

PIONEER PRESS

**Minnesota-made movies are getting better
Homegrown movies are getting fresher and,
best of all, boasting some good taste**

BY CHRIS HEWITT
Movie Critic

The bad news is that many movies that could have been made in Minnesota are going to those tax-break-happy carpetbaggers in Canada. The good news is that the movies that do shoot here seem to be getting better.

At one point, Hollywood probably thought of Minnesota — if Hollywood thought of Minnesota at all — as the land of 10,000 terrible movies. I'm thinking of "Here on Earth," "Joe Somebody," "Jingle All the Way," "Mall Rats" and "Drop Dead Fred" — movies, when they're listed together like that, sound like the schedule for the Blecch Film Festival. Even some of the more fondly recalled titles — "The Cure," "The Mighty Ducks" — don't make for much better than a So-So Film Fest.

But there's a great Minnesota-made movie coming next week: "Sweet Land," which was filmed in Dawson and Monte-video and is a swell reminder that Minnesota has produced excellent movies, too. Here are the six best:

1. "Fargo" (1996): St. Louis Park natives Joel and Ethan Coen's comedy gets better with age. At the time, it was widely interpreted as a cheap shot, but repeat viewings reveal how much affection the Coens have for their home state's meat raffles, politeness/passive aggression and, especially, for one of the most vivid movie characters of all time, Marge Gunderson. Frances McDormand's Oscar-win-

ning performance locates compassion, anger and intelligence in a small-town cop who is bewildered by the cruelty she sees around her. And I could watch that scene of a tiny car making its way through a snow-covered landscape as Carter Burwell's folksy score keens on the soundtrack every single day.

2. "American Dream" (1991): Barbara Kopple's Oscar-winning documentary is one of the finest portraits of a community ever put on film. The community is Austin, Minn., where years of labor unrest have ripped families and friendships apart. Although it took Kopple years to assemble the film, it was still way ahead of its time in showing how such phenomena as globalization and corporate greed affect every last one of us.

3. "Sweet Land" (2006): A small, nearly perfect gem of a movie, it showcases a vast Minnesota sky and a tiny little romance between a Norwegian immigrant and the German woman who comes here to marry him during World War I. Despite the period setting, it's as prescient as "American Dream" in its foreshadowing of the dangers that lurk ahead for family farms, but the hopeful "Sweet Land" is more interested in the way people come together in tough times. "Sweet Land" has been making the film festival rounds for a couple of years but will finally play in theaters here starting Oct. 13. Don't miss it.

4. "A Prairie Home Companion" (2006): When we saw Meryl Streep's tender performance as a lovelorn singing mom, who knew she'd follow up a month later with another woman whose paying job often puts her in unwinnable conflict with her job as a mother ("The Devil Wears Prada")? When Streep and Lily Tomlin sing a heartfelt tribute to their characters' mom, this valentine to performers hits its peak, but there's pleasure to be had in almost every frame.

5. "North Country" (2005): At the time it came out, I liked the movie, but I had a hard time getting past this somewhat true story's over-the-top ending, which never happened and which you wouldn't believe even if it had happened. If you want the whole story, you should read "Class Action," the page-turner of a book that inspired the film. The movie's pleasures have more to do with the loving way it captures life on the Iron Range and the performances of Oscar nominee Charlize Theron, as a mom who runs afoul of greedy bosses at a taconite mine (greedy bosses being a theme in many Minnesota movies), and Minnesota recidivist McDormand, as her cranky, big-hearted friend.

6. "The Heartbreak Kid" (1972): Even as you read, this classic comedy is being remade with Ben Stiller. It makes sense, since the premise is pure gold: A guy on his honeymoon falls in love with the perfect woman, a woman who is not his wife. But it's hard to imagine the remake bettering the astringent direction of Elaine May, Charles Grodin's twitchy performance as the guy who stays faithful just past "I do" or Jeannie Berlin as the wife whose peculiarities put us in the uncomfortable position of sympathizing with Grodin's behavior.

Chris Hewitt can be reached at chewitt@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5552.