

Staff Photos by Tom Sweeney

Garrison Keillor: "I could never do a comedy club. I'm too slow. I'm so slow that people would get drunk before they'd laugh."

## A sentimental return to Lake Wobegon

Doesn't seem like he's actually been gone long enough to get too sentimental about his revisiting.

But it's been more than a year since Garrison Keillor announced he would be leaving Lake Wobegon. And, he points out, he hasn't been back to the Twin Cities since last September.


So it's been quite a while. And it probably seems longer to him than to us. After all, we've been keeping up with the hometown boy made good through the news he continually makes.

It's been harder for him to keep up with us because he takes the New York Times now. "It's like going to civics class every day," he said of

his newspaper. "But it's where I live." Be that as it may, the Times doesn't write much about us.

For him, then, the separation has been long enough for some legitimate sentiment in the show he's doing at Orchestra Hall tonight. And even if the sentiment's not legitimate, it makes nice, warm theater. "Lake Wobegon

Revisited," the show's called. It's a special benefit for Phillip Brunelle's Plymouth Music Series and it's also more proof — if more proof were needed — how big Keillor grew, right before our eyes. Front-row seats for the guy who once did a morning drive-time program on public radio cost \$100.



**Doug Grow**

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# GROW: Keillor says Victor Borge was inspiration for this show

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The show, which is sort of like "Prairie Home Companion" done to full orchestra rather than the Powdermilk Biscuit Band, has been drifting in and out of the minds of Keillor and Brunelle for a long time now, Brunelle said.

Keillor said the roots of the idea for this show, which also will be performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., later this month, probably go back to the 1950s in the living room of his parents' house in the suburbs.

The Keillor family was late getting a television. When they did get the set, one of the first stars Garrison recalls seeing was Victor Borge, who combined classical piano and comedy. Keillor was enthralled. Borge, he thought then and now, had a good gig.

"An orchestra audience is an easy touch for a laugh," Keillor said. "Just going into the somber music hall, one experiences the memories of those music appreciation classes where you were supposed to learn to love great music but never did. Just going into a music hall puts you in a grim mood. You don't expect to laugh."

Borge did the unexpected and got laughs. Keillor hopes to follow him down that path to some easy smiles with this show.

"I could never do a comedy club," said Keillor. "I'm too slow. I'm so slow that people would get drunk before they'd laugh. But with an or-

chestra crowd . . ."

The musicians had no trouble finding the Borge in Keillor during rehearsal yesterday. But then, the musicians were putty in Keillor's hands, just as most Minnesotans were — and likely still are. When he was introduced to them, the musicians applauded nicely. Throughout the rehearsal they kept looking up at the star and smiling warmly.

Keillor can get downright syrupy about being back in Minnesota to perform. At first thought, suspiciously syrupy.

Hey, if he likes us so much, why did he go in the first place?

But maybe he deserves the benefit of the doubt. After all, no person is so sentimental about home as the person who's just left home.

Now Keillor has returned to his "home" for the first time. And now, for the first time, he's home and he's staying in a hotel. A Minneapolis hotel at that, which makes him feel just a little the stranger in his own land.

"All the years I lived in St. Paul I was snooty about coming to Minneapolis," Keillor said. "It's that reverse snobbishness you see over there a lot. So it's strange but familiar to be in Minneapolis.

"The church I went to as a boy was about a mile from where we are now . . . and when I was a boy we did all the field trips that I wonder if they still do. We went to the Foshay Tow-

er and toured the Star and Tribune . . . And there were my years at the university, so there are some parts of Minneapolis that are so familiar but there are other parts that I don't know at all. And the landscape has changed so much. It's not the city I was a child in, but what a handsome city."

For reasons he says he doesn't totally understand — middle age? — Keillor said he's been thinking a lot recently of his life and times at the university in the 1960s.

"What exciting times those were," he said. "The passions, the discord and this city, this city absorbed them all. What an amazing city this is, what an amazing society this is. Tremendous changes have taken place but Minnesotans have adopted them and remained essentially unchanged."

Still and all, it's a good life he's living in New York now, Keillor said. A life far less stressful than the one he led when he was putting out a radio program once a week.

"It's not as hard a work as I used to do," said Keillor. "It took a while to learn how to live like I suppose other people live. I have an office there. I think everybody ought to have an office. It's a place to go, and I keep a typewriter there."

And he composes short humor pieces for the New Yorker magazine in that office, and works on shows such as the show he'll be in tonight. And to hear him talk, he thinks a lot about the place he left.