

## Sweet Land

A Review by Tom Condon, OP  
(St. Martin Province)

### Film Synopsis

A woman who buries her husband on their Minnesota farm in 1968 relives her life as an immigrant who arrived from Norway in 1920 as a postal bride.

### Sweet Land is a stunning film.

Set in rural Minnesota, the film opens in the not-too-distant past, with the death of Olaf, an aged farmer of Norwegian descent. We meet Inge, Olaf's wife, along with family members and family friend Frandsen, at the wake in their own farm house. Inge finds a box of old photographs, including one of herself taken in 1920, newly arrived in this country. The movie then takes us back to Inge's arrival as a very young mail order bride, many decades ago.

We see Inge nervously waiting for Olaf at the train station with two suitcases and a large Victrola phonograph. Olaf and Frandsen arrive and immediately take Inge to the Lutheran church for the wedding. However, Inge informs them that she is German, not Norwegian. Olaf, Frandsen, and the pastor are speechless. The memory of World War I was still fresh and Anti-German sentiment was strong. The pastor refuses to perform the marriage ceremony,

saying the Inge does not have the correct "papers." He suggests that they go to the county judge; maybe he can help them. Inge, in her very broken English, protests that "Luther was German!" However, the pastor remains firm.

The judge also refuses to marry Inge and Olaf, wondering if she may be a spy. "I thought we won the war," Olaf mutters to himself.



Olaf and Frandsen wonder what they will do about this awkward situation. It was simply out of the question for Olaf to take Inge into his house without being legally married. Frandsen offers to take her in to his house, along with his wife and nine children. Frandsen's family is welcoming, but there is little room for Inge. In addition, the bank is threatening to foreclose on Frandsen's farm unless back mortgage payments are made. One night, Inge sneaks out and returns to Olaf's house. Still determined to "do the right thing," the couple decide that Inge will sleep in the bedroom and Olaf in the barn until they are

able to marry. Despite the many obstacles to be negotiated, Inge and Olaf grow in their respect and affection for each other until they fall deeply in love.

Working from the short story, "A Gravestone Made of Wheat" by Will Weaver, writer-director Ali Selim, lovingly brings the story of Inge and Olaf to life. Selim treats the characters and their dilemmas with deep respect, as well as a sense of humor. There is a deep sense of culture of rural Minnesota culture: hard working, faithful, reserved Norwegian Lutherans, respecting God, the land, family, and community. After two hours, I really felt like I knew Olaf, Inge, and their community.

Visually, Sweet Land is stunning. Every detail richly evokes the period. The cinematography captures the wide expanse of the rural landscape and the vastness of the Midwestern sky. Much of the drama is expressed in the visual images. In a lovely sequence, Inge and Olaf walk side-by-side through the field. First their hands brush against each other, then, naturally, gently, silently, Olaf's hand holds Inge's. The many night scenes are beautiful, including one in which Inge sees the Northern Lights. Selim also features such delightful and interesting scenes as Olaf taking a photograph of the newly-arrived Inge (the same photo Inge finds

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at Olaf's wake), and an early motion picture of Eskimos kissing, projected in Frandsen's barn.

Sweet Land is a very spiritual film. The small Lutheran Church is a central character in the film. Olaf, Inge, and the pastor have an uneasy relationship. They all want to do what is right, but find themselves in a difficult situation. The pastor wrestles with his duty regarding Olaf and Inge. Should he marry them, or abide by his obligations, and continue to insist upon "the papers?" Does he recognize their growing love in this awkward situation, or brand them "immoral" for living together? The pastor weaves back and forth, as he ponders his pastoral response to the unique situation before him.

A crisis arises late in the film that becomes a defining moment for Olaf, as well as the community. (Since I do not want to spoil the enjoyment of the movie, I will not go into detail.) Olaf responds in a way that puts him at great risk. The scene captures the moral character of Olaf: a spontaneous action done purely out of loving concern for another. It is an astonishing moment, full of grace. The courageous act of Olaf changes the hearts of others in the community. It's a moment of congregational redemption. So often in films we witness the effect of violence on individuals, families, communities. It's nice

for a change to have the opportunity to witness the effects of a courageous, loving act on others.



Sweet Land is wonderfully acted. Elizabeth Reaser and Tim Guinee are excellent as Inge and Olaf. The supporting cast includes many fine actors who you will certainly recognize, even if they are not exactly household names: Alan Cumming, Alex Kingston, John Heard, Ned Beatty and Lois Smith.

Not the least of Sweet Land's accomplishments is the way in which this period film can shed light on contemporary issues. The most obvious is the attitude toward immigration. Love eventually wins out in the film. Let's pray that love leads to justice for the immigrant in our own time as well.

Sweet Land is scheduled for release in selected cities in October. I hope it gets the wide release it deserves. I loved this movie and highly recommend it to everyone.

Tom Condon, OP