

Garrison Keillor, movie star?

The low-key humorist explains the unlikely film of his folksy radio show, 'A Prairie Home Companion' — and what it's like when Meryl Streep gets in your face



By HAP ERSTEIN
Palm Beach Post Film Writer

Garrison Keillor has gone Hollywood.

Don't worry. The amiable host of public radio's variety show *A Prairie Home Companion* and author of numerous bestsellers including the folksy *Lake Wobegone Days* is still unassuming to a fault and incredibly low-key.

Sitting backstage at an amphitheatre at Bayfront Park in Miami earlier this spring, a few hours before going on for a live broadcast, Keillor was the dictionary definition of relaxed. In a much-rumpled suit and his trademark red sneakers, he folded his 6-foot-4 frame onto a chair and leaned back to talk about his new colleagues: director Robert Altman and actors Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Lily Tomlin and Lindsay Lohan.

On Friday, Altman and Keillor's film version of *A Prairie Home Companion* opens. Keillor wrote and appears in it, playing — of all things — a laid-back radio host of a certain beloved show performed on the stage of the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul, Minn.

Each Saturday evening for the past 32 years, Keillor has been entertaining the nation — on 500-plus stations currently, including WLRN-FM 91.3 at 6 p.m. — with his radio show, an old-fashioned vaudeville program packed with comedy sketches, music, fictional commercials and Keillor's signature monologue, "The News from Lake Wobegone."

Still, it is amazing that *A Prairie*

■ Hap chats with director Robert Altman, 41.



Photo by MELINDA SUE GORDON

Home Companion — the movie, that is — got made at all, since once Keillor and Altman were brought together over dinner by a mutual lawyer friend, neither one much liked the movie notions of the other.

"I had this idea for a story and I pitched it to him and he wasn't interested," shrugs Keillor, 63, who wanted to take his Lake Wobegone characters onto the big screen. "Maybe because it was about a small town. I don't think that is particularly his beat."

Nor was Altman all that up on *Prairie Home*. "His wife, Catherine, has listened to the show for years. I think he'd heard it from the next room, y'know," says Keillor.

Yet Altman, recent recipient of a lifetime achievement Oscar for a 40-year career that includes such large-cast rambling features as *M*A*S*H*, *Nashville*, *The Player* and *Gosford*

See KEILLOR, 41 ▶

RADIO DAZE

A quick history of 'A Prairie Home Companion'

■ The show, a takeoff on the Grand Ole Opry, started in 1969 as a morning program on Minnesota Public Radio.

■ The title came from the Prairie Home cemetery in Moorhead, Minn.

■ The first live broadcast in 1974 had an audience of 12 — and a ticket price of one buck for adults, 50 cents for kids.

■ The show now has 4 million weekly listeners, and is on more than 580 public radio stations.

— Source: <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/>

RADIO VS. MOVIE

What's the difference?

The radio show:

■ It's basically a free-form old-timey live program, hosted by Keillor, featuring a weekly update on the news from Lake Wobegon ("the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve"), with songs, commercials and sketches.

■ Characters show up in show after show, from "Guy Noir, Private Eye" to church pastors to single farmers of Norwegian extraction.

■ The show has "sponsors," such as Powdermilk Biscuits and Jack's Warm Car Service, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and Mourful Oatmeal.

The picture show:

■ It's still about a radio program from Minnesota with Keillor as host, but the story is about the last night of the radio show that is being canceled.

■ Guy Noir is there, played by Kevin Kline, but many other new characters were written for the movie.



Meryl Streep (left) and Lindsay Lohan are mother and daughter in the film.

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Improvisation similar in Keillor's show, Altman's film

► KEILLOR from 11

Park was intrigued enough to go watch a broadcast of the radio show. "He found it interesting to look at," reports Keillor, who was taken aback when Altman pronounced that this was what the film should be about.

Keillor was unpersuaded. "I didn't want to write a story about myself," he gripes. "I just couldn't see that it would be that interesting. It takes time to write a movie script. I learned, and to write one about my own show seemed uncomfortable to me."

Still, Altman usually gets what he wants and when Keillor is asked what got him started working on the screenplay, he says simply, "A deadline." The fact that Mr. Altman was waiting for me, he said. Don't spend too much time agonizing over it, just write.

But what to write? Keillor made a couple of false starts before hitting on the idea of the show's final broadcast before the station is sold to a media mogul.

