

# SPIRITUALITY PRACTICE

## Film Review

By Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

## Sweet Land

Directed by Ali Selim

Libero 10/06 Feature Film, PG

An elderly woman (Lois Smith) lies dying in her home on a Minnesota farm; her grandson Lars is nearby. After her passing, a local real estate agent delivers a bid from a developer who wants to build 1200 houses on the land. Contemplating whether to sell their homestead, Lars recalls being with his grandmother after his grandfather died a few years ago. She brings out a box containing memorabilia from the past and shows Lars a photograph of herself as a young mail order bride.

Inge Altenberg (Elizabeth Reaser) is a spirited and attractive young woman who arrives in Minnesota via train in 1920 with two suitcases and a large gramophone. She is met by her husband-to-be, Olaf Torvik (Tim Guinee), a stoic and soft-spoken Norwegian farmer, and his best friend Frandsen (Alan Cumming), a childlike and gregarious man. Inge speaks only a little English. Her favorite phrase comes in handy when anyone asks her if she's hungry; her response is "I could eat a horse."

They go immediately to the church where the congregation is present to witness Inge and Olaf's marriage. But when the minister, Rev. Sorrensen (John Heard), discovers that she is German and does not have the proper immigration papers, he refuses to perform the ceremony. In this rural community, memories of World War I

have made the people resentful of Germans and convinced they are not trustworthy or morally upright. The same prejudice is turned against Inge by a clerk who works for the local judge. He tells her that she cannot marry until she learns English and her papers are in order.

Olaf and Frandsen take her to dinner at the home of Harmo (Ned Beatty). He is a prosperous banker who runs the community and is proud of it. Taking a look at Inge, he declares that she has greedy and inquisitive eyes, inferring that Olaf had better keep a watch over her. Since they cannot live together, Inge is taken to Frandsen's farm where she meets Brownie (Alex Kingston), his talented wife who not only looks after nine children but also runs the farm machinery. The two women share a magic moment of intimacy over a freshly made pie.

Sweet Land is a beautifully written, acted, and directed drama about the blooming of love, the powerful hold of place, and the challenges faced by communities who are distrustful of outsiders. Here is a tender and touching drama about the American immigrant experience that gradually works its way into our hearts and minds. In his debut as a feature film director, Ali Selim slows us down so we can feel the rhythms of the natural world and the wonders of the northern lights and vast fields of grain. The film is based on Will Weaver's short story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat," and it was shot on location in southern Minnesota, a rural area with legendary big sky. David Tumblety's exquisite cinematography dazzles the senses, and

Mark Orton's music by Mark Orton accentuates the emotional undertow of the drama's meditation on memory and family history.

Elizabeth Reaser carries Sweet Land on her shoulders as the feisty Inge, a woman whose love of music equals her patience in coping with prejudice toward her and her own dashed expectations about a new life in America. She manages to put us in her shoes as she tries to fathom why Rev. Sorrensen would be upset that she uses too many beans to make coffee. There are constant frustrations over the language barrier and Olaf's inability to share what he is feeling with her. He does surprise her with a bold action at the auction of Frandsen's farm. Inge decides to lend a hand in the harvest and that bonds them in a way that nothing else can.

In counterpoise to this story of courtship and love is the film's treatment of the harm and the poisonous effects that accompany fear of outsiders. This theme is a huge part of America's history and its shadow nature continues to dog the nation in its response to immigrants today. Weaver's story and Selim's treatment of it work well as it is played out in the small Christian community.

The late spiritual writer Wayne Teasdale once noted: "Openness is receptivity to everyone and everything. It is quite fundamentally an other-centeredness, a disposition of availability to others." Sweet Land makes this openness to others into an engaging and delicate story of love, memory, and hospitality.

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Mary Ann Brussat