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ENTERTAINMENT

The Herald-Palladium • Benton Harbor-St. Joseph, Mich.

The making of 'A Prairie Home Companion'

Virtually all of this show comes straight out of Garrison Keillor's head

By DEBORAH HASTINGS
of heronville

ST. PAUL, Minn. — During rehearsal, the boss menders backstage, singing to himself. He doesn't so much wander as he circles like an approaching jet.

When he descends from on high to anybody's guess. He's also the air traffic controller.

And it's his airport.

The boss is Garrison Keillor, the omnipresent and sometimes oblivious creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," the radio show adored by 4 million fans, broadcast live from Minnesota's mythical Lake Wobegon — home to Norwegian butcher farmers, strong-women, good-looking men and above-average children.

This is not the gentle narrator you hear on the air — that witty, sensitive observer of triviality and tribulations. This is a complicated and detached manager, issuing orders that change faster than weather. His loyal, highly professional staff stays in step.

Does the script? No problem. Get the mayor of International Falls, Minn., on the phone and patch her into the live broadcast? Alrighty, Beth. Fill five minutes of otherwise dead air because he's out about his much-loved monologue ("Well, it's been a quiet week here in Lake Wobegon...") in the middle of a live broadcast? You betcha, as they say in Minnesota.

He's written books, essays, columns and a screenplay, but he's most revered for what he does on Saturday nights: reader-teller of tales from a town that does not exist, imbued with exceptional horse-hand and trope of actors who deliver a dizzying series of skits, songs and sound effects.

His need for others on a show he's hosted for 21 years appears purely practical. It is impossible to sing every song, play every musical instrument and read each actor's lines — simultaneously, anyway. If it could, he might just would.

He started living writers too long ago, but virtually the entire two-hour program still comes out of his head. Which is his beauty, or its conceit, depending on one's viewpoint.

But for right now, take a moment to enjoy this view: stage right at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul. The house lights are dimmed. The 996 red-upholstered seats are empty. Outside, the cast and crew are rehearsing.

At 7 p.m., Webster doesn't have a script for tonight's performance, just a succession of marked-up pages. Webster gets each version to actor Sue Scott, Tim Russell and sound-effects guy Tom Keith.

"A lot of it's off the top of their heads," Webster jokes, "and other body orifices."

Where else could a group of writers and musicians put on a radio show featuring famous guests like Meryl Streep and Bonnie Raitt? Accompanied by comedy bits, gospel songs, music, song-alongs and poetry readings.

Forty-five minutes later, Keillor is having second thoughts. "I'm going to scratch 'Teardrop,'" he says. "It's gone."

At 7 p.m., Keillor announces: "I'm thinking of retooling 'Teardrop,'" he says. "Try it."

The band moves on to "Loving You," whose lyrics he has rewritten. Now it's an ode to a 1957 hit by Elvis Presley: "I Can't Stop Loving You," made memorable by Ray Charles, and Freddy Fender's country protest, "Before the Next Heartbreak Falls."

Keillor and band leader Rich Dworsky — who can play most any song off the top of his head — are working out chord changes with the Guy's All-Star Show Band.

Keillor loves to sing, but the feeling isn't mutual. He is sometimes on key, and just as often not. His hair stands on end. He hasn't shaved. His body language says: "I Am Thinking Approach An Actor Over There."

Keillor, who is about to turn 63, has never cared much about his appearance. His forehead is a cliff dropping into overgrown eyebrows. His 6-foot-4 frame hangs at odd angles. His legs go on for miles. "I have a face for radio," he says, eyes aflutter.



SOUND ENGINEER Sam Hudson controls the audio right on stage at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul, Minn., during an April live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" with host Garrison Keillor.

'This is his show. We put this together very fast. There's not a moment to waste. Everyone just kind of gives him space. He always has a vision, and he knows what it is.'

GARY RAYNOR Basist in Guy's All-Star Show Band

Words are most important. Writing, he believes, is rewriting. He does the latter during rehearsals, after rehearsals and during the broadcast. A song is written, someone just kind of gives him space. He always has a vision, and he knows what it is.

They run through other bits, including a scene from *Cafe Bizarre*, where the patronizing water speaks in bad puns and French-accented gibberish. "What wine goes with pea-meat, haberdash and jiffle sandwiches? Why one pea-meat newscaster, but of course, I'll be here."

Keillor listens with a faraway look. His mouth hinders into a perfectly shaped, upside-down U. This happens when he's not angry about what he's hearing.

His monologue for tonight is not written down. It's all in his head. In his tiny dressing room, he changes into a white shirt and black pants. Facing, he fiddles with the knot of his red tie, which matches the color of his socks and shoes, the uniform of every show.

He slips on a black jacket and takes a sip of water. He straddles across the hardwood floor boards and turns to face the band.

"Top, what are you playing?" he says to an unseen technician. Arms lifted, he nods to Dworsky at the piano, who plinks out the well-known notes of the show's theme song.

"Oh, hear that old piano fondly for stalwart Lake Wobegon and keeps one's peep hole shut."

Keillor doesn't answer. He's wearing that frown he gets when he doesn't like something. Without a word, and without reservation, "Feelings" dies. Twenty minutes in show time. Keillor stands in the wings.

He's rewritten the skits. And then there's the matter of the music therapist. No one has seen him, and Keillor has invited him to perform during the broadcast.

At 8:15 p.m., a nervous-looking man in glasses approaches the stage manager.

Like a lamb to slaughter, Schwartzberg trails the host across the stage to meet Dworsky. By way of introduction, the boss says: "Todd is going to do a couple of songs with the audience, and you're going to play."



GARRISON KEILLOR does "News From Lake Wobegon" during a live dress rehearsal for "A Prairie Home Companion" in front of an audience at the Fitzgerald Theater.

Dworsky nods. Schwartzberg looks terrified. He has to borrow a guitar from the band.

The therapist sings: "What kind of feelings do you have? Are you happy? Are you frustrated? Are you sad?"

This is a little too touchy-feely for stalwart Lake Wobegon. The music therapist stands at stage right staring straight ahead like a man about to be hanged.

The house lights dim. Dworsky begins to play. Keillor takes a long breath. "Oh, hear that old piano..."

Three hours later, Keillor sags with exhaustion. He has shaken his monologue in usual mystery. But it always evades a revereent response. Silence descends as he plays on a stool and begins to weave another intimate dispatch from a community so small you never need to use your arm signal, because everyone knows where you're going.

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'Prairie Home' history

Named after the Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minn., the radio show created by Garrison Keillor has had several lives.

Nearly all of them mirrored going on in Keillor's personal life. The show once moved to New York and was given a new name. In the late 1980s, when Keillor married his second wife and moved to Copelandville. Last year, it went Hollywood.

The timeline of Lake Wobegon

1974: The first live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" occurs on July 6 in the Janet Wallace Auditorium at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. Keillor came up with the idea for a radio program after researching on prior shows by Grand Ole Opry for The New Yorker magazine.

Twelve people show up to see his new show.

1978: The program moves to the World Theater in St. Paul. Eight years later, the venue is refurbished and renamed The Fitzgerald. It is the city's oldest theater.

1989: Keillor returns to Minnesota and sets up shop in New York City, where he launches "The American Radio Company of the Air."

1993: Keillor leaves the program back to his home state of Minnesota, and returns to his original name.

1995: Keillor returns to Minnesota and sets up shop in New York City, where he launches "The American Radio Company of the Air."

2006: Robert Altman directs what will become his last motion picture — a critical and financial success entitled "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor writes the screenplay about a fictional variety show that broadcasts live from the radio program's regular studio in St. Paul.

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