

The Patriot Ledger

MOVIE REVIEW: APPRECIATING 'SWEET LAND'; Film presents uncommon marriage of beauty, depth



Elizabeth Reaser as Inge and Tim Guinee as Olaf in "Sweet Land."
(Courtesy photo)

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'Sweet Land' is a hot property that's all about location, location, location.

Set in the gorgeous wide-open spaces of southern Minnesota, Ali Selim's visual masterpiece recalls the stark artistry of Terrence Malick and Western lyricism of Larry McMurtry, as it turns every frame into a picture postcard of stunning beauty.

Its scenario has plenty of curb appeal as well, as it astutely explores the suspicion and resentment stirred by the arrival of a German mail-order bride in the immediate aftermath of World War I.

Both timeless and timely, the film speaks eloquently about the hardships of immigrants ignorant of the ways of their new land, and to how "Americans" aren't always a welcoming people.

At the fore, though, "Sweet Land" is an utterly engaging

romance built not on flowers, candy and candlelight dinners, but on strength, fortitude and respect. Qualities shared by Olaf (Tim Guinee), a Norwegian immigrant who came to this country in 1910, and Inge (Oscar-worthy Elizabeth Reaser), his mail-order bride who followed him to Minnesota a decade later.

It's their shared stubbornness, however, that makes them so gosh darn appealing. Like Tracy and Hepburn, they bicker with the best of them, never backing away when things get tough. But unlike their more famous Hollywood counterparts, they communicate via telling looks and expressions instead of snappy dialogue.

On the rare occasion when they do converse it's chaotic, as Olaf speaks in broken English, while Inge chatters away in German. Yet they always understand each other perfectly. And we understand them, as well, even though Selim eschews subtitles.

The latter was a risky but wise choice that adds immensely to the film's strong sense of realism, a truthiness (sorry, Stephen Colbert), if you will, that has you so caught up in their lives that you completely forget you're watching a movie.

Adapted from a short story by Will Weaver, "Sweet Land" is

very much a Midwestern film, from its slow, steady pace to its no-frills, salt-of-the-earth characters who feel as comfortable as curling up under a down comforter on a wintry day.

Everything about the film is outstanding, from Selim's writing and directing, to David Tumblety's picturesque cinematography to a fantastic ensemble cast that includes Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, John Heard, Lois Smith and Ned Beatty.

It's Guinee and particularly the strikingly beautiful Reaser who dazzle most, as they engage in a tempestuous mating dance that's as charming as it is romantic. The two are simply smashing together, as they share a chemistry as fertile as the rich Minnesota earth.

Who better to tell their story, too, than Selim, the son of Egyptian immigrants who learned firsthand the difficulties of being a stranger in a strange land. And that knowledge helps fortify the power of a movie that perfectly encapsulates Midwestern culture and mores.

There are some occasional missteps on Selim's part, like the "It's a Wonderful Life" moment when a banker threatens to foreclose and send a family with

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nine kids (are these breeders or farmers?) packing. And what happened to all the dirt in this spotless Midwestern town? You'd have a better chance of finding Whitey Bulger than locating a speck of dust on any of the cars, people or tractors.

I also had a quibble initially with the somewhat awkward structure of the film, which begins in 2004 with Inge's death, then abruptly flashes back to Olaf's funeral in the mid-1960s and then flashes back again to the couple's courtship during the 1920s. I felt like I was getting jet lag from all the time traveling.

But in the film's bittersweet finale, there proves to be method in Selim's madness, as his unorthodox structure pays off with emotional power you never saw coming. It hits you like a brick, too. And it's at that moment that you realize just how lucratively your investment in "Sweet Land" pays off.

Sweet Land - (PG for brief partial nudity and mild language.)
Cast includes Elizabeth Reaser, Tim Guinee, Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, Ned Beatty and Lois Smith. Written and directed by Ali Selim. At Kendall Square, Cambridge.

3½ stars.

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