The film version of A Prairie Home Companion: Less than might have been hoped for

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17 June 2006

A Prairie Home Companion, screenplay by Garrison Keillor, story by Keillor and Ken LaZebnik, directed by Robert Altman

Unfortunately, *A Prairie Home Companion*, the joint effort of two talented individuals, writer and radio personality Garrison Keillor and veteran director Robert Altman, adds up to less than the sum of the parts.

Keillor is well known in the US for his longtime radio program (on the air, more or less, since 1974), *A Prairie Home Companion*, set in the imaginary time and space of tiny Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. The program, with Keillor (born 1942) as its host and ringleader, offers music, comic playlets, phony advertisements and other items. It has a weekly audience of 4 million on some 580 public radio stations.

Written entirely by Keillor, the show's centerpiece remains "News from Lake Wobegon" (a town "where all the women are strong, all the men all good looking and all children are above average"), an extended monologue by the host. In these pieces, Keillor conjures up small-town America as it was, or imagined itself to be, some decades ago. The work is saved from mere nostalgia, into which it occasionally descends, by Keillor's flights of fancy, his wry humor and his far from uncritical attitude toward rural life.

In recent years, Keillor, a liberal Democrat—although "culturally quite conservative"—raised in a family of devout Christians, has made clear his view, as he told the British *Guardian*, that "it is a tragedy that life is indeed brutal for a great many people in America today."

Altman's film, from Keillor's script, imagines a radio program like the actual one, except that this is on its last legs. A representative of wealthy Christians from Texas, known only as The Axeman (a small part eventually played by Tommy Lee Jones), has bought the theater in which the program is performed weekly in St. Paul, Minnesota, and intends to turn it into a parking lot.

We see the broadcast of the final program and the offstage goings-on of its company: the Johnson Sisters (Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin), who travel the lowly county-fair circuit; a pair of raunchy, dubious cowboy singers, the Old Trailhands (Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly); Keillor himself, here known as "GK," and others.

Also on hand are Streep's depressive daughter (Lindsay Lohan), a highly pregnant and overworked assistant to Keillor (Maya Rudolph), an elderly country singer (L.Q. Jones) and his equally aging romantic partner (Marylouise Burke). A character out of the actual radio program, private eye Guy Noir (played on radio by Keillor), here reduced to little more than a security guard, is impersonated by Kevin Kline. Virginia Madsen floats around enigmatically in a white trench coat, an angel of death.

The combination of Altman, with his usual informality, fluid camera and overlapping dialogue, the grimly fanciful Keillor and the variety of talented performers ensures a certain number of pleasures. Streep, so often mannered in her roles, is delightful, seemingly not under pressure here *to act* quite so determinedly, as the somewhat blowzy Yolanda Johnson. She sings and reminisces and prances about, and seems to be enjoying herself.

Lohan, who was adorable as an 11-year-old, then had the misfortune to fall victim to a series of formula teenage films and television shows, reappears and proves to have talent after all. Her screwy rendition of "Frankie and Johnny" is a highlight. Harrelson and the always deeply human Reilly are fine as the questionable cowpokes.

Tomlin, a gifted performer, has little to do, however, and Kline, although probably better off in comic roles such as this one, has not much more. The Madsen character is not effective, merely odd, and Jones's Christian corporate mogul seems like an afterthought, a relatively cheap and easy addition.

Altman-Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion* exudes a general warmth and foolishness, favors the chaos of a creative community, argues for some sort of elemental human and artistic solidarity and kindness—and aside from that, not much. It's something of course, but both writer and director have done more on other occasions.

Both Keillor and Altman are on record with comments critical of Bush, his corporate cronies and the general commercialization and degradation of American public life. Altman was at his most acute several decades ago (in the early to mid-1970s, in such films as *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*, *Thieves Like Us*, *California Split* and *3 Women*), but he has shown flashes of the old form in the past 15 years, in *The Player*, *Short Cuts* and *Gosford Park*. Given Altman's age, now 81, and other factors, one assumes that Keillor was the more active element in shaping the film's overall tone and feel.

