

Wed., March 4, 1987 ■ THE

‘Prairie Home’ show better heard than seen



Garrison Keillor and "Prairie Home Companion" return to restored World Theater in St. Paul in 1986.

By NANCY K. BARRY

WHEN I HEARD the news that "A Prairie Home Companion" was cable-ready, I thought it as the beginning of the end, but I never dreamed the end would come so soon. After Minnesota Public Radio announced that the Disney channel would begin to broadcast the program as a regular series in March, Garrison Keillor informed his audience of roughly 4 million listeners that the show would close up shop entirely on June 13.

I suppose television was bound to catch up with Lake Wobegon sooner or later, but I wish Keillor would let the show spend its last few weeks away from the camera. It seems ironic that a program with its roots in public radio will end in the ranks of pay TV. I can't help but wonder exactly how many homes in Lake Wobegon are actually wired for cable — the Bunsons', perhaps, and maybe the Dieners', but certainly not the Ingqvists' or the Chatterbox Cafe.

It's interesting, too, that at the same moment Woody Allen's new movie, "Radio Days," reminding us of the joys of listening to a magical box instead of watching one, the most successful radio program of the television era has decided to expand its venue and become visual. But myth is myth, so why am I bothered by this?

This program, I thought, was designed for listening, not watching, and I was under the impression that its creators prided themselves on the distinction. Lake Wobegon, and all the talk that surrounds it, is an imaginary place; its inhabitants work and eat and quarrel in a realm that teases us into believing that the unreal is real and the impossible possible.

Television cameras may be able to capture the sights of the performance well enough, but I worry that the on-stage spectacle might interfere with what used to be, for me, such a solitary pleasure.

This is a show that we tune into and tune out of, depending on our pace and our Saturday-evening chores — not the stuff of sustained attention in front of a television set. When "Prairie Home Companion" reopened the restored World Theater in St. Paul, in 1986, PBS telecast the show for an evening. I remember watching it with keen anticipation, but after 15 minutes, my enthusiasm faded. Oh, it was fun to see Garrison Keillor in his white suit and red socks; the sound effects were interesting to watch as well as hear — it was all enjoyable enough. But I fidgeted; something wasn't right.

The truth is, we listen to this show with our eyes on other things, like fixing tuna casserole. Hearing the broadcast is like having an after-dinner conversation, where somebody gets up to clear the table, hears the thread of a story being told, returns, interrupts, shares the joke, and then goes back out to the kitchen to finish the dishes.

Listening to the radio is like that: we go about our business, losing track of the music and the talk for a bit, coming back in odd spurts of attention, a leisurely companion to our chores and thoughts. A television show is too intrusive for me. Besides, I'm so busy inventing pictures of Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, not to mention the Tolleruds and the Krebsbachs, that I'd just as well invent pictures of Garrison Keillor and all the other guests.

Seeing the sights and sounds of the production on stage would only tempt me to try and visualize more about these people and their lives than I have a right to see. Eavesdropping is bad enough.

I first discovered "Prairie Home Companion" by accident. I had been living in the Midwest for several years, but the show was still in its early days, before best-sellers and cable contracts came along. I was twiddling with the radio dial one night for some music to keep me company while I unloaded groceries. Suddenly, I heard a man with a quintessential radio voice talking about a little town I had never

heard of, but still somehow felt I knew.

Garrison Keillor and I became regular companions on Saturday evenings, and I will never forget how those programs helped me through a particularly lonely summer. I was in graduate school, had no money to speak of, and listening to the radio seemed as good a treat as any for a Saturday night. I would take a beer and a K-Mart grill out on my front porch and listen to the show while I fixed some chicken and watched the neighborhood grow dark.

People would pass and nod, and when the skits were funny I would laugh out loud, not caring who heard. My neighbors probably thought it strange — the image of a woman watching her supper cook and listening to commercials for products that didn't exist. But it was all the company I needed, and to this day, I can recall the shadows cast over houses as the sun went down.

The program always seemed to end as the dark came on, and for just a moment, hearing about that "little town that time forgot" made me forget where I was, and who I was, too. There was nothing but the radio tuned in low and the shuffle of passing strangers, and the sun — deep red and silent — etching the trees darker in the twilight.

It was a graceful, private space, and I wouldn't trade it for all the full-color broadcasts in the world. Many people will argue that this show is well-suited for television — the true home companion for most of us these days. But I worry that the sound effects won't sound so funny when I see exactly how they're made; I worry that real commercials might start appearing now and then; mostly, I worry about people handing over their imaginations to the Disney Channel, instead of their own mind's eye.

Garrison Keillor and his stories have been so faithful to me for so long that I don't want to desert him now that the show is approaching its end. But I do feel a little uneasy about all this success, and maybe he does, too. Or maybe Jack (from Jack's Auto Repair) wrote a letter to "whoever is in charge down there," and convinced Keillor it was time to close up shop.

I'm willing and eager to wish him luck, but I'm still disappointed. It's as if an old friend has bought a whole new wardrobe that I think will make him look terrible. Just as I start to criticize, he tells me the new suits are a prelude — he's leaving town and moving on to other things. I was all ready to say, "Who are you kidding — you're going to look foolish," but then I realize that, foolish or not, I'm sorry to see him go.

So I won't complain too much about the Disney deal. For 13 years, Garrison Keillor made me feel connected to a community of listeners, trading birthday greetings and wedding announcements with hundreds of strangers that were — for an instant — somehow related to each other. He reminded us all that small towns don't seem so confining when painted with tales like Bruno the Fishing Dog, or the Gospel Birds.

Making up stories about who we are and where we come from is something Americans do especially well, and we're remarkably loyal to such grand lies. Minnesota Public Radio has promised a replacement show, and rumor has it that a Hollywood studio might produce "Prairie Home — The Movie," but I think we should let it rest for a while. All good storytellers know when to spin the yarn into a finished knot, even when their listeners have trouble letting go.

Some people will want to tune in and watch the last few broadcasts with rapt attention. Not me. I'll listen to the program with the same whole-hearted distraction I've given it all along. With any luck, when the show closes in June, I'll have the first barbecue of summer and a slow, warm twilight to keep me company while an old friend leaves the air.

A leisurely companion to our chores and thoughts, and we can invent the pictures of Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery

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