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Radio feels at home on the 'Prairie'

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Everyone in the World Theater is wearing a sweater. It's not that they all called one another before leaving home to coordinate clothes. It's that the temperature out on Wabasha Avenue is in the low teens, and members of the audience have no way of knowing in advance whether *A Prairie Home Companion*, live and in person, will make them feel toasty the way it does when they hear it at home on the radio.

At a few minutes before 5, when the show is scheduled to bounce out of downtown St. Paul up to a satellite, and then out to 200 public radio stations across the country (including WUSF-FM 89.7 in Tampa, which delays the Saturday broadcast until 9 p.m.), Garrison Keillor walks out to the microphone on the extreme left of the stage. In the vernacular of the trade — a phrase that accommodates his own soft-voiced style — he begins to warm the crowd up.

"THIS IS ALWAYS the most awkward part of the show, right before we go on the air," Keillor says. "Awkward for me because I know, and maybe some of you don't, that as this is radio there isn't all that much reason for you to see it. That's why we thank you for coming before we go on . . ."

A wave of chuckles.

"And I know it's awkward for you, too, because one of the things about radio is you form a picture in your mind, maybe of the World Theater — a palace of the arts, crystal chandeliers and that sort of thing. And you've maybe formed a picture in your mind of me as well. So that's why I come out here, to give you a chance to adjust yourself to that."

More chuckles, and a couple of guffaws. The audience is not cold.

No palace of the arts, the World Theater looks about the way it did when Minnesota Public Radio bought it two years ago ragged. Crystal chandeliers do not dangle in it — only two balconies, some sound equipment, and flakes of the wall paint.

In the last two years, it is Keillor that's changed. His face was just a heavy black beard and a pair of thin-framed glasses in 1981. Usually he appeared on stage in a white linen suit and a Panama hat; sometimes he toted an autoharp. This New Year's afternoon, Garrison Keillor — who long ago lengthened his name from Gary, because he wanted it to sound "formidable" — is clean-shaven, unencumbered by hat or instrument, and his suit is tan.

Only the voice is the same: a gentle baritone punctuated on the radio by pauses and latent breaths, and on the World Theater stage punctuated by Keillor's lanky body. That is the other new thing. During songs his feet stomp, and during stories his arms work in animated ways they did not when *A Prairie Home Companion* originated from college campuses and places like Crookston, Minn. six, seven and eight years ago.

Then, the show was just a curiosity. You didn't have to reserve tickets for it weeks in advance, or pay for them. You just wandered by and sat down. And Keillor was much more the quintessential shy person who would benefit so by eating Powdermill Biscuits, the program's once mythical, now mythic, sponsor. "They give shy people the courage to get up and do what needs to be done," Keillor says, the audience mouthing the words along with him.

How the motto, with *Companion* and all its other charming signature phrases, got from Crookston to stations in Florida, and even more remarkably, to New York and Los Angeles, is a question for Margaret Moon, the producer.

"I really don't know why," Moon said, unhelpfully. She mentions the program's peculiar mix, and concludes simply, "It's different from most of the entertainment available."

The real answer is out on stage, crooning the gentle *Companion* theme song, *Hello, Love*.

Garrison Keillor doesn't do interviews, he does shows. And this one is part riposte. Most of it, however, is standard. The 80 minutes or so of music is varied as ever. After two opening jazz numbers by the Rutch Thompson Trio, a string quintet in black tie takes the stage to play Viennese operetta music accompanied by two singers.

KEILLOR FOLLOWS with a song he has written for New Year's, which he sings with the soprano, giving her the best lines. Then comes a family of Ukrainians to play their native Christmas music (right on schedule, because their church calendar lags a couple of weeks). Then a local swing combo called Rio Nido, and finally the rustic duo of Dakota Dave Hull and Sean Blackburn.

In its sweep, the music makes *Companion* the only place we know of where public radio meets the public — and not only because the show is public radio's most popular, after *All Things Considered*. It is because *Companion* puts classical music, which so dominates most public stations' airtime, into a populist context. On the stage of the World Theater, the practice gains visual terms.

Out front, the soprano in her black gown trills while backstage, beside a battered guitar case bearing an Alaska Airlines sticker, Sean Blackburn, in cowboy boots, passes the time twirling a lariat.