The work seems timid to me, in the end, rather evasive. The weekly radio program, one way or another, makes a more direct comment on the current state of things in the US. Keillor claims, in his interview with the *Guardian*, to prefer to "talk about politics ... in a very light-handed and in-passing way," but his 2004 *Homegrown Democrat: A Few Plain Thoughts From the Heart of America* warns ominously that "The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is the death knell of democracy" and that "No republic in the history of humankind has survived this." If that is so, one would think he has a responsibility to pursue the matter rather more seriously.

No artist is obliged to include any material that he or she doesn't feel deeply, about politics, social polarization or any other subject, but here one feels that Keillor has shied off, been intimidated by the general social and political atmosphere. His weakest sides emerge here, the insistence on the homespun, the semi-religious and the merely quirky. Enough. There's no need to convince the faithful, and the extreme right will not be convinced by a thousand gospel numbers or morsels of quaint 'Americana.'

In any event, the film lacks urgency in the more general sense, that of

seeing things clearly, conveying what life is truly like at present, giving a deep sense of its human difficulties. Art abhors a vacuum too. Because we don't have that urgency, we have something else. The film leans on the elegiac rather too much for its own good.

Its conceit is that the radio broadcast is the program's last. That hangs over the events, a little too conspicuously (there is the Angel of Death; the death of a performer; the death of the program; the 'death' of the building; the death, presumably, of a certain type of mixed up low-and-high-brow entertainment, in which poetic intimations of mortality, 'old-time' music and dirty jokes commingle).

Much is made in this *A Prairie Home Companion*, by Keillor in particular, about *not* mourning the end of the show and simply getting on with things in a stoic manner, so much so that the attitude calls attention to itself and turns into its opposite. The film ends up, almost inadvertently, a bit self-centered. Ironic, because this is what Keillor would like, above all, *not* to be. Chapter 1 of his *Homegrown Democrat*, summing up what he takes to be the theme of his upbringing and social background, is "Don't Think You're Special."

But if you're not going to deal with the central problems you confront, if you avoid things, consciously or not, this is what you get. Having decided not to take on the status quo, politically or culturally, except in the perfunctory and unconvincing form of the corporate "Axeman," Keillor ends up with himself and his pals and the fictional fate of his program.

Frankly, the continuation or cancellation of a radio show, whatever its strengths or charms, is not the most pressing issue facing the people Keillor claims, and no doubt genuinely desires, to be addressing. Nor is the more general problem of confronting death and mortality. That comes to everyone, but what about the more immediate matter of "the Christian party that conceals enormous glittering malice and is led by brilliant bandits"? Very little of that here.

We're not criticizing Keillor for having the wrong politics, he is principally an artist and performer and should be judged on that basis, but for not pursuing his own stated concerns in a committed fashion, for making something relatively inoffensive and harmless, when other opportunities presented themselves.

Of course, this artistic problem is not disconnected from his social point of view. *Homegrown Democrat*, published in the last election year, strongly criticized the Bush administration for engaging "in a war against a small country that was undertaken for the President's personal satisfaction but sold to the American public on the basis of brazen misinformation, a war whose purpose is to distract us from an enormous transfer of wealth taking place in this country, flowing upward, and the deception is working beautifully so far. The top 1 percent holds nearly half of the financial wealth, the greatest concentration of wealth of any industrialized nation, more concentrated than at any time since the Depression."

And furthermore, it went on: "The Union does not rest on strength of arms or financial wealth but on the common faith of American people that their children have a fair chance to thrive, that the iron gates have not slammed shut on them, that there is justice, that the Bill of Rights has not been privatized. This is the bottom line in America: we have to feel that our kids stand a chance—otherwise, there's a civil war brewing."

Of himself Keillor wrote: "I am a liberal and liberalism is the politics of kindness. Liberals stand for tolerance, magnanimity, community spirit, the defense of the weak against the powerful, love of learning, freedom of belief, art and poetry, city life, the very things that make America worth dying for."

