

Timeless Americana

Altman does Keillor.

A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION: Directed by Robert Altman. Screenplay by Garrison Keillor; story by Keillor and Ken LaZebnik. Cinematography, Ed Lachman. Starring Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Lindsay Lohan, Kevin Kline, Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly, Tommy Lee Jones, Virginia Madsen and Maya Rudolph. Picturehouse, 2006. PG-13. 105 minutes.

Do you spend evenings listening to Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" on NPR, wondering what exactly Powdermilk Biscuits are, chuckling at the tall tales and humming along with the songs? If so, recognizing Guy Noir and cowpokes Dusty and Lefty from the variety radio show will add a layer of enjoyment to *A Prairie Home Companion*. But you don't have to know anything about the roughly 30-year-old public radio classic to enjoy the new film from director Robert Altman, writer Keillor and their generous, talented ensemble cast.

In Keillor's quirky, sweet and occasionally madly funny story, "A Prairie Home Companion" is about to go off the air, its small-time radio station home sold to a Texas company. In St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater, most of the cast and crew are flustered and uncertain. Host G.K. (Keillor) delivers tall tales and stoicism in equal measure: "Every show is your last show," he says when asked if he's going to say anything about it being the end. Not even the radiant and mysterious

"Dangerous Woman" (Virginia Madsen), who stops by on business but also wants to discuss an old joke, can rattle his façade for long. The show must go on, and so it does, full of songs, fake jingles, sound effects, dropped

cues, forgotten lyrics and out of place remarks. Musical numbers trade screen time with backstage conversations, Altman's precise timing moving from one character to the next at just the right moments.

Keillor is a mellow, down to earth center to the movie's cast, which includes Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin, clearly enjoying themselves with Altman's trademark overlapping dialogue as the singing Johnson

Sisters; Lindsay Lohan as Streep's angsty, poetry-writing teenage daughter; Maya Rudolph as harried, pregnant assistant stage manager Molly; and Tommy Lee Jones as "The Axeman," sent from the Texas conglomerate to check out the show's close. Streep is a fluttering, reminiscing delight, grounded and checked by Lohan's eye-rolling and Tomlin's gruff affection. Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly, drawling and scruffy as singing cowboys Dusty and Lefty, get some of the film's best awful jokes. Their characters, like clumsy, inept gumshoe wannabe Guy Noir (Kevin Kline), seem to have stepped out of a different time and place straight onto the Fitzgerald stage — finding an unlikely but perfect home as facets of the broadcast's corny, astute, down-home character.

Though timely in its brief commentary on corporate takeover and tinged with an awareness of death and endings, *A Prairie Home Companion* keeps its tone light. Warm, glowing light surrounds the performers offstage; the camera moves gently but near-constantly across the actors' faces and the unfussy stage. The visual grace and crisp performances combine for something both nostalgic and grounded, observant and genial. Though the film may not linger for long after you leave the theater, Altman and Keillor have created a worthwhile diversion, capturing a feeling of timeless Americana while accepting that it may not be around for long.

EW

A Prairie Home Companion opens Friday, June 9 at the Bijou.



Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep and Lindsay Lohan bring *A Prairie Home Companion* to a close.

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