

**ENTERTAINMENT**

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# 'Prairie Home' takes a turn on national radio stage

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It wasn't exactly like old times when Garrison Keillor opened the "Prairie Home Companion" at Northrop Auditorium Saturday night. For one thing, there was no doubt when the radio show was about to begin.

Most other nights the evening's festivities glide almost unperturbed into a broadcast. The Powdermill Biscuit Band will have the walk-in crowd stomping and a guest fiddler or gospel group will have wandered on stage and started in. Keillor might ask for quiet to introduce the program, but unobtrusively. The folks at home wouldn't get in the way of the fun, which often continued into the night after the broadcast.

But Saturday night was different, because the broadcast wasn't just statewide on Minnesota Public Radio. It was coast to coast on National Public Radio. It was the night's main event of the network's Folk Festival U.S.A. It was a success. And it was an unusually formal rendition of a show that always at least seemed to succeed on the merits of the relaxed and the unrehearsed.

This night, the show in the auditorium began at the start of the broadcast, and not before. A couple of guests performed in the half-hour before airtime, but they seemed premature. The all-but-capacity crowd, which paid \$4 and \$5 for seats that once were free, was dressed for a night out. It had the jittery air of a performer on opening night.

Keillor strolled onstage looking as cool as his beige jacket, but although he coached his followers on how to behave on national radio—advising limited applause for performers and economical chuckling for his "laughter-efficient" humor—there was no mistaking the smell of sweating palms when the cue came at 8 p.m.

Only with the chanting of the "Powdermill" theme song refrain, which the crowd performed with a relieved gusto, did the evening fall to the comfortable, familiar ways—which were outlined in 15-minute segments on a glossy program handed out by ushers.

But none of this fuss seemed to have much effect on the area folk, gospel and jazz all-stars who were hurried on- and offstage during the two-hour show. Pop Wagner, the Biscuit Band, and Thelma Buckner and the Minnesota Gospel Twins were received as old friends, as were Sean Blackburn and Dakota Dave Hull. Tenor Vern Sutton of the Minnesota Opera Company sang a "duet"—for the uninformed, that meant he alternated tenor and falsetto lines—and Claudia Schmidt's soaring soprano sent an entranced crowd into the hallways at intermission (yes, there was an intermission).

Curiosity acts were the American-Swedish Spelmans Trio and the Plymouth Church Festival Choir, directed by Philip Brunelle, which asserted its reverence to "folkiness" by performing a choral version of the Powdermill song. Their very presence, though, indicated that the night was really a Prairie Home Sampler of Minnesota talent, offered up for national approval.

The evening had all the trappings of an inaugural, but with an election-night intensity. For NPR is trying to decide whether the entire country should savor Minnesota's talent and Keillor's easy (which didn't always sparkle Saturday). However, perhaps the questions the network should be asking is whether the show ought to be broadcast nationally.

No one is quite sure, for instance, whether going national would do much more than stroke the ego of KSJN, the station that modestly declares itself "the best public radio station in the country."

Then there are the sort of artistic and, well, "quality-of-life" questions that sprang up with the word that Dick Quinson's cartoons might be nationally syndicated. Would Keillor's wit have a coast-to-coast appeal? Would the rest of America sit still for a deejay who doesn't ignore commas? If we shared the Old Scout, would we lose him?

And what about the music? Saturday night's crowded program cut short any rolicking in the early stages. The Wolverines Classic Jazz Orchestra, in particular, was just getting up steam when it was interrupted, its finale with the spunky Rio Nido set the house moving again, but when the radio show signed off, the performers took a bow, the house lights went up and the people went home.

You'd like to think they went a bit reluctantly, because there seemed to be some music and fun still to come.

**'Prairie Home Companion's' Garrison Keillor: The palms were sweating**