

Stars, Robert Altman magic light up 'Prairie Home' movie

By JEFF BAENEN
Associated Press

St. Paul, Minn. — Kevin Kline is in the zone. The Academy Award-winning actor is so focused on his role as hard-boiled gunslinger Guy Noir that he doesn't notice he's cut his finger as he shoots a scene for the "A Prairie Home Companion" movie in the lobby of the Fitzgerald Theater.

Decked out in a pinstriped suit and with his hair slicked back, Kline does take after take, adding funny asides under director Robert Altman's quiet gaze. Kline does a pratfall over a bar counter, pops the cork on a bottle of champagne and drinks a toast with "Saturday Night Live" actress Maya Rudolph, who's playing an assistant stage manager.

"I'm bleeding!" Kline declares at the end of a take. He holds up a bloody left ring finger as his makeup artist applies a tissue to it.

"I'm surprised he didn't notice it," Rudolph says.

"Notice? Notice? I was acting!" Kline says, sounding like the Master Thespian. Kline is among a bevy of stars — including Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Lindsay Lohan, Woody Harrelson, Virginia Madsen and Tommy Lee Jones — bringing to life Garrison Keillor's script about backstage goings-on at a not-too-fictional radio show.

Coupled with the legacy of Altman, whose films include "M.A.S.H." and "Nashville," the film is a rare combination of star power and is also bringing Altman, a filmmaking maverick, together with Keillor, the creator-host of "A Prairie Home Companion," the variety show heard on public radio by more than 4 million listeners each week.

"He's a movie guy," Keillor says of the 80-year-old Altman. "The moment they started shooting this picture it's like he became 30 years younger.



Actress Maya Rudolph munches White Castle hamburgers with director Robert Altman. An all-star cast is making a film based on Garrison Keillor's radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

He's tremendously focused and capable."

Wearing a jogging suit and tennis shoes, the white-haired, goateed Altman is a commanding presence on the set. He allows the actors to improvise on Keillor's script, hustling them into position with an occasional call of "Let's boogie!"

"With (Altman), nothing's etched in stone. A script is a foundation, or a blueprint, kind of written in wet cement," says David Levy, one of the movie's producers.

It's a freedom that inspires admiration from the actors.

"It's more than the alpha male. You can feel he's a powerful man, and yet he's so kind. There's a lot of love around him," says Madsen, who plays a mystery woman who may be the Angel of Death.

Madsen compares the "Prairie Home" set with that of the 2004 movie "Sideways," for which she received a supporting actress Oscar nomination.

"Everyone is so free. There's nobody with a bullhorn, nobody tapping their watch. And it's like, 'Oh my God, it feels so good to make a movie this way! Movies like this, they always turn out to be good,'" she says.

When a birthday cake is

wheeled out for the pregnant Rudolph, who turned 33 on the last full day of shooting, she announces to her unborn baby: "I wish you'd come out just like Bob Altman!"

"I like him a lot and I like his movies a lot, too. In every sense of the word, I'm a big Bob Altman fan," Rudolph says later in an interview.

Sitting next to Altman is Rudolph's boyfriend, Paul Thomas Anderson, whose own films "Boogie Nights" and "Magnolia" have drawn comparisons to Altman's work. Anderson's chair is labeled "Pinch Litterer," meaning he's ready to fill in should Altman become sick or unable to finish the picture. (That doesn't turn out to be necessary, and the movie wraps three days ahead of its 25-day schedule and on budget.)

Anderson, 35, calls working with Altman "dreamy." "It's a gift, I guess, is the best way to say it," Anderson says, pausing while a scene outside the Fitzgerald is set up. "He's put up with my presence, and I just like being around him."

Keillor, 63, calls making the movie "one of the amazing experiences of my young life."

As in life, Keillor plays a radio announcer in the movie. It features Streep and Tomlin as the singing Johnson sisters, Lohan as Streep's daughter, Harrelson and John C. Reilly as singing cowboys Lefty and Dusty, and Jones as the Axeman, who's dispatched by the radio station's new corporate owners in Texas to shut down the show.

Keillor says Lohan is a "good comic actress." He recalls a scene in which the teen star runs at him with tears in her eyes and accuses him of being cold and unfeeling.

"And she wept onto the sleeve of my suit. I have a suit that has Lindsay's tears on it," Keillor says.

When Altman and Keillor first talked about doing a movie on Lake Wobegon — Keillor's fictional town where "the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average" — Altman suggested a writer to Keillor, but that didn't work out.

"And I said, 'You know, we should do your show, and you should write it. Because it's your humor, it's your sensibility. It's not mine.' And I've tried very hard to do his stuff rather than my own," Altman says.

Filming the movie at the elegantly restored Fitzgerald, the home base for Keillor's Saturday night radio show, and using the "Prairie Home" radio team helped make for a smooth production.

"It's just been one of those blessed shoots where everything worked and everything worked smoothly," says Tim Russell, who does voices for the "Prairie Home Companion" radio show and plays the stage manager in the movie.

The movie doesn't have a distributor yet, but an early 2006 release is planned.

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