

Wednesday, Feb. 21, 2001

The Capital Times

# Teaching humor is no joke

## 'Prairie Home' laugh meister at head of class

By Chuck Haga

Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune  
MINNEAPOLIS — Professor Garrison Keillor summoned Melissa Schultz to the front of the class one recent Tuesday.

As the slight young woman read her assignment — a burlesque treatment of a piece of holy scripture — the professor hovered nearby, tall and judging, gravely intent on the words.

As Schultz finished, her classmates responded with laughter and applause. She smiled, then looked to the teacher.

"Perfection!" he said.

It must be a quiet winter in Lake Wobegon. Keillor has gone back to the University of Minnesota, this time as a teacher. The course is Composition of Comedy, and the syllabus includes such topics as timing, caricature and hyperbole.

And burlesque, as in Schultz's treatment of the parable of the prodigal son:

Jesus spake unto his disciples saying, "A certain man had two sons.

"And the younger of the sons went to his father and said, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. I will take them and travel unto the Twin Cities, where I shall make merry with strange people and finance expensive body art and sleep through my classes until they are nigh over.' And the father said unto his son, 'No.' And that was the end of all that nonsense."

"I read this over the phone to people in distant places, and they all laughed out loud," Keillor said.

"How much rewriting had she done?" he asked.

None?

This was her first draft?

She nodded.

"I'm beginning to hate you," he said.

On the first day of class last month, Keillor invited the 80 students to describe him in a humorous way.

One offered that he was a cross between Julia Child and Mick Jagger.

Another said he sounded like Jimmy Stewart on Valium.



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Garrison Keillor lectures to a class on humor he's teaching this semester at his alma mater, the University of Minnesota.

"I believe in comedy as a humane art and as a profound craft," Keillor told the students, "despite the fact it is considered by most academics as a sort of bastard stepchild of literature, to be kept in the basement and fed cold cereal."

Those critics "are unable to write funny," he said, "and this is why they despise it."

That Tuesday's two-hour class — in a physically humorless physics lab — was standing-room-only.

"He's funny," said Katrina Woods, 21, an English major from Springfield, Mo., who persuaded a friend — a music major — to sign up for the course with her. "He breaks into stories as he's talking about writing."

She was born in Minneapolis, and her parents have told her that she "first saw Garrison Keillor live" when she was 1. She doesn't remember, but her family listens regularly to his "Prairie Home Companion" show on public radio and thinks wistfully of Minnesota.

"He's brought in a lot of practical tools for us to work on" to write with more humor, Woods said. "Listening to him here, you appreciate that what he does on radio is very well crafted. How he does it is inspiring."

As a lecturer, Keillor is informal, engaging like a good minister, and prone to wander — not unlike the man who gives the news from Lake Wobegon.

He was encouraging to the students, but not above tweaking them on their spelling.

"I love and admire the work you've done so far," he said. "A great many of you made me laugh out loud on Sunday. I'm not an easy audience. And I don't usually laugh on Sunday."

About a dozen students were asked to read their burlesques of holy text because something — a rhythmic line, a metaphor, a deliberately chosen word — struck Keillor as creative.

"Some were promising but went off the track," he said. "Others struck me as deeply odd."

But many pieces "bear evidence of a lot of delicate weighing of options. If we were a smaller group, we would sit and discuss and tinker with each one. This is how comedy is created — this delicate piecework, working with the weight of things, the sound of things, the cadences."

The course was Keillor's idea. Julie Shoemaker, director of the English Department's creative writing program, said it grew out of an earlier contribution.

Keillor had asked her last year whether she could "find a dozen undergrad poets so he could invite them to his house for dinner," she said. "He made a wonderful meal for them, and he had them read their poetry aloud. It was close to Valentine's Day, so they were poems of love. He was extremely generous in what he said about the poems."

Keillor told her that when he was a student at the university in the 1960s, a writing profes-

sor invited him to his house for dinner and asked him to read his poetry.

"That made a huge impression on him," Shoemaker said. "It was one of the best things that happened to him at the 'U.'"

After that dinner, Keillor offered to teach a class.

"We suggested a small class, maybe 15 people, graduate students and advanced undergraduates," she said. "He said no, he wanted at least 80, all undergrad. The class filled immediately."

Keillor is not being paid.

"We offered him something more generous than what we usually pay," Shoemaker said, "but he said he had no experience as a teacher, and he didn't want the money."

Because Keillor has other commitments that will cause him to miss a class or two, he has a co-teacher: Shannon Olson, a novelist and author of "Welcome to My Planet: Where English Is Sometimes Spoken."

It's not the first time Keillor has returned to campus to champion his alma mater. In 1992, he delivered a no-fee speech to an alumni gathering in which he described the university as "one of the glories of this state." The testimonial was used in radio and TV ads.

Keillor's assignment for next week's class: Write a letter of dismissal to a true love.

Jim Brunzell, 22, an English major from White Bear Lake, said that he enjoys hearing Keillor lecture on writing and where he gets his material.

"He jokes around in class quite a bit," he said. "Sometimes we're not sure if he's serious. He says something and two people laugh, but the rest aren't sure."

"And sometimes he doesn't understand (us). He'll read a piece and not understand a word, but all the students laugh."

Biggest lesson so far?

"That comedy is logical," Brunzell said. "It's not chaos."