



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# A Prairie Home Companion

‘Somewhere there’s another land, different from this world below... We shall never find that lovely land of might have been...’ So goes one of the Ivor Novello songs that make up the soundtrack, and the on-screen musical entertainment, of Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* (2001). The same vision emerges, turned in a more explicitly religious direction by a country-and-western rendering, in Altman’s last film *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006). There’s the two surviving Johnson Girls, Yolanda (Meryl Streep) and Rhonda (Lily Tomlin), remembering their family in song, ‘and I know there’s peace in the land of delight’, then a finale from the whole company of ‘In the Sweet By and By’, which evokes ‘a land that is fairer than this.’

Would Altman have found something appropriate, even comforting, in such a religious turn if he knew or suspected that this would be his last film? Possibly, although of course he’s been here before, 30 years ago, in country-and-western terms, and there’s nothing in this particular religious scheme that could be called personal. Altman was a Catholic by background, which has emerged most clearly in his urge to blaspheme (the Last Supper in *MASH*, 1969). In other films, he has chosen, if not exactly to worship elsewhere, then to use another place of worship as a community focus, a fixed architectural point in this land, perhaps pointing to that other.

The Presbyterian church bulks large in *A Prairie Home Companion*, literally; it’s one of only three buildings seen in this film, shot ‘entirely on location in St Paul, Minnesota’. Then there’s the Southern Presbyterian church where the Easter pageant is staged in *Cookie’s Fortune* (1998), leading back to the town of Presbyterian Church, fragile frontier outpost in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), in which said edifice is so prominent. And what denomination is its equally prominent counterpart in *Popeye* (1980)?

These churches’ significance, of course, is that they stand at the border of a region with no denomination at all. Death – whatever Altman suspected – permeates *A Prairie Home Companion*, which is also one of his most joyful films and one of the purest demonstrations of his narrative (or what is often assumed to be his anti-narrative) method. A bronze head of F. Scott Fitzgerald – St Paul’s most famous son presides in a glass booth at the top of the Fitzgerald Theatre, over what is a strange mixture of backstage musical, *film noir* parody and personal testament. This is a fictional re-enactment of the last broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion*, a long-running live radio show written and presented by local humorist Garrison Keillor.

So there’s death above, and death somehow worked into the design – in the beautiful execution of all the on-stage numbers, which exist in pools of light within an unusually deep and extensive area of darkness. And if death weren’t so much part of the fabric, then it’s unlikely the film could carry off its most difficult, theoretically unworkable and potentially ridiculous conceit. Which is to have the Angel of Death herself (Virginia Madsen) prowling backstage, circling the company, moving in on one of their number (L.Q. Jones), then after the

show is over gliding into Mickey's Diner, where she gives pause to the four principals who have been waxing hopeful about making their comeback.

Perhaps it helps that this is Death conceived in parodic terms, introduced through the narration of one Guy Noir (Kevin Kline), a private-eye who has taken charge of security at the Fitzgerald since falling on hard times (due to a lack of 'missing heiresses and dead tycoons'). Death first comes to him as a vision in a white trenchcoat – 'so white that rain would be embarrassed to fall on it' – and he directs her to the Presbyterian church. But she returns to the Fitzgerald – 'Presbyterians weren't who you were looking for?' – as if the theatre were church enough.

The doubleness of performance already suggests some alternative 'land of might have been', while theatrical realities conversely might put one in touch with eternal verities – 'It was curtains, and everybody knew it,' as Guy Noir pronounces, in best Sam Spade mode, talking about the imminent arrival from Texas of an executive known as 'The Axeman' Cruett (Tommy Lee Jones), representative of the corporation that now owns the Fitzgerald and intends to tear it down to make way for a parking lot. But having a good relationship with Death, hardboiled dame that she is, Guy Noir enlists her help, and before the night is out Cruett will also be sped on his way to 'another land'. Not that his end will avert the end of the Fitzgerald.

