

The last radio show

By [C. Clifton Black](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

Robert Altman's *A Prairie Home Companion* is such a deconstructionist's dream that you almost expect the late Jacques Derrida to make a cameo appearance. Talk about reality's insubstantiality: here we have the cinematic version of a beloved radio program, now over three decades old, whose sly conceits play on a homespun America that barely existed. "Real people" (Garrison Keillor, playing "G. K.," an addle-patted caricature of his radio persona) cavort on the actual stage of St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater with pure Keillor inventions, like private-eye Guy Noir (Kevin Kline, badly channeling Peter Sellers) and cowboys Dusty (Woody Harrelson) and Lefty (John C. Reilly). The closing crawl thanks "The Johnson Sisters" for use of their names, attached to characters that are never other than Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin, or at least the images they project. This is a movie so filled with self-referential winking that you could leave the Cineplex with a nervous tic.

This is a problem—perhaps it is a symptom—because *A Prairie Home Companion* is about death. The obvious end in view is that of a long-running radio show and the grand auditorium from which it has been broadcast. But death is everywhere: backstage, in a candlelit dressing room; in the arch poetry of a teenager (Lindsay Lohan) whose T-shirt proclaims, "Extinction is forever"; in the ethereal wandering of a beautiful yet Dangerous Woman (Virginia Madsen); in another character's comment, "Every show is your last show." Many who see *Companion* will realize, from last spring's Oscar telecast, that Altman, the octogenarian director, has just pumped out his 39th film on his second heart. Those who have read *Homegrown Democrat* (2004) will know that Keillor survived a heart attack some years ago. The last six minutes of the fictional show's demise occasions the debut of a new generation. The film's last three minutes credit Robert Reed Altman's camera operation and Jason Keillor's sound engineering. Never send to know toward whom the belle strolls. She strolls toward thee.

The movie doesn't gel, partly because its creators' trademarks call too much attention to themselves. Almost every take is a languorous pan—practically a spoof of an Altman movie. Save for some inspired, improvisational bursts, every character's speech sounds just like Keillor. The latter trait is arguably apt; the only

thing missing from “the show’s last, live broadcast” is the “News from Lake Wobegone.” The movie itself is that surrogate monologue. It’s pretty good Keillor—tuneful shaggy doggerel—and middling Altman—sweet *Nashville*. That may leave either artist’s diehard fans dissatisfied. It may also extend the reach of both to a wider audience, who can assuredly find coarser ways of whiling away the summer.