# Sweet Land: Combined Film Reviews

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# Entertainment Weekly review

##### ***Sweet Land*** (2006) EW's GRADE A Reviewed by [Owen Gleiberman](http://www.ew.com/ew/owen-gleiberman) on Oct 18, 2006

Bottom of Form

If Terrence Malick could ever banish the wispy art clouds from his brain and give in to the storyteller inside, perhaps he might make a movie as stirring as **Sweet Land**. I want to be absolutely clear about what an independent triumph this is. The writer-director, Ali Selim, has taken a low budget, two characters who barely speak broken English (and therefore spend a lot of time saying nothing), and a pace that's rigorously true to the rhythms of rural life in 1920, and he has forged a visually indelible movie that's a grand dream of the American past — a tale that links up with the images so many of us have of our relatives and ancestors: the nation's seed sowers.

Inge (Elizabeth Reaser), who grew up in Norway but speaks only German, arrives on the dappled plains of Minnesota toting a Victrola but without her papers, so when she connects with Olaf (Tim Guinee), the dour, strapping Norwegian farmer it has been arranged for her to marry, the two aren't allowed to go through with the ceremony. Instead, they coexist in an awkward limbo, which turns out to be God's romantic gift to them. Selim unveils an organic community: the farmers and capitalist land scavengers, the beauty of making a pie, the brute hardship of harvesting a corn crop the size of several baseball fields. Sweet Land is a movie of extraordinary tenderness, in which Reaser and Guinee, using a language of looks, make you happy to think about what love once might have been. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1547550,00.html>

MOVIE REVIEW *Los Angeles Times*

‘Sweet Land’ Delicate “Sweet Land” is a type of American independent we don’t see often enough. By Kenneth Turan, Staff Writer November 15, 2006

Think of “Sweet Land” as a gift, the kind of delicate but deeply emotional love story, both sincere and restrained, that, like love itself, is more sought after than found.

Directed by Ali Selim in the Minnesota farmland where its story takes place, “Sweet Land” is a type of American independent we don’t see often enough, a beautifully photographed film (in 35-millimeter no less) that celebrates its regional identity. In addition, it’s sure-footed enough to tread on the borders of sentimentality without falling into that ever-seductive trap.

“Sweet Land” begins with a resonant quotation — “Let us hope that we are all preceded in this world by a love story” — and proceeds to tell just such a tale with a sureness of touch that benefits from superb work by stars Elizabeth Reaser and Tim Guinee as well as a setting with an emotional charge of its own.

For the back story of “Sweet Land’s” narrative about the eager hopes and complicated reality of a mail-order bride in 1920s rural Minnesota is the quintessentially American one of the immigrant experience, of the often forgotten, sometimes unimaginable difficulties new arrivals faced.

Before things get going, director Selim (who also wrote the screenplay based on a short story by Will Weaver) starts off with an intricate prologue that presents a dilemma: Should a man sell off the farm he’s just inherited to a developer who wants to turn it into tract housing? We then flash back to his grandparents, Inge Altenberg (Reaser) and Olaf Torvik (Guinee), and their story.

We see Inge, the mail-order bride, first, getting off the train hanging onto an enormous, unwieldy gramophone she lugged from Europe and a command of English limited to a single phrase of doubtful utility: “I could eat a horse.” Blessed with a face that easily conveys emotions, Reaser’s Inge looks simultaneously tentative and bold, piercingly beautiful and scared stiff. That gramophone shows her determination and the rogue ringlets of hair that escape from under her hat indicate an unquenchable spirit.

Olaf shows up eventually with his already married friend Frandsen (the always showy Alan Cumming).

Olaf seems gruff, but we can see that he is in reality simply nervous and shy. He can’t believe either his good luck at having such a beautiful mail-order bride or the bad luck that immediately follows.

For though, like her potential husband, Inge has come from Norway, she is in fact German, a major problem in xenophobic, post-World War I Minnesota. “We have a common language, background and culture, she is not one of us,” says Minister Sorrensen (John Heard), who flatly refuses to marry them.

Although no one seems quite to know what to make of her presence, Inge will not give up. In Selim’s carefully worked out script, these two end up frequently in each other’s company (it wouldn’t be fair to reveal exactly how) and this film provides us the pleasure of watching perfect strangers fall in love.

There are actors with bigger names in “Sweet Land” (besides Heard and Cumming, Ned Beatty and Lois

Smith have cameos), but it is the two leads who make the film what it is. Guinee’s ability to be stubborn as well as likable is essential, but few actresses own the camera with as much authority as Reaser does here.

Though “Sweet Land” is a story of intimate emotions, it has been shot by David Tumblety in a beautiful epic style that emphasizes the largeness and openness of Midwestern space. It’s likely that filmmaker Selim, with a career as a director of commercials behind him, was unwilling to settle for anything less than a pristine look for his feature.

That Selim is the son of Egyptian immigrants clearly helped him convey the intensity and desperation of the immigrant experience, as well as what it means emotionally to be an American. Everyone who worked on “Sweet Land” seems to have understood why this story mattered, everyone felt its emotional power, and it’s hard to imagine an audience member who won’t feel it as well. For the back story of “Sweet Land’s” narrative about the eager hopes and complicated reality of a mail-order bride in 1920s rural Minnesota is the quintessentially American one of the immigrant experience, of the often forgotten, sometimes unimaginable difficulties new arrivals faced.

<http://www.aliselim.com/downloads/LA-Times-Sweet-Land-Movie-Review.pdf>

Independent Weekly June 13, 2007

Film Review *Sweet Land*: Yesterdays of Heaven by Godfrey Cheshire

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 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.

[ Here I’m omitting several paragraphs of plot summary—too many spoilers, I think. If you don’t mind that sort of thing, you can find the full review at the URL pasted in below.]

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.

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.

<http://www.aliselim.com/downloads/Sweet-Land-Film-Review-Independent-Weekly.pdf>