But parody (and visual gags involving light bulbs/haloes) aside, this Death does have her sting, a lyrical, longing one. By the time the cast have reached their ensemble performance of 'Red River Valley' it's possible to imagine New Hollywood Altman merging with the shade of Old Hollywood John Ford. In strictly Altmanesque terms, though, one might wonder at the role of these security guards – Guy Noir, the Fred Ward character in *The Player* (1992) – which is peripheral-seeming but still pressingly central, as they patrol the precincts of fantasy, keeping the players' noses clean.

Whether or not it's the entry to a 'land of delight', death is an inevitable and unavoidable kind of altered state. And while it's not exactly an uncommon occurrence in cinema as a whole, it has certain striking and peculiar functions in Altman. For one thing, it's an altered state that is often welcomed through suicide. 'Suicide is painless,' declares the title song of *MASH*, which later forms the basis for the Last Supper interlude. The suicide of Cookie (Patricia Neal) in *Cookie's Fortune* convulses her family, and Lola (Lindsay Lohan), Yolanda's disaffected teen daughter in *A Prairie Home Companion*, writes poetically about doing it to yourself with a car exhaust and hose pipe: 'Death is easy, like jumping in the big blue air and waving hello to God' or 'Don't expect to wake up and get toast for breakfast/The toast is you.' 'Suicide is painless' isn't in it.

**Richard Combs, *Sight & Sound*, February 2007**

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## A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

*Directed by:* Robert Altman  
*@:* Powdermilk Pictures, LLC  
*Production Companies:* Sandcastle 5 Productions, Prairie Home  
*Presented by:* GreeneStreet Films, River Road Productions  
*Distribution Advisory Services:* Cinetic Media  
*Executive Producers:* John Penotti, Fisher Stevens, William Pohlada, George Sheanshang  
*Co-executive Producers:* Frederick W. Green, Patty Payne Green, Gerard L. Cafesjian, Armenia Film Studio, John H. Stout  
*Producers:* Robert Altman, Wren Arthur, Joshua Astrachan, Tony Judge, David Levy  
*Associate Producer:* Lowell Dubrinsky  
*For Sandcastle 5: Production:* Timothy McDowell  
*For GreeneStreet Films: Head of Production:* Tim Williams  
*For Prairie Home Productions: General Manager:* Kate Gustafson Sanderson; *Technical Director:* Scott Rivard; *Stage Manager:* Albert Webster  
*Unit Production Manager:* Julie Hartley  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Christopher K. Grap  
*Production Accountant:* Maeve Mannion  
*For The Fitzgerald Theater: General Manager:* Brian G. Sanderson;  
*Production Manager:* Thomas Campbell  
*1st Assistant Director:* Vebe Borge  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Dave Halls  
*Script Supervisor:* Drucilla Carlson  
*Casting:* Pam Dixon Mickelson  
*Screenplay:* Garrison Keillor  
*Story by:* Garrison Keillor, Ken Lazebnik  
*Director of Photography:* Ed Lachman  
*Stage Lighting (Fitzgerald Theater):* Michael Wangen  
*Camera Operators:* Robert Reed Altman, Pete Biagi  
*Additional Camera Operator:* Michael St. Hilaire  
*1st Assistant Cameras:* Steve Speers, Julie Donovan  
*Additional 1st Assistant Camera:* David Schnack  
*2nd Assistant Cameras:* Randall Smith, Michael Lindquist  
*Gaffer:* John W. Deblau  
*Key Grip:* James McMillan  
*Still Photographer:* Melinda Sue Gordon  
*Special Effects:* Steve Hintz  
*Graphic Design:* Kelly Rae Hemenway  
*Editor:* Jacob Craycroft  
*On-line Editor:* Anthony Kounouklos  
*1st Assistant Editor:* Jane Rizzo  
*2nd Assistant Editor:* Matthew Giordano  
*Production Design:* Dina Goldman  
*Art Director:* Jeffrey Schoen  
*Art Department Co-ordinator:* S. Catrin Magnusson  
*Set Decorator:* Tora Peterson  
*Sign Writer:* Phil Vandevaart  
*Property Master:* Ben Barraud  
*Costumes:* Catherine Marie Thomas  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Mickey Carleton  
*Costume Supervisor:* Jane Myers-Williams  
*Make-up Artist/Department Head:* Kimberly Greene  
*Key Make-up Artist:* Natalie A. Hale  
*Hairstylist/Department Head:* Bridget Cook  
*Key Hairstylist:* Roxanne Wightman  
*Title Design by:* Big Film Design  
*(Designers:* Randall Balsmeyer, J. John Corbett)

