

CITY PAGES

Ali Selim's Minnesota masterpiece just does it '20s-style

The Heartland Wants What It Wants



Inge and Olaf go courtin': Elizabeth Reaser and Tim Guinee in 'Sweet Land' (Image: LaSalle Holland)

by Dylan Hicks | October 11, 2006

In a seemingly frivolous time and place, let us say the U.S. in 1996, a theatrical company might dress Prince Hal in Zegna or surround Antigone and Creon with video monitors and still not get the crowd to recognize much topicality. By 2002, the same audience might find, in the plainest and purest productions of Shakespearean and Greek drama, a disconcerting timeliness. *Sweet Land*, an independent film from first-time feature-maker Ali Selim, has been a 16-year labor of love for the St. Paul-based director, so perhaps it can't be credited with punctuality. It is, however, both timeless and timely. There's a stranger in town, cross-cultural lovers stymied by the authorities, war-fueled factionalism, an impending farm foreclosure, forbidden fruit, pulpit pronouncements regarding who can marry whom. And all these archetypal conflicts seem to speak to the present, more loudly no doubt than they would have had the film made its way to theaters 10 years ago. Serious times smile on old stories, like a good concert hall on a soprano.

Continued on next page...

Inspired by northern Minnesota writer Will Weaver's story "A Gravestone Made of Wheat," *Sweet Land* takes place in the author's stomping grounds in 1920, 1968, and 2004. All of the action, then, happens during or just following a war, at which times tolerance tends to be about as thick as a sheet of newspaper. In 1920, redheaded German stranger Inge Altenberg (Elizabeth Reaser) has crossed the Atlantic with two suitcases and a Victrola to marry Norwegian bachelor farmer Olaf Torvik (Tim Guinee). Anti-German sentiment during WWI reached its nadir with the unpunished 1918 lynching of German immigrant Robert Prager. That was in Collinsville, Illinois, but, to paraphrase Sinclair Lewis, it could have happened here. In 1917, the year the U.S entered the war and the feds passed the Espionage Act and the Russians proved the impossible perhaps wasn't, Minnesota created the Commission of Public Safety. The CPS was an unchecked seven-member body that went about suspending civil liberties and generally harassing folks not playing nicely with the team—German pacifists, German non-pacifists, non-German pacifists, labor organizers of assorted nationalities.

In Weaver's story, Olaf and Inge's marriage is arranged by the groom-to-be's parents back in Norway, where Inge is a young, war-orphaned German woman working on a nearby farm. Here, she is more of a mail-order bride, still alone in the world, but with a mysterious and apparently urbane history. She carries with her, along with the record player, a passion for Keats (in translation—she speaks scant English), a light step on courtly waltzes, and papers declaring allegiances to Teutonic socialists. In rural Minnesota, this is not the stuff that earns plaudits in church newsletters.

Indeed, the town minister (John Heard) opposes the union, and the couple lives apart for a while. But despite having come together in the old, practical way, there's a subtle erotic frisson between Inge, aflame in hair and soul, and the taciturn Olaf, a lovable Lud-dite skeptical about industrial-agriculture snake oil such as tractors, adamant that "farming and banking

don't mix." Summoned, as it were, by aurora borealis, Inge crosses a field to Olaf's, and their courtship begins in earnest. Those northern lights are lovely, but not as much as the less, or perhaps more, magical 35mm shots of endless wheat fields, lonesome farm houses, oceanic prairies. David Lynch caught similar Midwestern beauty in *The Straight Story*. *Sweet Land's* cinematographic successes, though, aren't all indebted to landscape painting—my favorite frame is a close-up of the Victrola's dark wood seashell speaker, and the actors' faces are treated with similar affection.

Deservedly so. It's a superb cast of relative unknowns, two semi-big names, and local notables. (Guthrie vet Stephen Pelinski's ineffable magnetism translates fully to the screen. Is it too late to make this guy a star?) I found Alan Cumming's comic-relief character to be merely cute, but the rest of the players manage the great trick of being at least two things at once. Reaser's Inge is sophisticated and childlike; Guinee's Olaf is simple and deep; Heard's minister is both a pious, possibly hypocritical adversary and a very good man; Ned Beatty's fat banker grins about town foreclosing farms and yet the actor avoids true melodrama. Did fate bring Olaf and Inge together, or was their love born of proximity? Both. Selim's portrayal of Minnesota is loving but not provincial, and always he withholds judgment. *Sweet Land* doesn't laugh at Midwestern practicality and circumspection, but rather shows its force and wisdom, and then comes most alive when its characters make decisions that defy all reason except the heart's. After Olaf takes a heroic stand that could easily ruin him, Beatty's banker patronizingly asks why the unassuming farmer would do such a foolish thing. His answer, though I suppose it mirrors a running-shoe slogan, is profound and complete in its contention that certain moral impulses, like romantic ones, can be ruined by explanation. "I just did it," he says.
