

It's a Rush for Fans to Visit 'A Prairie Home Companion'

Radio • People brave extreme weather to line up early for choice seats to Garrison Keillor's live variety show.

By ROBERT K. ELDER
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ST. PAUL, Minn.—As early as 11 a.m. they start coming, clad in parkas and other winter wear. By midafternoon, more than 200 people are gathered in the autumn chill, forming a line that wraps around the Fitzgerald Theater. They sit, snuggled in blankets, in lawn chairs or on the cold, gray sidewalk.

"They are like ice fishermen, they thrive on adversity," said Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion," the live radio show these dedicated souls in the rush line are waiting to see. During any given season, some fans wait more than five hours in extreme weather, just for a chance to buy a rush ticket—with odds not unlike ice fishing.

Now in its 26th year, author Keillor's variety show, heard by 2.7 million listeners worldwide, is one of the hottest tickets in town. Radiophiles tune in every weekend to hear "Prairie Home's" mix of music, comedy serials such as "Guy Noir, Private Eye" and Keillor's wandering monologue about small-town life in the "News From Lake Wobegon."

But because Minnesota Public Radio members have first crack at tickets, which abruptly sell out, nonmembers are left out in the cold—literally. And you thought Minnesota Vikings tickets were hard to get.

But then again, Vikings tickets don't allow you to sit on the field. Those with "Prairie Home" rush tickets are seated on stage, and in the front row, right in the thick of the action. The rush line was adopted in 1994, to allow out-of-towners and non-MPR members a chance to see the show from exclusive seats.

This Saturday morning, sisters Betty and Peggy Marshall have claimed the pole position. The sisters, both in their late 50s, took a detour on Amtrak to see the show on their way to Seattle. They



CAROLYN KASTER / For The Times

In its 26th year, Garrison Keillor's variety show is hot ticket in St. Paul.

started the line just before 11 a.m. and have six hours to wait before curtain time.

"It's something we've heard over the course of many years. My sister and I tune in when we're together; it's sort of a nostalgic thing," said Betty, who now runs a hotel and art gallery in the Dominican Republic. She met her sister in Tennessee, where the two grew up, before striking out on their cross-country vacation.

"The charm of the show is the down-to-earth, quirky type of humor [Keillor] has. It's wholesome and sort of connects you with a different time and place."

Carl Hines, a Minneapolis native waiting in line with his wife, Mary, added: "It's like going back in time a little bit, to a simpler life—like we wish life would be."

Through snow, rain, sleet and blizzards, these die-hard fans from near and far brave weather that would send most postal carriers packing, just for a chance to see the show. It's also not uncommon to see people camped out in tents the night before the performance.

"It's a lovely phenomenon. I just don't want them to suffer," Keillor said. "I was practically in tears one time, seeing people huddled on that sidewalk with snow falling."

Katie Burger, event services manager for "Prairie Home," said some out-of-town patrons actually attempt bribery. "Even today, someone tried to slip us a \$20 bill," Burger said. Others have more subtle approaches, like paying people to stand in line for them or buying tickets through relatives who are MPR members.

Friends Brian Murphy, 37, and Liz Ellis, 31, from Minneapolis, sit wrapped up in a flowery bedspread, chiseling away the hours with magazines. Strangely, however, both are already MPR members but like the "adventure" of the rush line.

"Sometimes the journey is as fun as the destination," Ellis said. "It's a live radio show, and especially in our current media age, it's an art form that's less and less common."

"A Prairie Home Companion" remains a rare bird in an endangered species of radio entertainment. A few shows such as "Michael Feldman's 'Whad'Ya Know?'" and "West Coast Live" include audiences in their broadcasts, but these shows are a minority in FM broadcasting.

Many potential audience members come from out of state, not knowing whether they'll be able to purchase a ticket. Vaughn Harris, a 30ish corporate real estate agent, flew up from Nashville for the sole purpose of seeing his favorite author.

