IN two of the most attractive American films of the year, *Junebug* and *A Prairie Home Companion*, this popular hymn by Will Thompson is sung without a trace of affectation or condescension. The surprising incidence of the hymn in films released here within weeks of each other is not, I think, indicative of religious revivalism at work in American cinema. If they have anything broader in common, it is that they are essentially modest treats, films that make one grateful for their kindly but rigorous interest in intersecting lives.

As well as enjoying widespread critical acclaim, *Junebug* has been a surprise commercial hit in Melbourne, suggesting that quality, like blood, will out, and that word of mouth can do the work of the aggressive publicity that accompanies the 'big' films. Despite a title that gives nothing away and may even seem off-putting,
it ran for three months or so in several cinemas. As for *A Prairie Home Companion*, everyone seems to like it. Its success is less surprising: it's a Robert Altman film (his last, as it sadly transpires) and it stars Meryl Streep and other well-known people. Together these two films remind one of what a humanist medium the cinema can sometimes be, of how, in among the expensive claptrap that occupies so much screen time, films of humane orientation can still claim our attention.

The informing scenario for *Junebug* is that of the family reunion or the clash of cultures when a newcomer is introduced into the family circle. This template has been a narrative stalwart of films at least from *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), where it was played for hilarious comedy and, finally, sentiment. More recently, it was the subject of the mildly engaging *Meet the Parents* (2000) and its unspeakable sequel *Meet the Fockers* (2004), and the crudely schematic *The Family Stone* (2006). In *Junebug*, elegant, sophisticated English Madeleine (Embeth Davidtz) runs an 'Outsider's Gallery' in Chicago, meets there and falls for the handsome and agreeable George (Alessandro Nivola). They marry fast and happily, without her having met his folks in North Carolina. By chance, she wants to meet a cranky old artist there and suggests they combine this with a visit to his family. The scene is set, we suspect, for a lot of more or less predictable comedy or melodrama but nothing happens as expected. The template keeps sliding.

The family consists of a somewhat dour, dominant mother, Peg (Celia Weston); a peaceable father, Eugene (Scott Wilson of *In Cold Blood* fame); a boorish, sullen younger son, Johnny (Ben MacKenzie), unexcited by his brother's return; and his very pregnant chatterbox wife Ashley (Oscar nominee Amy Adams). The film refuses to patronise these lower-middle-class people and equally it doesn't want to make Madeleine seem patronising. She seriously tries to get along with them. 'I'll be fine,' she's assured George. Tiny moments like the one when, on first meeting, she goes to kiss Peg first on one cheek, then in sophisticated continental style on the other, and Peg is not quite ready for this, thinking they've finished kissing, epitomise the care and subtlety of the film. The merest tremor of Peg's eyes is all that is needed to register that she and Madeleine will have some awkward territory to negotiate together. Ashley thinks she and Madeleine are going to be buddies and they aren't, but again the film doesn't criticise either—Ashley isn't just pushy, she is also genuinely sweet-tempered; Madeleine isn't just reserved, she's a little bewildered at being so far off her usual turf. Again without being an urban tough cookie, Madeleine is shown as willing to compromise her integrity in dealing with the anti-Semitic artist, and we're not invited to condemn her for this.
The film is full of episodes that speak of its humanity and perceptive observation. For instance, the church social where George joins some old friends to sing the Thompson hymn is done with exquisite tact, as Madeleine is stirred to review the man she loves and has married. Later, when Ashley has had a miscarriage, there is a beautifully written and acted scene between her and George when he visits her in hospital. And there's the scene at Replacements Ltd where seething Johnny works and where, away from the constraints of home and of imminent fatherhood, he is a quite different person. And at the end what passes for closure is really a matter of signalling continuities. As Madeleine and George drive away, she gently strokes the back of his neck, and one recalls the sensual gropings they engaged in on the drive down south. Distance has been traversed, and director Phil Morrison seems unerringly to know how much 'information' we need and want on all these occasions.

If the narrative impresses by never taking any of the obvious, clichéd paths, the camera on the other hand behaves with the most perfect discretion; again and again one anticipates its next move, not because it's conventional but because it seems so right. You hope it's going to light on this or that face, or you hope it will stay on this figure who's moving away—like the close-lipped neighbour who is not sure how to respond to Madeleine's graceful wave across the street. And the acting is as near perfect as makes no matter. Davidtz and Nivola convey the sensuality of the newly married couple and are just as convincing at the end when this has been tempered by a gentler understanding. The parents and Johnny are immaculately detailed, drawn with a kind of minimalism that says a great deal about them, and from Amy Adams is a heartbreaking performance of reckless good nature.

