

Nick Prescott's Reviews

A Prairie Home Companion

Talent: Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Kevin Kline, Lindsay Lohan, Virginia Madsen, Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly, L. Q. Jones, Tommy Lee Jones.

Date of review: Thursday the 5th of October, 2006.

Writer/director/editor: Robert Altman

Classification: PG

Duration: 105 minutes

We rate it: Four stars.

Garrison Keillor's beloved "Midwestern radio show", *A Prairie Home Companion*, has been listened to by an avid fan-base for just on thirty years. As a gifted comic and articulate raconteur (not to mention a singer of quite some subtlety) Keillor acts as primary writer and host of this unusual show, a program that mixes shaggy-dog storytelling with musical interludes and ties it all together with Keillor's engaging spoken-word nods to sponsors and advertisers. *A Prairie Home Companion* is a curious beast, but it has remained a lively and much-loved part of the American radio landscape, and now Keillor has joined forces with one of his country's most accomplished and idiosyncratic filmmakers, Robert Altman, to bring the project to the cinema.

Altman, as famous for tackling unusual adaptations as he is for his gloriously exuberant ensemble movies, has for years built a kind of tapestry of American popular culture through films like *M*A*S*H*, *Short Cuts*, *The Player* and *Nashville*. The latter is the Altman film that most closely resembles *A Prairie Home Companion* in structure; *Nashville* brought one of the director's trademark weighty casts to work on a portrait of America, examining that country through its cult of celebrity and its country and western music. *A Prairie Home Companion* is a far more gentle and comic creation than 1975's *Nashville*, though it shares the earlier film's fascination with the enduringly popular country and western music that remains a Midwestern staple.

Garrison Keillor here plays Garrison Keillor, the creator and MC of the successful show. As the film opens and the show's cast prepares to hit the stage and go to air (the broadcast is to be recorded before a live theatre audience) we discover that an announcement is to be made: tonight's show will be *A Prairie Home Companion*'s last. Keillor is philosophical about this, but many of his regulars are not, and the company's strange security consultant, Guy Noir

(played by the ever-reliable Kevin Kline) seems both unable to deal with the demands of the evening, and utterly preoccupied with a mysterious trenchcoat-wearing woman who appears unbidden at the strangest moments. The scene is set for a memorable final show, and Altman follows both the onstage performances and the backstage antics with his usual panache and fluidity.

Seeing the accomplished cast put through its paces here is one of the film's great pleasures. Keillor's wry and lugubrious presence is frequently hilarious, and the singing talents demonstrated by the likes of Meryl Streep and, believe it or not, Lindsay Lohan, are quite remarkable. John C. Reilly and Woody Harrelson have an absolute ball as Dusty and Lefty, two caricature cowboys who sing dirty songs and tell wonderfully risqué jokes; and memorable supporting performances are contributed by L. Q. and Tommy Lee Jones. Like many of Altman's films, *A Prairie Home Companion* is a non-traditional piece of work; fluid in structure and observant without being beholden to convention, the film feels a lot like a night spent sipping a glass of wine and shooting the breeze. Funny, warm and whimsical, *A Prairie Home Companion* will warm many hearts.

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