

Keillor reflects on 30 years of 'Companion'

By Frazier Moore

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NEW YORK — A key to storytelling is a sense of place.

TV viewers know this, whether they're visiting placid Mayberry or wallowing in the debauchery of Wisteria Lane.

But radio can create a sense of place that's all the more vivid for its absence of visual form. Just ask fans of "A Prairie Home Companion," which for 30 years has transported them to the realer-than-real haven of Lake Wobegon, Minn., courtesy of host Garrison Keillor, its enduring bard.

No plasma screen is needed to enjoy the hi-def experience Keillor invokes live for two hours every weekend on nearly 600 public radio stations. (It airs locally on Wisconsin Public Radio from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday on WERN/FM 88.7.)

But among 4 million "Prairie Home Companion" listeners, quite a number by now might be reasonably interested in putting a face to Keillor's euphonic voice, and to get a look at how he and his troupe stage this music-and-humor show each week.

Offering such a glimpse is "The 30th Broadcast Season Celebration" DVD, which captures in sound and in video, too, the show's anniversary edition as it took place last summer from St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater, longtime "Prairie Home Companion" home.

Keillor would be pleased if you ordered this DVD, though, to be honest, he hasn't seen it. "Except some baseball, I haven't watched television in 20 years," he explains.

Why then would he make an exception to watch, of all things, himself?



Radio humorist Garrison Keillor is seen here outside his home in St. Paul, Minn.

"Anything that's visual is really fixed in time. But the audio medium is very, very fluid," he muses over fried eggs, corned beef hash and home fries in a Manhattan coffee shop one recent morning. "In late middle age, which is where I am now," says the 62-year-old Keillor in his unhurried cadence, "you start coming around to the certain burden of what you've done before. But in radio, no. You are perpetually starting over new, in radio. I don't know what I'm talking about, but these are really good potatoes."

A fine breakfast indeed, conceivably improvable only by Powdernilk Biscuits, one of the mythical "Prairie Home Companion" sponsors which, as Keillor has told his listeners too many times to count, "gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

If Keillor isn't one of those shy people, he surely represents them. Raised in Anoka, Minn., a small town outside Minneapolis, he embodies heartland reserve, even while shrewdly amused by it in others. His bulldogish face prefers a deadpan expression. He reacts with discomfort at praise

for his work, dismissing it as "a man talking slow."

Already a staffer at Minnesota Public Radio, Keillor unveiled "A Prairie Home Companion" on July 6, 1974. The show's format and folksy flavor were inspired by "Grand Ole Opry" radiocasts of yore. But, as time and a devoted following have demonstrated, "A Prairie Home Companion" is no knockoff or parody, but one of a kind, and evergreen.

Keillor insists there's no formula to the program, which went national in 1980.

"Formula would ascribe too much planning, it would make it seem rational," he argues, "which it's not. It's intuitive."

"The show is an evolution of a number of different radio genres: a musical-variety show" — whose rustic pickers and fiddlers join luminaries like Willie Nelson and opera soprano Renée Fleming — "combined with elements of sketch comedy, and then a little section of verbal meandering."

And what of that "verbal meandering"? Better known as "the news from Lake Wobegon," each 20-minute monologue melds currency with timelessness as Keillor channels the likes of Thornton Wilder and Mark Twain in his sonorous, ear-massaging baritone.

It is compiled during the week leading up to each broadcast, Keillor says, from things he thinks about or stumbles across. He is nourished by proximity to his make-believe community: He lives in St. Paul with his third wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and their 7-year-old daughter.

Then, come airtime, he shines his observations through the prism of Lake Wobegon, where, as he always concludes, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

In performance, each edition of the "news" is a masterfully crafted set piece which nonetheless sounds for all the world like it's off the cuff. Although Keillor says he writes the whole thing out beforehand, viewers of the DVD will see he works without notes.

"No, no, you don't need that," he declares. "Anything you put down on paper you will remember — you will!"

Along with the monologue,

Keillor writes much of the rest of the show, all on top of his performing demands.

"It's a difficult thing, year after year after year," he concedes. "But what keeps a person going is the thought, the knowledge, that you haven't done the show yet that you wanted to do."

In his first flush of stardom (he had even scored a Time magazine cover), Keillor quit the show in 1987 to flee Minnesota and concentrate on the literary life (he has written a dozen books of both fiction and nonfiction, and for a time was a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine).

But within two years he had started another radio show, this one based in New York City (where he still keeps a home).

Then in 1992, he returned to St. Paul and, a year after that, "A Prairie Home Companion" was back on the air.

"It was a man making a terrible mistake," he says of his original defection. "I was really worn out, run-down. Never make decisions when you're tired."

How much longer will he do the show?

"I think I have a couple more years," says Keillor. But instead of years from now, his mind is on the next show bearing down on him, and he shares a bulletin from somewhere near Lake Wobegon: "Tend to business. Do what it is you do. And don't get carried away."

On the Net: <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org>