IN *A Prairie Home Companion*, Thompson's hymn is sung backstage at the Fitzgerald Theatre, St Paul, Minnesota, by Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin as Yolanda and Rhonda, the two still-performing members of the Johnson Sisters quartet. What the episode does is to confirm our sense of the bond between these sisters, Streep the simpler and softer of the two, Tomlin more forceful, but united in their loving recollections of their mother and their home and in their devotion to Streep's bespectacled, poetry-inclined daughter Lola (Lindsay Lohan). The occasion for all this is the putative last night of Garrison Keillor's well-loved radio program of the same name as the film. Fiction blurs with reality here: this is a real program on public radio in the United States, broadcast in Australia for a while on ABC Classic FM, and still a going concern. The 'last night' device is presumably there in the
film partly to give some shape to the loosely connected moments that constitute its 'plot' as it meanders on and off stage, and, perhaps more important, to underline the elegiac aspect of the film.

This element of elegy works on several levels. For one thing, Robert Altman, just deceased, was already into his eighties when he made the film and for those of us who have loved his films there was a question of how many more he will be able to deliver. For another, the days when radio could muster huge audiences, let alone when audiences would gladly fill a theatre every Saturday night to watch a 'live' radio show, are surely numbered. The film gives off a poignant air of catch-this-while-you-can. It invites our contemplation for the passing of time, for the way things valued are always fleeing and fleeting. At the same time, it enjoins on its viewers the need to value what they have, even as they are aware of the inevitability (and even imminence) of its passing, and not to be fearful of endings. If this sounds solemn, it's not meant to: this is a hugely enjoyable movie that just happens to touch on—well, matters of life and death.

Altman made more ambitious films—think of *Nashville* (1974) or *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), *A Wedding* (1978), *Short Cuts* (1993) and *Gosford Park* (2002), among others—films that revel in multi-story plotting, taking on big issues such as the anti-war stance of *M.A.S.H.* (1970), or reworking classic genres such as the Western in *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1972) and the 'hardboiled' Raymond Chandler thriller in *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Yet none of his delectable oeuvre is more enchanting than his last offering. The sheer warmth of his affection for the small world on display here is irresistible, and so, mirrored here in the activities of the radio station, is the wonderful sense of collaborativeness that always marked his films. *A Prairie Home Companion* is a mellow joy from an indisputably great director.

Keillor, who plays himself or someone simply called GK, holds his radio show together by an endless capacity for improvisation, important when his assistant stage manager drops all the material in her frantic effort to find the right sheets for him. His is an engagingly low-key persona; he keeps his head, just, while various kinds of crisis are happening backstage. Though backstage isn't just a crisis scene: it is also the place where relationships have been forged (such as that of the food lady and the elderly Chuck, who dies quietly in his dressing-room) or where the Johnson sisters idly and warmly reminisce or where the two dirty-minded 'cowboys' Dusty and Lefty (Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly) swap anecdotes and jokes.

GK's program, first heard on a car radio travelling somewhere in the Midwest, is an amalgam of country and western songs, comedy and advertising, and it all
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takes place in front of a frame-house set, before which the actual band from the
radio show does its stuff with great panache. Some of the singers are also from the
real show: Robin and Linda Williams, who do several country songs in fine style
(‘Old Plank Road’, ‘You’ve Been a Friend to Me’ and others); and gospel singer
Jearlyn Steele (‘The Day is Short’). The others, including Streep, Tomlin, Lohan,
Harrelson and Reilly, do their own singing, and very exhilarating it is. Yolanda and
Rhonda, in contrast to the tender simplicity of the backstage hymn, give a rousing
version of ‘Swanee River’ with the words somewhat adapted; Lola, casting aside
her suicide-dominated poems for the moment, steps in with a vigorous ‘Frankie
and Johnny’; and the whole cast gathers for ‘Red River Valley’ and ‘In the Sweet
By and By’ at the film’s end. The songs are a potent factor in the film’s appeal: whether
singers or actors, the cast throw themselves into the numbers as if it matters to
them to woo the audience in the imagined theatre, let alone us in the cinema.