*Digital Intermediate:* Technicolor New York  
*Lab Timer:* Don Ciana  
*Additional Musical Score:* Richard Dworsky  
*Additional Lyrics by:* Garrison Keillor  
*Music Conducted and Arranged by:* Richard Dworsky  
*Supervising Music Editor:* Annette Kudrak  
*Production Music Mixer:* Samuel Hudson  
*Post-music Mixers:* Samuel Hudson, Martin Czembor  
*Post-music Recordist:* Thomas Scheuzger  
*Production Sound:* Drew Kunin  
*Boom Operator:* Michael Primmer  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Michael Barry, Martin Czembor  
*Recordist:* John Sims  
*Re-recordist:* Terrance Laudermilch  
*Post-production Facility/Sound:* Sound One  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Eliza Paley  
*Sound Editors:* Dan Korintus, Mariusz Glabinski, Bruce Kitzmeyer  
*Sound Effects Recordist:* Michael De Mark  
*ADR Mixer:* Bobby Johanson  
*ADR Editor:* Gina R. Alfano  
*Foley Supervisor:* Andy Malcolm  
*Foley Artist:* Goro Koyama  
*Recording Foley Mixer:* Don White  
*Dolby Sound Consultant:* Steve F.B. Smith  
*Special Thanks:* Paul Thomas Anderson

## Cast

Marylouise Burke (*Evelyn, the lunch lady*)  
Woody Harrelson (*Dusty*)  
L.Q. Jones (*Chuck Akers*)  
Tommy Lee Jones (*the axeman*)  
Garrison Keillor (*Garrison Keillor, 'G.K.'*)  
Kevin Kline (*Guy Noir*)  
Lindsay Lohan (*Lola Johnson*)  
Virginia Madsen (*Asphodel, dangerous woman*)  
John C. Reilly (*Lefty*)  
Maya Rudolph (*Molly, assistant stage manager*)  
Tim Russell (*Al, stage manager*)  
Sue Scott (*Donna, makeup lady*)  
Meryl Streep (*Yolanda Johnson*)  
Lily Tomlin (*Rhonda Johnson*)  
Tom Keith (*himself, sound effects man*)  
Jearlyn Steele (*herself, gospel singer*)  
Robin Williams (*himself*)  
Linda Williams (*herself*)  
Prudence Johnson (*herself*)  
The Guys All-Star Shoe Band: Richard Dworsky (*piano/organ/bandleader*); Pat Donohue (*guitar*); Andy Stein (*violin/saxophone*); Gary Raynor (*bass*); Arnie Kinsella (*drums*); with featured musicians: Peter Ostroushko (*mandolin/fiddle*); Butch Thompson (*clarinet*)  
Christopher K. Grap (*axeman's chauffeur*)  
Debbie Delisi (*lobby usher*)  
Bob Douglas, Adam Granger, Bill Hinkley, John Koerner, Judy Larson, Dan Newton, Jon Pankake, Dick Rees, Becky Schlegel, Pop Wagner (*musician extras*)

USA 2006©

106 mins

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## ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

### A Prairie Home Companion

Sun 25 Jul 12:00; Sat 31 Jul 17:50

### Dr T & The Women

Mon 26 Jul 20:30

### Cookie's Fortune

Tue 27 Jul 17:40

### The Player

Wed 28 Jul 20:30

### The Company

Sat 31 Jul 11:50

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