



Director Robert Altman, left, and radio personality Garrison Keillor discuss their oddball movie, 'A Prairie Home Companion,' a solid theatrical mini-hit.

Companions Altman, Keillor share 'Prairie Home' tales

LOS ANGELES (AP) — What was it that made "A Prairie Home Companion" such a quintessential Robert Altman movie that also captured the gabby spirit of the Garrison Keillor radio show on which it was based?

Maybe it's because when Altman and Keillor get together, they don't sound that different from the rambling raconteurs of the radio program and the chatty Altman characters who talk over one another's dialogue.

Altman and Keillor sat down with The Associated Press to discuss their oddball movie, a solid theatrical mini-hit that debuts today on DVD.

The cast includes Keillor as host of a fictionalized version of the radio show, along with Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Tommy Lee Jones, Lindsay Lohan, Lily Tomlin, Woody Harrelson, Virginia Madsen and John C. Reilly.

Debuting in 1974, the show airing on public radio stations features songs, jokes, gag commercials and Keillor's monologue about the make-believe town of Lake Wobegon.

Keillor, who wrote the screenplay, set the film on the show's last night as the St. Paul, Minn., radio station where it's produced is scheduled for demolition.

The story weaves in a supernatural element with Madsen's character, an angelic visitor from beyond.

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AP: What sort of movie did you originally have in mind?

Keillor: I had some morbid story that I wanted to do ...

Altman: About people sinking in a boat ...

Keillor: Something like that. So he listened to it. He didn't listen to it for very long. I think about 20 minutes, 15 minutes ...

Altman: That's a long time ...

Keillor: Ten, actually. And we got to the end of it, and he just didn't think it was anything he wanted to do. It would have been a Lake Wobegon movie. A small town where all the women are strong.

Altman: All the men are good-looking. I didn't want to get into a film where all the men were good-looking.

Keillor: It kind of limits your hand there, doesn't it?

Altman: Yeah. Puts me in a game I don't want to be in.

AP: So it sounds like you turned it back around at Garrison and said, "Why not do 'A Prairie Home Companion'?"

Altman: That's my exact quote. I said, "Why don't we do your show? Why don't we just do your show?"

Keillor: It was a terrible idea, but I managed to revise it to save him from the disaster it would have been if he had gone ahead as he wanted. He wanted to have a Lake Wobegon monologue in it, and he wanted to have actors reading off pieces of paper as we do in radio. ... I saved him from his path toward disaster.

Altman: Well, but I've been saved by all kinds of people.

AP: Who had the idea of adding the fantastical element with Virginia Madsen's character? (Altman and Keillor point to each other.) OK, I take it it was a pure collaboration?

Altman: Absolutely. This thing grew like top seed.

Keillor: He was an easy person to write for, because he doesn't go in for meetings.

Altman: I don't like meetings. Since we had the set lit and ready to shoot, when the script came in at that exact moment, I didn't want to stop and have a meeting. So we just went ahead and shot.

Keillor: He was easy to write for also because I don't think he ever really read the script.

Altman: Well, the script is not to be read.

Keillor: I would send it by e-mail attachment, and a couple of days would pass, and I'd get a response from him. He'd say, "This isn't bad." "I think you're on to something here."

Altman: I have a whole list of those.

Keillor: If I'd been in development with a studio — Disney, just to name one ...

Altman: I wouldn't have been there ...

Keillor: There would have been a 50-page memo, and it would have been filled with conflicting observations from 14 different people ...

Altman: Conflicting egos.

Keillor: "You need to pick it up a little bit at this point."

"We need a point of quiet reflection." "The arc of the story lags here."

"Where is the hero and the hero's wound?"

"Where's the challenge?"

Altman: We get all that.

Keillor: You must never have read Joseph Campbell.

Altman: Who's Joseph Campbell?

AP: Did you always expect Garrison to co-star?

Altman: It never occurred to me, doing this without Garrison in it.

Keillor: It occurred to me.

Altman: Then one of us becomes redundant.

Keillor: I thought they were in serious negotiations with George Clooney to play me, and I was all for that. That's why I had my character putting his pants on at the beginning of the movie. I thought it would be really interesting to have George Clooney pulling his pants on.

AP: How do you think Garrison really did as an actor?

Keillor: I'll leave the room if you want me to leave the room.

Altman: No, no, no, no.

Keillor: What he said at the time was, I was adequate. Marvelously adequate.

Altman: No, he served the purpose.

Keillor: Remind me to ask you for a blurb for my next book.

Altman: Do I have to read it?

Keillor: No.

Altman: Then I can give you the blurb, yes.