



As his 'Prairie' evolves, so does Keillor

■ Garrison Keillor embraces the spontaneous genius of Robert Altman as they turn his radio show into a movie.

By PETER KAUFMAN
Washington Post

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Preparing to rehearse a scene on the set of his latest project, Robert Altman, the dean of American film directors, says: "I don't even know what's in the script." He's not a bit concerned about that, either. He is, in fact, describing his customary way of working.

Waiting for technicians to solve some problem, he leans back in a director's chair — exactly like the ones you have in your rec room, except that yours don't say ROBERT ALTMAN on the back.

"I'll go to set a scene up," Altman says, "and I'll ask the actors what it is, or I'll ask the script supervisor 'What is this scene, what is this about, what do they say in it?' But at the end of the scene, I don't know whether they've said the dialogue or not."

This unorthodox method has worked out pretty well for Altman. In his 1970 breakthrough, *M*A*S*H*, and in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *The Player*, *Short Cuts* and the best picture nominees *Nashville* (1975) and *Gosford Park* (2001), one of Altman's hallmarks is the spontaneity, the naturalness, of the scenes. The speech on the page is merely the springboard.

Still, it's a little surprising to see him take that approach on the current movie: an adaptation of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the venerable weekend variety show on public radio. The screenplay was written by *Prairie* creator and host Garrison Keillor, who is also a novelist and essayist. Words matter to him. He selects them painstakingly.

Moreover, Keillor is on the set nearly every day, because in the film he is playing himself — or at least he's playing the host of a radio broadcast. He is there watching as the actors and director, again and again, futz with his lines, mosh separate scenes together into

Garrison Keillor's script often turns into typical Robert Altman free-for-all scenes in *A Prairie Home Companion*, now filming.

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one, add morsels of their own.

"It's very difficult for him," Altman says. "It's the first time he's had anybody that can override him. ... I have the editing control. But he's smart enough — he knows that."

Somewhat wistfully, Altman adds: "I don't know if he's having any fun."

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He is, though. During an hourlong conversation in a spacious dressing room upstairs at the Fitzgerald Theater here, Keillor marvels at the notion that Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline and Lily Tomlin, among others, are bringing to life characters he invented.

"I find it really breathtaking and amazing to see actors working up a role," he says. "I've never seen this before. All of the acting that's done on our show is just kind of instant, immediate stuff."

He speaks in the soothing, resonant croon known so well to the 4.3-million listeners of *PHC*, which first took the air in 1974. A descendant of vaudeville, Jack Benny, the Grand Ole Opry and possibly Firesign Theatre, *PHC* is a two-hour weekly valentine to, and gentle satire of, heartland America. It emanates most frequently from the Fitzgerald, the oldest existing theater in St. Paul, and the entire broadcast is flavored by Keillor's affectionate depiction of Minnesotans

as self-effacing and buttoned up.

The musical acts incline toward bluegrass and blues, with a jazz chanteuse here and there. (The host himself will sometimes sing a tune or, with perfect earnestness, a hymn.) The imaginary sponsors, whose "ads" are written by the host, include Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Powdermilk Biscuits, the Ketchup Advisory Board and the Cafe Boeuf, which is presided over by Maurice, the world's haughtiest French maître d'. Joined by actors Tom Russell and Sue Scott, Keillor appears in sketches about retro private eye Guy Noir or Dusty and Lefty, two old cowpokes who pass the long hours on the trail by sniping at each other.

And there is the News From Lake Wobegon: Standing at center stage with nary a note in his hand, Keillor uncorks a shaggy-dog story, lasting 15 minutes or so, about events that, in the seven days past, purportedly befell various citizens of that fictional Minnesota town. The tale is often funny, sometimes poignant, always observant, and the theater audience is unfailingly transfixed by it. Just a man talking extemporaneously for a quarter-hour, and people actually pay attention.

"He's just the best at radio management and production that I've ever seen," says Russell, a St. Paul native who also co-hosts a morning show on WCCO, a Minneapolis news-talk station, and has worked in the medium for more than 30 years.

PHC may be great radio, but who

would ever regard it as boffo movie potential? "I didn't see the film in it," Altman recalls. "It was a real challenge: How can we make this work?"

"It was his idea," Keillor says. "And I didn't care for the idea, but I found him intriguing and I still do."

So Keillor got to work on a screenplay about a St. Paul radio program called *Prairie Home Companion* — the movie may or may not bear that title — hosted by someone who is usually addressed as GK. The show is carried not on a nationwide network but by one station, WLT. That's because the plot requires the station to be sold to a greedy Texas corporation, which sends a hatchet man (played by Tommy Lee Jones) to close down the show and fire everybody.

But the story's not really the thing here. A look at about 45 minutes of footage indicates that the film will emphasize backstage shenanigans and musical numbers performed by the actors. "I like the fact that the story is fairly simple and straightforward," says the man who wrote it, "and so it allows all these different, lovely acting turns."

To get his favorite characters into the movie, Keillor had to turn some elements of the show inside out. The film couldn't be "a bunch of actors standing around holding scripts," he says. "I mean, that would be funny for 45 seconds." So Dusty and Lefty, played by Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly, have hung up their spurs and are now radio cowboys, strum-

ming guitars and singing bawdy ditties. Guy Noir, the gunshoe played by Kline, has shuttered his office on the 12th floor of the Acme Building to become head of security for the radio show. Scott and Russell, who voice any number of characters on the real *PHC*, here portray a makeup artist and the stage manager, respectively.

Lake Wobegon is not mentioned in the movie.

There will surely be a soundtrack CD, but much else about the *PHC* movie is uncertain. It doesn't have a distributor yet, let alone an opening date. David Levy, a producer, says the picture might be shopped around at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

So the work of Levy and the other producers is really just beginning. Altman, too, must oversee the editing of the movie once shooting is completed. But most of Keillor's work is done. He's just enjoying the ride now.

When Altman and his caravan have finally opened their movie and meandered off to another subject, Keillor, who turns 63 next month, will steadfastly tend his radio show. After 30 years, he says, *A Prairie Home Companion* is still a work in progress.

"I think it's got life left in it," he says. "I keep feeling that it's ready to turn a corner and develop in some new way."

"I don't have a clear vision of this yet. But I don't feel that I've done the show that I really want to do. I think I'm still kind of searching for it."