnesota, have that spend-thrift mentality. They are very reluctant to use words and push their opinions. Whereas in Egypt people talk a lot, they put their energy out there."

Even though *Sweet Land* centers on the problems of coming to a new country, immigration documents, and language barriers, Selim never really viewed it as an immigrant story.

"My father's an immigrant and the house I grew up in was filled with languages I didn't understand. My father was a professor and his friends spoke Greek and Italian, they'd fill our house Friday nights.

These people came and gave to our society, they changed our society, they were immigrants and yet they were also just... friends. So I never had this remarkable distinction that this was a story of immigrants, it was rather

Continued on next page...

a story of the people I know.” The simplicity of the story, which had so moved Selim, didn’t gel as easily with others, however.

“People who read it said ‘I don’t get it, I can’t see it’, so in the meantime I raised a family, I watched baseball, and I directed some 800 commercials.”

But he kept at it, aided by a group of people who had faith in the project, including Alan Cumming who has a part in the film and is its producer. Says Selim: “We see so many films that sort of honor the fast talking and loud. I wanted to honor the quiet.”

Juilliard-trained Elizabeth Reaser plays the part of Inge. In 2004, Interview Magazine named her as one of the 14 To Be emerging creative women. A natural beauty whose credits include *The Family Stone*, *The Believer*, and appearances on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and *The Sopranos*, Reaser hesitated to audition for the part.

“I was terrified!” she says about her first reading of the *Sweet Land* script. “I had no idea what they were saying, so much was in Norwegian and German, languages I don’t speak. I almost didn’t go to the audition; in fact my agent forced me to.” But she quickly fell in love with Inge, the story, the land, and the animals.

“For me it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever done, and I am so proud of it. The story felt so authentic. Technically my part was difficult, because I had to work phonetically, and with translations, so in a way my situation was similar to Inge’s since I didn’t always understand what was going on. I love Inge, she’s full of

life, open and strong. Since she has lost her family, she has had to learn to be alone. She is spirited and she has heart.”

Reaser describes the film process, which took place in a middle-of-nowhere part of Minnesota, as very organic.

“I’ve never been any place so remote, but it was great. For Ali it was so personal, and he is technically brilliant, he knew everything and in working with the actors was the most gentle and generous person. Tim Guinee was passionate and committed, in fact everyone was very committed. We were always in it.”

Tim Guinee, who plays the morose Olaf, approached his part very much like Reaser: through language.

“I went up to the Norwegian Embassy and recorded a guy there reading my lines. That’s how I learnt it and it was a challenge! But the truth is that every part is a challenge and every part has an accent of sorts.”

Spending only little over three weeks out in the country while trying to make it look like you’ve been a farmer forever, takes some preparation.

“Ali did a really smart thing,” Guinee says, “he hooked me up with this guy who knew farming, and he taught me to cut the corn and stuff like that. Also the location gives you a lot. The isolation and desolation of Minnesota, it all added to the character.”

Guinee and Reaser spent most of their time working on their characters.

“We stayed at the same motel, we drove to the set together and worked on our lines in the car. We drove home from the set together, working, we had dinner at Subway, still working!”

Guinee, whose resume includes *How to Make an American Quilt* and *Ladder 49*, says he was amazed by the generosity of the people in Minnesota.

“We were invited to a barbecue by a couple of farmers, and they all played instruments, their talents were unbelievable! I love this movie more than anything I’ve ever done, and I think Ali is quite masterful at showing the ache in the heart and desire to be part of a community.”

The movie *Sweet Land* opened on October 18 at five New York locations. For theatre listings in your state or more info, see: www.sweetlandmovie.com.