"Yeah, there were a couple of stories that just did not work," Keillor concedes.

"One was about a person from the radio show cast who becomes a big star and then he returns for what he hopes will be a triumphant homecoming. And he is greeted instead by envy, resentment and sabotage. That sounds funnier than it is. It was kind of a sour story, but I went down that road a long way, then I came back from it.

"Then there was a sort of farcical version and that really wore thin on me after a while. So I took a different approach. I just started working on characters. And they would all be, except for Guy Noir (a private detective character familiar to fans of the radio program), performers on the show."

The final broadcast idea arose from the fact that *A Prairie Home Companion* is a genuine throwback to an earlier era. "Yeah, because we do it live, we don't use recorded material. So in that respect, we're trapped in the past," says Keillor.

Because each week Keillor and his stable ensemble of performers inch their way from a seemingly chaotic rehearsal to a tightly timed radio program, there are definite parallels between his show and the free-form, try-anything atmosphere of an Altman movie set.

"Maybe so," allows Keillor. "But it turns out that that's a lot more room for improvisation on an Altman movie."

Asked whether they have similar comic sensibilities, Altman says, "Well, he's smarter than I am and he's a lot drier than I am. But we seemed to mesh quite well. You never know when you start in, but I'd make another movie with him, absolutely."



THROWBACK TO AN EARLIER ERA: Garrison Keillor (from left), Lily Tomlin, Meryl Streep and Lindsay Lohan star in *A Prairie Home Companion*.



FINAL BROADCAST: Kevin Kline (left) is Guy Noir, from Keillor's real radio show, while Streep plays a singer and Keillor a laid-back radio host.

Nevertheless, Keillor was astonished at how Altman went about making *A Prairie Home Companion*. "It was so intricate and yet loose. I think Mr. Altman has a lot of trust in actors. He really admires them, at least the ones that he uses," says Keillor. "He told me that after he's cast a movie, he feels that nine-tenths of his work is done, which is really quite amazing. I always had this idea the director is somebody who's very involved in each scene, guiding the psychology of it and so on. But that wasn't the case for him."

It does not hurt that by now Altman has his pick of acting talent for his projects. "He wanted to build the film around Meryl Streep, and then he added Lily Tomlin, so the Johnson Sisters became characters—a sister-singing act who are the remnant of a once larger singing act, five sisters. They bring

the diminishment of a quintet," says Keillor. "So I could then tell the stories of each sister who dropped out. But having Meryl Streep in mind, and Lily Tomlin, you start on top."

"And then (tabloid star) Lindsay Lohan came in. She wanted to do this, but I didn't know who she was going to be. I had her first being a songwriter, a bad songwriter who wanted to audition for the show. That didn't go anywhere until I read an interview with Miss Lohan in which she said she was going to be in this movie and that she was going to play Meryl Streep's daughter, which was news to me. But it was a terrific idea. She thought of it first."

There is a knock on the dressing room door. It is a production assistant for the radio show, come to deliver a newly purchased Panama hat for Keillor to wear onstage.

He tries it on, grunts his approval, tosses it on his make-up table and continues talking without missing a beat.

"And then Kevin Kline came aboard, and he wanted to be Guy Noir. Now with Kline in mind, that part explodes in possibilities. I remembered his intricate physical comedy from *A Fish Called Wanda* so I didn't want to overwrite the part, but I wanted him to have work to do. To make that part larger, then came a character I called The Dangerous Woman (played by Sissy Spacek/Virginia Madsen). She just evolved wildly. At first she was a fan, a sort of deranged female fan, but from a number of rewrites, she became an angel. I had to get Mr. Altman's permission for that.

But he didn't have to get Altman's permission that often. "He was not that involved

in the screenplay. I sort of expected that he would be, but he wasn't. He read each draft and he would say things like, 'I think you're getting closer.' Or 'I like those sisters. You got something there.' Minimal input. Not like a studio, where each draft would be looked at by a committee of 18 people in their early 20s and they would give you back a 40-page memo with contradictory remarks.

"He just wasn't that involved. He said 'OK on the angel, as long as she doesn't have any aura.' I didn't put an aura in, but he did when he finally shot it. He was always wanting her to stand in front of a lamp. He wanted back lighting. He got fascinated by that character. Obsessed, one might even say."

