

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST DAY ONE

And they're off

'Prairie Home Companion' premieres at Austin festival

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AUSTIN — Lake Wobegon met Town Lake on Friday night at the historic Paramount Theater at the official kickoff of this year's South by Southwest, the 20th anniversary of what's become a giant film, music and Internet festival.

Robert Altman's latest star-studded vehicle, a movie takeoff on Garrison Keillor's popular public radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*, made its global premiere here before an enthusiastic capacity house.

Starring Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Woody Harrelson, Tommy Lee Jones, Lindsay Lohan, Kevin Kline, Virginia Madsen, John C. Reilly, Maya Rudolph and Keillor, the slight, sweetly comic film is a fictional look at the backstage drama involved in broadcasting *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Set in the bucolic (and totally made-up) Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon "where children are above average," the radio show is a celebration of American roots music and culture.

Altman is known for films like *Gosford Park* with large ensemble casts. Unfortunately for name-drop-



PICTUREHOUSE VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS ARCHIVES
Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep and Lindsay Lohan, right, from 2005, star in *A Prairie Home Companion* but did not attend its opening Friday at South by Southwest.

pers, there wasn't much star wattage at the premiere though. No Streep. No Lohan. Not even Texan Jones. Altman was in London working on a play.

So it was time for John C. Reilly, a character actor from such movies as *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights* who never gets center stage, to get the star treatment. He's actually one of the highlights of *Companion*, playing half of a philosophical singing cowboy duo with Harrelson.

"It's great to be back in Austin," he told the crowd before the film. "You guys have been so great to me over the years."

In an earlier interview he joked: "This is the first time an audience is going to see the movie, and I am the ambassador. I get to introduce a Robert Altman film to the world. That's pretty funny."

"I love Austin. I shot [the 1993 film] *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* here and was back for a benefit for the Austin Film Society with my [2004] movie *Criminal*. I just love Austin. Austin's been very good to me."

What's the word?

While *A Prairie Home Companion* was the official opening-night movie, it wasn't the first. Screening before it at the Paramount was a documentary with a title that can't be printed in the newspaper. Let's just say it's named for one of George Carlin's famed seven dirty words and tells the humorous history of the term and its use.

Much like *The Aristocrats*, a documentary that showed at last year's South by Southwest in which some of the world's most famous comedians riff on a dirty joke,

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this film is built around a premise that can't be discussed in detail in print. But director Steve Anderson managed to corral a motley crew of cultural commentators from across the political spectrum, some of whom are predictable (Janeane Garofalo, Bill Maher), some not (Pat Boone, Ice-T, Miss Manners), to talk about the word and its implications.

While the movie is fun, it tends to set up social conservatives as easy targets and doesn't take their views seriously. What everyone can agree on, though, is that this is going to be one tough film to market because its name can't be printed in mainstream papers or said on the air.

"We had a lot of discussion about what to call the film. We decided to call it [what it is] and let it fall where it may," Anderson said before the movie. "It's a challenge."

The film and Internet portions of South by Southwest continue through Tuesday, though many of the movies will be repeated and screened through the week. The more crowded music sessions begin Wednesday and run through March 19.

While SXSW organizers have not officially released attendance figures, all indications are that registrations are up significantly this year, perhaps by as much as 40 percent. In recent years, SXSW has been attracting as many as 15,000 registrants. So if you're coming down: Get here early.

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