

## Keillor doesn't tell us much about self

Garrison Keillor lets his radio show take center stage in his first dramatic play, and keeps himself at a distance.

**THEATER REVIEW**  
GRAYDON ROYCE



The program says he is playing "The Host," but there's never a question that actor Pearce Bunting is present to channel the spirit and thoughts of Garrison Keillor.

"Radio Man," Keillor's first stage play, largely dispenses with fictional pretense, as "The Host" gets himself ready for "A Prairie Home Companion" and then goes "On the Air."

The result is that "Radio Man," which opened Saturday at History Theatre in St. Paul, finds its rhythm in the characters and situations that faithful listeners have heard for 40 years. Not much new there.

Keillor allows his title character moments of introspection, remorse and doubt through scenes that take place in real time, in memory and in imagination, and this is where we would hope "The Host" finds a moment of transformation or clarity. Does he really want to quit the show — as he shouts in frustration during a private moment off the air — or is everything hunky dory in the land of Wobegon?

Director Ron Peluso steers this multipurpose vessel into an entertaining harbor. Bunting and young actor Jonah Harrison play out scenes from childhood and from the glory days of radio.

Here's where a shy kid, who considered himself weird (in that era's vernacular), fumbled through relationships with girls but also found inspiration for his career. Set designer Chris Johnson has built a storybook village, with church steeples and a big full moon, that seems perfect.

Keillor hops lightly on personal subjects, careful never to reveal too

See **REVIEW** on E3 ▶



Scott Pakudatiz  
Pearce Bunting and Sandra Struthers Clerc in "Radio Man."

### RADIO MAN

**Who:** By Garrison Keillor. Directed by Ron Peluso.

**When:** 10 a.m. & 8 p.m. Thu., 8 p.m. Fri., 2 & 8 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., ends Oct. 26.

**Where:** History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.

**Tickets:** \$15-\$45, 651-292-4323 or www.historytheatre.com.

## 'Radio Man' leans on 'A Prairie Home'

• **REVIEW** from El much. His religious upbringing, for example, remains a source of fond humor rather than a portal into what makes him tick.

The large, dramatic set piece is the radio show, and in particular "The News From Lake Wobegon." The news reports on the death of Byron Tollefson — a local man who has an unsavory history. This moment occupies a lot of time, as if Keillor is asking us to ponder the conflicting emotions a well-known fellow can raise.

Peluso's cast is first-rate in every respect. These are not deep characters, but every actor wears his or her comic chops to play types: Angela

Timberman, as droll as ever, plays a local gossip who points out Byron's faults with a razor-sharp assessment of truth. And that track suit she's wearing? Nice costume work by E. Amy Hill. Jon Hegge is a convincing Norwegian bachelor and does very fine work as the radio show's sound effects guy. Peter Thomson's best bits come as the station manager who howls at Keillor's indiscretions (is that Bill Kling?). Laurie Flanigan Hegge is sweet and bereft as a diner waitress, and charming as the eager part of a singing duo. Jay Albright does double duty as actor and music director.

The one character we are asked to consider on real terms is Mary Lou-

ise (Sanda Struthers Clerc), Keillor's old flame. When she returns to work on the show, Bunting's Keillor finds his deepest well of regret.

Bunting, an intuitive actor, has located the cadence of his subject's voice, the dour and blank face. His slightly unnatural gestures, though, caused me to wonder if he isn't completely sure what is going on inside the character, largely because the playwright doesn't want to tell him.

We don't learn much about the guy named Keillor. We see more of a "Radio Man" who prefers to live behind his creation of fiction.

Graydon Royce • 612-673-7299



DAVID JOLLES • Star Tribune

Garrison Keillor, the playwright, with actor Pearce Bunting, who plays Keillor in "Radio Man," which opened at History Theatre in St. Paul.