Backstage, other things are going on too. The security guard, Guy Noir (Kevin
Kline), who has delusions of Chandleresque grandeur though he’s as accident-
prone as Inspector Clouseau, copes with the routine by living at least partly in his
imagination. Who then is the mysterious woman in a white raincoat (played by
Virginia Madsen) who wanders into the theatre and seems to have easy access to
the circle or to the corridors behind the stage or to the onstage house-set? Noir-
addicted Guy obviously thinks she’s going to prove to be Jane Greer from Out of
the Past or some other dangerous lady from 1940s Hollywood. Well, she is and she
isn’t dangerous: she may be the angel of death and she certainly sends the take-
over man (Tommy Lee Jones) on his way to a timely accident; but it’s not her
function to get people scared. ‘I used to listen to your program till I died,’ she tells
Keillor, and she seems almost to be bestowing benison as she moves softly around.

In the film’s last scene, set in Micky’s Diner opposite the theatre and reminis-
cent of the diner in that famous Edward Hopper painting, Yolanda and Rhonda,
GK and Guy talk about taking the show on the road. The woman in white is still
hovering; Lola has become a smart business woman in a suit; but lest you think the
film is going to finish on a downbeat note Altman brings the whole cast back to
sing again, and with such a robust joy in the act of performing that no mere theatre
closure could extinguish. Like Junebug, Altman’s film, in its way, insists on contin-
uality. If it is an elegy for times passing it is also a gentle celebration of the same.

THE third of our modest treats in recent months is Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont,
adapted from the novel by Elizabeth Taylor (not the diamond collectress). Technically
an American film with an American director (Dan Ireland), it is in
all other creative aspects about as British as could be: its locations are entirely English and its cast is a roll-call of British character acting. Taylor's novel is a rigorous and unsentimental account of an elderly woman who goes to live in a cut-above-genteel private hotel where everyone dines at Rattigan-style separate tables. She falls in the street one day and is rescued by a young man struggling to be a writer and an unlikely but touching friendship ensues. Ireland's film follows this outline more or less closely but, at certain points and in certain ways, can't help softening the story's edges.

What is nevertheless impressive is that the film has confidence in the idea of such a relationship as the centre of its narrative. Certainly it has the advantage of a very finely eloquent, subtly understood and felt performance from Joan Plowright as the elderly widow: she has adequate means but is concerned about how to fill her days. Plowright has sometimes in recent years given way to grande-damehood, but not here. The nuances of the woman fetching up among people with whom she has little in common, tentatively feeling her way in her new surroundings, finding an affection for the rescuing Ludo that neither her daughter nor her grandson can excite, dealing with the brusque attentions of the hotel's male guest who invites her to a Masonic Ladies' night: all this is precisely observed and full of the kind of detail that acts as a guarantee of the authenticity of what we are seeing.

Ludo (Rupert Friend), a handsome young man, is kitted out with a much more likeable girlfriend than Taylor had astringently allotted him and this undermines the toughness of the central concept, as if the film is anxious for us to see Ludo as a real charmer. Without in the least yearning for 'fidelity' to the original, I think it would have strengthened the film's core to have retained some of the novel's reservations about both Mrs Palfrey and Ludo—and some of theirs about each other.

The scenes at the hotel, with the other permanent guests eying the newcomer, almost forcing Mrs Palfrey into passing Ludo off as her (neglectful) grandson Desmond and pushing her into unaccustomed deceit, are played for slightly broader comedy than Taylor chose to employ. This, though, is only a minor quibble, and, when one knows that these guests are played by the likes of Anna Massey, Millicent Martin, Georgina Hale and Robert Lang, the quibble is further diminished. It is a film that assumes that what goes on between people is about the most interesting narrative topic to be had.

WHEN you feel most movies are being made for people under twenty-five (and that may be stretching the upper limit), it's heartening to note that there is still a
steady stream of films that, often on comparatively small budgets, seem to be made entirely for grown-ups. These are films where you don't have to cut your way through the comic-strip foreground on the off chance that there may be lurking beneath or beyond something adult or 'dark' as critics are fond of saying in justifying these big jobs. In the line of other recent modest treats, such as Winter Solstice and The Squid and the Whale, Junebug, A Prairie Home Companion and Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont are films that seem adult all through.