

ARTS

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# Thoughts from Lake Wobegon

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The voice on the telephone — so deep, relaxed and thoughtful — is easily recognizable. Garrison Keillor speaks so Mr. Rogers-ish, if Mr. Rogers had spent a lifetime mesmerizing mature adults with comfortable, pleasantly humorous yarns about mythical Lake Wobegon, Minn.

"Ahhh, Mr. Rogers," Keillor says when it is suggested that the power of his voice ranks right up there with that of the PBS kids' show master. "Fred Rogers. There was a piece of work." Keillor's chucking now, as easily as he casts off with self-deprecating wit every opportunity to acknowledge the homespun nature and extent of his own celebrity.

Surely he's thought about how his long-time radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* and its new movie version, directed by Robert Altman, have made him someone beloved by many. "I'm not aware of anything of the sort," he says from Los Angeles. "I'm just a writer, and a writer sitting around. And nobody is busy believing them. They just sit and they write and rewrite. It's just a great struggle."

Keillor wrote the big-screen version of *Prairie*, which opened nationwide Friday, and he co-stars with a heady cast of Oscar winners and nominees, including Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Kevin Kline, Tommy Lee Jones, Virginia Madsen, Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly.

The film follows the final performance of a popular, down-to-earth radio show at a historic theatre (*Prairie*'s own Fitzgerald in St. Paul, Minn.). Naturally, Keillor's the emcee. Streep and Tomlin play folk-singing sisters. Jones arrives as the executive whose company is dismantling the show. Madsen's enigmatic character shows up, too, garbed in a sleek raincoat and sort of walking around the set. Is she a stalker? An angel of death? Maybe both.

Here is Keillor on that and other existential mysteries, on working with Altman, and on playing a guy named Garrison Keillor.

*Do you like making movies?*

I thought it was tremendous fun for many different reasons. For one thing, it was fun not to be in charge. Mr. Altman was clearly in charge, and he has seniority and he has experience and everybody looks to him and trusts him to finish the picture as he's shooting it. And this takes an enormous pressure off people. If it were some young punk director for whom this is an all-or-nothing project, it would have been very different. But here was a veteran who loved making movies and who was having a great time. And so all of us did, too.

When I do the radio show, I'm the writer. I'm the host, and I'm the boss. So I have all that anxiety, whatever it is, and in the case of the movie, none of it.

And when you are working with people who are so much better than yourself, this is the only way to work. People assume it would be intimidating to act with Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline, but it's really the opposite. If you were work-



Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep and Lindsay Lohan in *A Prairie Home Companion*. Keillor, who wrote the script, calls Streep the angel of the movie, whose belief in the project helped it to get made.  
Melinda Sue Gordon

ing with rank amateurs, it would be terrifying. But when you work with them (Streep and Kline), you're simply reacting to them, and you're sort of bobbing along in their wake.

*Tell me about Meryl Streep.*

She was really the angel of the movie. She signed up for it so early on and just stuck with it. And the fact that she was behind it, I think, was really crucial in getting it made. And also in the writing of it. It was just a pleasure to write dialogue for Meryl Streep. I must say.

*I was wondering if you also wrote the dialogue specifically for Tommy Lee Jones or reshaped it after he was cast, because his character fits him so well.*

No. His character was from Texas, and I wanted the character to have a certain depth, though I didn't have a great deal of time to go into the characterization. It was kind of a tricky role for him. He kind of had to walk into it and put it on and walk around in it. There wasn't any way to define him.

I thought he came off just right. Not as a villain, but simply as a person whose motivation was other than that of the others in the picture.

*A lot of the art in an Altman film derives from what some film lovers call the beauty of confusion. He allows all the actors to talk at once and over each other and sees what comes out of that. So did the final product differ much from your original script?*

Since it was Mr. Altman directing the movie, he gave me licence to an extent I daresay no other director would have. I

was making a lot of little changes day by day in the next day's shooting script. The actors tolerated this very well and to me, that was a great privilege. The movie is really very, very close to the script. There are a couple of little scenes where parts of them are improvised, but less than one might think. The acting is such that many things appear to be impromptu that simply are not. I have no idea how he usually works, but in this picture, because we needed to get it done in a very short amount of time, it sticks very closely to the script.

*When you first approached Altman, you were hoping he'd direct a movie based on Lake Wobegon.*

He just said he didn't want to make the movie I approached him about but he'd be interested in talking about something else. And he started talking about radio.

*And as he did that, what were you thinking? Was the spark instantaneous?*

Well, I thought I'd just trust him that there might be something there. I can't see it myself. Because I do the show, so on the surface of it, to write a screenplay about your own show seems to be self-serving. But I also thought, here is a chance to do something very interesting that I'd never done before.

*Before its release, much of the talk about the movie centred on its homespun nature and the comedy. But the movie seems very metaphysical, the reality and eventuality that everything comes to an end — your work, your life. Can you talk about developing that?*

The angel, played by Virginia Mad-

sen, came about in sort of a natural evolution. She started out as a sort of obsessive fan, who was a stalker and, um, I wasn't happy about that character, but I kept her in. And, um, she was off in the margins. And then from a stalker she became an angel. It seemed like a very natural, though sharp, right turn.

She became a benevolent angel of death who had been a listener to the show. I'm not sure of the theological ramifications of all this, but in any case it's my story and I'm sticking to it. Though she is the angel of death, she is perfectly benevolent. There could be no mistake about that. And that is how she is played.

*Do you sense, in a way, that you are the last of your breed?*

I don't feel that way.

*Outside of the Grand Ole Opry and you, what else like that goes on?*

I don't know what goes on, but the world is changing. I just finished teaching a course at the University of Minnesota on the composition of comedy. I had 140 students. This is something I did even though I don't have time. But I made time, and I've been spending the last five months hanging out with people who are 19 and 20 and who want to write comedy.

After that, I don't feel that I'm the last survivor of anything. I felt right in my element among them. I don't know how they will choose to exercise or develop their gifts, but you know the world is hospitable to comedy in whatever form it may come.

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