

Independent Weekly

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Sweet Land

Yesterdays of heaven

by Godfrey Cheshire

***Sweet Land* opens Friday in select theaters.**

It has been at least a decade since the tag "American independent" suggested a film of humanity, vision and genuine artistic purpose. During that time the term has degenerated into a marketing label too often attached to slick, meretricious movies that merely ape Hollywood's empty formulas, albeit usually on lower budgets.

Ali Selim's *Sweet Land* is such an extraordinary exception to that rule that it almost seems like it could reverse the decline by itself. Far and away the best Amerindie I've seen in the past year—winner of the Independent Spirit Award for Best Debut Feature, it was No. 3 on my 10-best list for 2006—it gives new meaning to "American independent" by reclaiming the term's original meaning and promise.

The film is American in the most profound sense: A tale of Scandinavian immigrants in Minnesota just after World War I, it touches, as so few movies do these days, on the very fundamentals of our national experience, both material and spiritual—home, community, land, family, hardship and faith.

It is independent in the most necessary and instructive senses: Made without studio interference or stars in the lead roles, it looks like a Hollywood film that costs 10 or 20 times as much, yet it is full of the kind of charm, intelligence, subtlety and genuine feeling (as opposed to opportunistic sentimentality) that seem to have been leached out of most Hollywood movies in the last few decades.

Brilliantly written and acted, *Sweet Land* is also remarkable for evoking two crucial veins of American cinema at once. In its concern with people trying to wrest a living from a spectacular but challenging landscape, it recalls the stoic classicism of John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley* and *Wagon Master*. Yet in its oblique storytelling and ravishing visuals, it also summons up the elegant modernism of movies such as—the

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Elizabeth Reaser as Inge, a
Norwegian immigrant in
Minnesota

film that critics invariably point to—Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*.

So how does such a compelling account of Norwegians in the upper Midwest come from a guy named Ali Selim? As it happens, Selim grew up in Minnesota and lives there still. But his father was an immigrant from Egypt, and he has said that he thought of his dad's memories of coming to America when he read the story that, according to the credits, inspired *Sweet Land*, Will Weaver's "A Gravestone Made of Wheat."

In Selim's screenplay, the Norwegian immigrants' tale is framed by not one but two intertwined stories that launch the film on an elegiac note. Each concerns a death that forces a reexamination of the lives that surround it. In 2004, when his aged grandmother Inge (Lois Smith) dies, middle-aged Lars Torvik (Stephen Pelinski) faces the decision of whether to sell the farm she lived on for decades to a developer.

That, in turn, prompts a recollection of the time in 1968 when Inge's husband, Olaf, died and was laid out in the farmhouse's front room in a wooden coffin that would soon be enveloped in the Minnesota sod he had spent his life tilling. It is here that young Lars hears his grandmother talk with a longtime friend about her marriage's early days.

Young Inge (Elizabeth Reaser) arrives in Minnesota in 1920 carrying a gramophone with a large wooden horn. She speaks German and some German-accented Norwegian and not much else. Her English seems to consist of one phrasebook expression: "I could eat a horse." But this comes in handy: She has a healthy appetite.

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Photo courtesy of Libero LLC

Alan Cumming as Frandsen in Sweet Land

A mail-order bride, she has been brought across the Atlantic by stolid, handsome Olaf (Tim Guinee), one of those taciturn bachelors who seems to have been rendered almost speechless by his long solitude. His encounter with Inge is hardly a case of love at first sight. For a few minutes she thinks she's meant for his affable friend Frandsen (a winning turn by Alan Cumming). With her gramophone, striking beauty and challenging, wide-eyed gaze, Inge perhaps strikes Olaf as some exotic bird that's been shipped over by mistake. The language barrier merely compounds the emotional distance between them.

An even greater set of barriers, however, emerges from the community surrounding them. Inge's German roots make her an effective pariah. The Norwegians' pastor (John Heard) won't marry them. And because of her lack of papers and the suspicion that still dogs Germans not long after World War I, local government officials won't permit the ceremony, either. Olaf and his would-be bride must wait for either the bureaucratic wheels to turn or the walls of prejudice to dissolve. But in the meantime, they must maintain the appearance of propriety. So Inge moves in with the large, rambunctious Frandsen family, where she sleeps with a child's feet in her face.

This concern with the community's opinion is one of the most fascinating and resonant aspects of *Sweet Land*. By its end, the film becomes a love

story of enormous power and originality, one that suggests a discrete parallel between the romantic impulse and the forces of nature that everywhere affect these farmers' lives. Yet the American frontier experience, Selim reminds us, was not about letting nature run wild, but about taming it. Every individual attempting to do that depended on the community around him, a support system structured according to beliefs that, no matter how arbitrary or unreasonable, provided continuity and meaning in the midst of nature's wildness and unpredictability.

In its lustrous images, *Sweet Land* offers a ravishing vision of the life and landscapes of 1920s Minnesota. "Painterly" is too mild a word for the careful yet breathtaking look supplied by Selim and cinematographer David Tumblety, a look in which a white farmhouse set against the blue-green sweep of sky and land can indeed seem like something out of Edward Hopper. Yet this lyricism avoids prettification or sentimentality precisely because it is constantly poised against reminders of the hardships and struggles the same life entails.



Photo courtesy of Libero
LLC

Intimations of Terrence Malick:
Elizabeth Reaser and Tim
Guinee in Sweet Land

The film's captivating visuals are so effective in part because they retain an element of mystery—one might even say silence—that invites us to supply the meaning ourselves. The same principle applies to Selim's writing. The story captivates in part because its characters and incidents are not conventionally developed or over-explained. They seem fragmentary or anecdotal, as discontinuous sometimes as memories or dreams—or, again, as mute or language-challenged as the relationship between Inge and Olaf. It is our imaginations, finally, that invest them with poignancy and significance.

The script's poetic fragmentariness is given the most lavish articulation, however, in the film's remarkable lead performances. As Inge, Elizabeth Reaser simply steps to the forefront of American actors with work that is as forceful and commanding as it is endlessly subtle. She has a fine match in Tim Guinee, whose Olaf emerges as an icon of stoic grit and unyielding determination.

Sad to say, but we hardly ever see performances this rich and fully human in Hollywood movies, much less given by unknown actors. But that's one of the sustaining blessings of American independent filmmaking: Every once in a long while, it gives us the privilege of witnessing a first-time director like Ali Selim bet everything on talent and artistic conviction—and win. It is, thankfully, our victory too.

Ali Selim, the director of Sweet Land, will appear on behalf of his film this weekend with Godfrey Cheshire. On Friday, June 15, he'll be present for the 7 p.m. screening at Chapel Hill's Varsity Theater. On Saturday, Selim and Cheshire will appear following the 1:25 and 7 p.m. presentations at Cary's Galaxy Cinema.