Keillor is particularly loquacious when it comes to talking about his own performance in the movie. "I'm not an ac-

"She and I had discussed this scene and she had some ideas, so I wrote it with her suggestions. But it was a surprise then to do it and have her really come at me. She really played it for real."

GARRISON KEILLOR
On set with Meryl Streep

tor. I don't want to be caught trying to act. My character doesn't develop a half an inch in the course of the movie. I was very careful of that. I think of him as a piece of furniture," Keillor says.

Altman scoffs at his collaborator's opinion of his acting ability. "But he's been acting for 25 years, he's been acting as Garrison Keillor. If that's just himself, then he's playing himself."

Altman cannot recall any advice on acting he had to give Keillor to get him through his film debut. "No, he knows what he's doing."

Still, the no-actor was brave enough to write in scenes for himself alongside Streep, one of the greatest actresses our country has ever produced. In the picture, they are former lovers, and as Keillor describes a key scene between them, "She's kind of yammering at me as we're walking onstage, about why we had broken up and she's accusing me of being cold. She and I had discussed this scene and she had some ideas, so I wrote it with her suggestions. But it was a surprise then to do it and have her really come at me. She really played it for real. There were just words on paper and then there's this woman, right in your face."

Gradually, however, Keillor fell into the rhythms of filmmaking. "I didn't know this, but you have a walk-through. I think twice or three times, and Mr. Altman is directing movement, not directing acting. So you've got three times to say your lines where you maybe have your script with you and then you do a take. But you know he's going to do another take and probably a third. Sometimes a fourth or fifth. Basically that is it. So you've got four run-throughs. And as Meryl Streep says, 'You only have to get it right once.'"

Regardless of how well *A Prairie Home Companion* does at the box office, though, Keillor is pretty sure a star has not been born.

"No, I was the screenwriter who was also there in a small role," he says adamantly. "I'm just glad I wasn't on any longer than I was."

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Altman still a companion-magnet Everybody wanted to be in his 'Prairie Home' film

By HAP ERSTEIN
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Nothing faces Robert Altman. This is, after all, the man who accepted an honorary lifetime Oscar in March and left the broadcast's international audience stunned by announcing that he had a heart transplant 11 years earlier. "I kind of intended to, I think," he says mischievously.

Today, at 81, he insists his health is "pretty good." After all, he reasons, "Here I am out having my movie, getting ready to do another one."

Following a career in television, Altman began an eclectic film résumé by directing the military comedy *M*A*S*H* in 1970, the

first of many large-cast, sprawling features, leading to his latest, *A Prairie Home Companion*. With its backstage story and music-filled soundtrack, it seems likely to remind moviegoers of one of his best, *Nashville*.

"Oh, well, I can't help that," responds Altman dismissively. "That's OK with me. *Nashville* is a much broader piece. This will sell more tickets, but it really won't have the range that *Nashville* had."

Asked about his latest film in comparison to *Nashville*, Altman calls it "a little more accessible. I mean, I think, it's simpler."

Maybe that is a nod to moviegoers' tastes today or perhaps it reflects the wisdom the director has acquired over the years. "Well, experience teaches you not to get into the quicksand, the quagmire," he laughs knowingly. "To let those things go and do the things that can be done with facility."

By now, actors fall over themselves to

work with Altman, so gathering a cast of Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Kevin Kline, Lindsay Lohan, John C. Reilly and Woody Harrelson, as *Prairie Home* has, is relatively easy for him.

If they are so recognizable that they never really disappear into their characters, that is just the nature of stardom, Altman says. "That's who they are and you know who they are. If I had unknowns in there, it would have been quite a different movie, quite a different reception."

Even in *M*A*S*H*, where he cast Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould and Sally Kellerman, Altman demonstrated his eye for talent. "That cast was unknown. They weren't anybody, they just wanted to work. All these actors, they just want a part."

Noice screenwriter Garrison Keillor credits Altman with teaching him how to weave many stories together into a satisfying

whole. Altman, typically, demurs. "Did he? I don't know that I taught him anything, but we did interview."

Altman remains cagey about his next feature film, worried about letting out too much information too early. But he assures us that there will be a next feature, even after the honorary Oscar given to make up for the oversight of Academy voters who have never given him a competitive statuette.

"Well, that's what they always do," he says of the honorary award. "But that doesn't make any difference. I'm happy to have it."

Winning an Oscar may not help his career much at this point—Altman has come to accept that it will always be hard to raise the money for his offset projects—but he concedes, "It would feed my ego."

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