

Prairie Home on the change: Radio show leaving Fitz for now

- Garrison Keillor's show is negotiating for several other venues.

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It's like taking the lake out of Lake Wobegon. Garrison Keillor is moving "A Prairie Home Companion" from its St. Paul home, the Fitzgerald Theater, for the next year, and maybe longer.

"We have no plans to do the Fitz after January 1 in the current season," Keillor said Wednesday of the theater that Minnesota Public Radio bought for the show in 1980, and where the "PHC" movie was filmed this summer. "The fall of 2006 remains an open question," he added. "Our

2006-2007 season is an utter blank; I have no idea where we'll be or what we'll be doing."

"PHC" is negotiating to broadcast several shows from the Ted Mann Concert Hall on the West Bank campus of the University of Minnesota and from the State and Orpheum theaters in downtown Minneapolis, as well as several locations around the region, he said.

The only scheduled show at the Fitzgerald is set for New Year's Eve.

Companion continues: It will be the show's first move since 1991. **A13 ▶**



Melinda Sue Gordon-Noir Productions Inc.

The scene on the "Prairie Home Companion" set at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul during a Saturday rehearsal. Keillor is considering several other locations, including downtown Minneapolis.

'Prairie Home Companion' to move

COMPANION FROM AI « I'D LOVE TO TAKE IT TO THE U.K. FOR A YEAR.

« There are no plans to return to the Fitzgerald in 2006," said playbills from recent shows.

This would mark the first time that St. Paul has not played permanent host to Keillor's show since he returned in 1992 after a five-year absence. The departure of St. Paul's biggest star also puts a damper on the city's drive to bring in more entertainment.

Muddled motives

Trying to determine the exact reason for the move is as murky as a Guy Noir mystery. Theories abound.

Minnesota Public Radio executive Sarah Lutman was given authority over all programming in August. Soon thereafter, longtime Fitzgerald manager Brian Sanderson, whose wife works on Keillor's staff, left his position after 18 years with MPR. Keillor also may want to tour more widely to help publicize his upcoming movie. There are noisy renovations going on at the building abutting the Fitz.

Whether any of these actually prompted the change is unclear. Only Keillor and MPR chief Bill Kling would speak for the record, via e-mail.

Kling said the show "makes its own decisions about when and where to perform. Sometimes it makes sense to use a large venue like the State Fair, sometimes a younger venue like Ted Mann, sometimes a bigger venue like the Orpheum."

He said the Fitzgerald will fill the gap with more concert events for MPR's new station

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Garrison Keillor

the Current (89.3 FM), plus other musical and theatrical performances, lectures and community events.

In his e-mail, Keillor professed to "love the Fitz" but added, "It's been a long time since we've done shows in downtown Minneapolis. 'PHC' is a radio show and can originate anywhere and needs to move around.

"I'd love to take it to the U.K. for a year. People there look on Lake Wobegon as a fabulous and mysterious place, just as I do. My old aunts and uncles are giants to me, and they're who I tell stories about, but the stories maybe don't float so well here at home."

He emphasized that "retirement is not on my mind."

The 95-year-old, 996-seat Fitzgerald was known as the World when it began serving as home base to "Prairie Home" in 1978. (At Keillor's request, the name was changed to honor native son F. Scott Fitzgerald.) Before that, the show bounced around various venues, including Macalester College, Walker Church in south Minneapolis and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

Since MPR bought and renovated the Exchange St. theater, it has been considered an

important part of the organization. Even MPR's recent expansion was tied to the Fitz — officials reportedly didn't want to relocate too far away.

"Prairie Home Companion" broadcast from the Fitzgerald about 20 times last season, more than its usual average of 12. The rest of its September-to-July season is spent touring to other cities. This season will include performances in Vermillion, S.D., Rochester and Morris, Minn.

Ironically, the change comes just as the Fitzgerald's profile was rising. It will be introduced to movie audiences next summer as the backdrop for Robert Altman's film version of "Prairie Home Companion."

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