Gunter Seefeldt, a Swedish senior citizen who has lived in California the last 41 years, tried five times to get tickets over the phone. He has listened to "Prairie Home" from as far away as Japan, but this will be his first time seeing the show in person—if he gets in.

"I think [Keillor] reflects the soul of America," Seefeldt said. "There is so much superficiality here in our society, particularly with us in California. We don't know anymore what the substance of this very country is all about. I think he hits it."

Gabe Carr, 20, played cards with fellow college mates Kathleen Cook, 20, and Adam Cohen, 18. Cohen has never heard the show and has never waited four hours to see anything.

"It's part of the culture. I'm from New York, where public radio really isn't that big, so it's a good experience to understand the Midwest culture."

Carr, who talked Cohen into seeing the show, added: "It's one of the last remaining bastions of the Midwest culture."

Vicki Duraine, 44, a native Minnesotan, has listened to the show for 15 years from Arizona, where she lives.

"Living in Tucson is a far cry from Minnesota, so I come back

here every Saturday . . . while listening to the radio," Duraine said.

A recent graduate of the University of Arizona's English program, Duraine made a special trip to see "Prairie Home," after making several e-mail requests for tickets. MPR sent back automated replies advising her to get in the rush line early.

"It's a tough ticket because we play in a small theater. I don't think there's another way," Keillor said. "I wish we didn't have a preference for MPR members, but it's a corporate thing that goes way back when the ticket was not a hot item, whatsoever. But it's a fight that we fight and lose within our corporation. We just have to keep fighting it."

• In Southern California, "A Prairie Home Companion" airs Saturdays at 6 p.m. on KPCC-FM (89.3) and KUSC-FM (91.5).

During that particular incident, Keillor lobbied for fans to be let into the building, a practice the theater has continued at times of severe weather.

"The rush line is a source of guilt to me every Saturday," Keillor said. "I drive in on Exchange Street every Saturday, and I see them there standing on the corner—it's like something out of a Depression photograph."

The atmosphere on Exchange Street is anything but depressing. Quite the opposite, in fact. There's a friendly community atmosphere, and a scene straight off a Norman Rockwell painting. Mingling accents from different states and countries talk about the weather—which is unseasonably warm today—and people hold one another's place in line during food runs and bathroom breaks. There is, however, some tension as to how many of them will get in.

The average number of rush tickets released is 70, although that number fluctuates with available space, and each person in line is allowed to buy two \$10 tickets. The theater itself only holds 1,100, and shows have been sold out since the early '90s. Often, one-half to two-thirds of those waiting are turned away.

Sumptuous THE PLAYERS
Blithe Spirit
by Noel Coward
Winged by Call for Change 800-233-3123
PASADENA PLAYHOUSE
THEATRE OF CALIFORNIA

MURDER MYSTERY
DINNERS
FRI. & SAT.
Weekends Monday
818-785-7700
310-836-7700
www.murdermystery.com

"AN ABSOLUTE HOOT!"
ENNIO
A UNIQUE THEATRICAL EVENT
BOX OFFICE 310.208.5454
213.365.3500
GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

"RIVETING & BURNS UP THE STAGE."
PASADENA PLAYHOUSE
Closer
by Patrick Marber
PAY WHAT YOU CAN
Wed, Nov 22 at 8pm
Available at the Box Office on day of performance for cash only. 2 tickets max per person. Box Office opens at 12 noon. Limited availability.
MARK TAPER FORUM 213.628.2772

SPECIAL HOLIDAY PERFORMANCE!
THANKSGIVING THURS. 11/23 at 8 PM
ALL SEATS \$25
W/ CANNED FOOD DONATION
Tonight at 8

"IS THIS ANY WAY TO TREAT A MEMBER OF THE DINER'S CLUB?"
"80 minutes of bitchy fun!"
CRITIC'S CHOICE - L.A. TIMES
FULLY COMMITTED
THANKSGIVING THURS 11/23 at 8
ALL TIX \$25 w/canned food donation
213.365.3500
CORONET THEATRE 310.657.7377
ONLINE TIX: WWW.FULLYCOMMITTED.COM