ON TELEVISION

HARL VICK



GARRISON KEILLOR: . . . as this is radio there isn't all that much reason for you to see it. That's why we thank you for coming before we go on . . .

See PRAIRIE, 22-E

Prairie from 1-E

Keillor retreats offstage to pace and bob by himself during songs. Almost no one approaches him; he looks unapproachable. He comes out between selections to put the show's soul into words.

Most weeks Keillor writes the whole of *A Prairie Home Companion*. It is an exercise mostly in humor, but there are gags in the guise of "commercials" Keillor sprinkles through the show's two hours, revivifying a convention of old-time radio while gently parodying it.

"This portion of our show," Keillor announces, "brought to you by the Butch Thompson Music Corporation, for musicians who mean business." *Good humming*, says Thompson, a jazz pianist with the show since its earliest days, *You just don't hear it anymore the way you used to . . . in elevators, one guy would start and by the fourth floor you'd have a little choir in a box.*

Usually, though, half-hour segments of *Companion* are sponsored by the merchants of Lake Wobegon, the tiny Minnesota town Keillor has made up, and made famous. It is home (to name only a few) to Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Bob's Bank, and Jack's Auto Repair.

"There is a Jack's Auto Repair, it's a real place," says Paul Gruchow, who once worked with Keillor at a public radio station in central Minnesota. You had to pass Jack's on Highway 52 to get to Collegeville, where the station was located, from Minneapolis; so Keillor must have seen it many times, at least subconsciously, Gruchow says. The friend believes Wobegon derives from Keillor's time living in a small town near Collegeville; he had left the radio station for a year or two to write.

Another friend, Patricia Hampl, who has known Keillor since 1964, finds it pointless to search for Wobegon. "The life of his imagination is different from the life of a lot of people's imaginations," Hampl says. "I wouldn't even begin to guess where one thing lets off and another begins."

"This is someone who's made of his life his art."

THE NUB OF each show comes in the second hour, when Keillor recites a 15- or 20-minute vignette that always starts with the words, "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." The talk is always funny and always tender — tender as in gentle, and as in vulnerable. It is his regular homage to the reserved souls of small towns, and the love that guides them.

"He's done a great favor to people who are assured they had no identity," Hampl

says, "by making an imaginary realm of that identity. Part of the theme that goes through those talks is the theme of the dispossessed or the ignored — and oddly enough, not ignored by the world as by themselves. With all this (Keillor says) about 'shy people' and 'Norwegian bachelor farmers,' these people leading decent lives — he's given a sort of attention to them."

Gruchow once poked a little fun at the imaginary Wobegonians in print, "and I had quite a stern note from him — which is uncharacteristic; Garrison is really the kindest of persons — that said his people were not hicks," Gruchow remembers. "My characters don't go to town and gawk at tall buildings. . . . He really didn't think it was funny. He was quite offended."

This night's news from Lake Wobegon — which Keillor delivers apparently from memory, his notes on a music stand 10 feet to his right — is uncharacteristically instructive, even angry, though in the quietest way. He remembers trying to stay up till midnight on New Year's Eve when he was 12 years old and hoping 1954 will be the year his parents buy a TV set.

"If only we had a little screen there where we could see it all. See Guy Lombardo . . . young, slim and beautiful, with his sash across his chest and a saber on his belt, there on the stage of the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom."

And his voice grows ecstatic: "With the Royal Canadians and their scarlet Mounties' tunics! Musicians playing saxophones on horseback, there! in the ballroom! and the horses — big, black horses — standing. And the Canadians, the Royal Canadians, would all be sitting in a row: the clarinets and the trumpets and the trombones and the drummer . . ."

"You can *imagine* it on radio. But oh! to have a television, and be able to *see* it, in your own home!"

THE STORY meanders into Wobegon, where people don't need television because they have other people, "and where the main recreation is talk." It concludes with a vibrant evocation of jumping between cold sheets at age 12 to fall asleep hearing the grownups talking downstairs. "I can hear them in the last minute before I go to sleep, in that last minute when I'm dreaming what a fabulous thing it will be when we get a television set, and we can see Guy Lombardo and his orchestra, on horseback, from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, in New York City."

The remembering awe in his voice is just a whisper now. "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, Minnesota." The benediction. Applause arrives in cascades. Keillor steps back from the microphone, removes his glasses, takes out a hankie and wipes his face hard.

TRAVEL BARGAINS