Of course to the extent that Keillor identifies the Democratic Party with these values, he is seriously mistaken. "The primary reason I am a Democrat," he told an interviewer in 2004, "is that they take the idea of justice seriously and justice is the sine qua non of our society." He chooses to imagine that the Democrats continue to operate within the traditions of Minnesota agrarian populism ("The state was settled by no-nonsense socialists from Germany and Sweden and Norway who unpacked their trunks and planted corn and set about organizing schools; churches; libraries; lodges; societies and benevolent associations ...") and its Farmer-Labor politics.

Leaving aside the mythologizing in which Keillor indulges about figures like Hubert Humphrey, former senator and vice president from Minnesota, the Democratic Party, including its liberal wing, has lurched far, far to the right. It has fully embraced the cause of "the powerful" against "the weak."

As we have noted before, the liberal and compassionate Democratic Party, friend of the poor and the disadvantaged, exists today almost exclusively in the fertile imagination of Hollywood screenwriters and directors (like Rod Lurie of *The Contender*, Gary Ross of *Seabiscuit*, the makers of *The West Wing*, perhaps Steven Spielberg, and others) and figures like Keillor.

It is presumably not coincidental that Keillor's artistic work, like his politics, is a curious mix of the serious and the unserious, the deeply felt and the facetious, the artistically worked out and the too hastily thrown together.

One of his recent novels, for example, *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* (2001), contains some lovely and sensitive passages. Narrated by a 14-year-old aspiring writer, caught in a severe hormonal crossfire in a family of strict Christians, the book chronicles its protagonist's struggle with a variety of personal dramas. Some of it is very good, and honest. And amusing. Keillor is one of the few writers who can make a reader laugh out loud.

Oddly, for a writer who continues to push the virtues of small-town America, one of the novel's most moving, not comic, passages concerns his mother's trip, years before, to New York City. To appreciate the passage fully it has to be come upon in context, among a collection, perhaps too large a collection, of somewhat acerbic and sometimes cartoonish pictures of the mythical little Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon.

In any case, the boy asks her at one point, "What did you see in Brooklyn?"

With a degree of wonderment, she replies, in part: "There was a candy store open on the corner and people buying ice-cream sodas, so we got sodas and we sat on the curb, and across the street there was a park and thousands of people lying on blankets spread out on the grass. Thousands of them. Some men sitting on park benches smoking, and some women sitting and talking on the grass, and all the others lay sleeping, whole families, men and women and little kids, on blankets they spread out on the grass."

And further: "[W]e went up in the elevator and it was hot in the room, so Daddy took the mattress off the bed and we slept outdoors, on the fire escape. On an open grate, nineteen stories in the air. You could look right over the edge and see people walking on the sidewalks below. But we went right to sleep and didn't wake up until eight in the morning, and it was raining."

But there are other sequences and characters, as noted, that are cartoonish. No writer, except perhaps the very greatest, can extend 'full-roundedness' to all his or her creations. Outside a certain range often lie figures, 'extras' perhaps, drawn superficially or in short-hand. In Keillor's case, interestingly, the working class characters, as opposed to shopkeepers and farmers and eccentrics, are often given short shrift, like the Guppy family in *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* (even the surname is foolish-sounding). This is another way of saying, I suppose, that Keillor is a gifted story-teller and capable of real insight, but no more than that.

One thinks of a James Thurber, American humorist of the mid-century. I was raised on his stories, particularly wonderful short pieces like "The Night the Bed Fell" ("I suppose that the high-water mark of my youth in

Columbus, Ohio, was the night the bed fell on my father," it cheerfully starts off.) The work is relatively light, humanistic, satirical, liberal-minded, common-sensical, with occasional moments of malice—not Mark Twain or H.L. Mencken, but something.

Keillor's writing has too many blind spots, too much inconsistency to make it great, but it pleases and even enlightens. All the more reason then for there to be disappointment with the results of his collaboration with Altman, which pleases only slightly and enlightens a bit less.