

SATURDAY, MAY 19, 1990

MOVIES/ENTERTAINMENT

TIMES ADVOCATE C3

## Keillor takes a critical look at this year's radio variety hour

**BROADCASTING:** *The entertainer who rarely laughs has plans for more "frivolity"*

**ELEANOR BLAU** / N. Y. Times News Service

**NEW YORK** — Backstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on a recent Saturday night, Garrison Keillor, the humorist, looked somber. It was hard to see why.

The theater audience had just cheered his variety program, "American Radio Company of the Air," broadcast live over WNYC-AM (820) and FM (93.9) and other public-radio stations across the country.

Some two million listeners have been tuning in to the series, which began in November and which is scheduled on most Saturdays from 6 to 8 p.m. through June 9.

And there are plans for a bigger second season starting on Sept. 29, when "American Radio Company" is to be broadcast from a Manhattan theater (no site announced yet).

But Keillor wasn't thinking about that. "After a show," he said, "you only think about what you did wrong."

The 700 or so in the audience had not seemed to notice. They broke into rhythmic clapping as a guest artist, the mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, belted, "Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay!" while whomping a bass drum.

They looked impressed as she sang a tenor aria from Verdi's "Aida."

And they giggled as Keillor supposedly tap-danced with two turkeys, a pigeon and a seal.

That bit was accomplished for the radio audience by a drummer rapping shoes on the top of an audio speaker while a sound-effects man barked, gobbled and slapped himself on the chest and cheeks.

The stage was crammed with actors, singers, an orchestra, a piano, engineers, equipment and Keillor, the low-key host.

"I'm planning on having a good time on that show," he said the other day.

Keillor speaks slowly, with pauses. Sometimes long pauses. "We've been having good shows," he said. "But next year when we hit our stride, we're going to get into more frivolity and silliness." Silence. "I don't think I've laughed at anything yet."

But he never laughs, does he? "I never laugh," he agreed. "Occasionally, I do laugh," he added. And he barely smiles. "Well, I wasn't brought up to do that," he said, slightly breaking the Minnesota taboos. "We were serious people."

Now that he is an ardent unapologetic New Yorker, he is having a hard time, he said, weaving the city into his monologues about people back home in Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve."

When he told Wobegon stories on "A Prairie Home Companion," the show he broadcast for 13 years from St. Paul, "it was the easiest thing I did," he said. "Now it's the hardest."

But he has no trouble recounting New York's allures. Crowds, for instance.

"To be near other people is to me almost a sensual pleasure," he said. "There are hundreds of possibilities of people to see, conversations to overhear."

Also subways. "It's where you see who lives here," he said. And people down there keep telling him in a friendly but impersonal way that his billfold is sticking out of his pocket.

"It's just the opposite of what Midwesterners expect of New York," he said. "But the more you live here, the more characteristic it seems."

Part of his monologue the other night, which did not mention New York, recalled his father's stage fright. Having to preach "terrified him, and turned him into a tenor," Keillor had recalled, and "his shirt darkened under his narrow fundamentalist tie."

But now Keillor was unhappy with the segment.

"It was too personal," he said.

Not that he belittles his program, which differs substantially from the old "Prairie" show.

This one is more structured — more scripts, less ad-libbing. And instead of country and folk music, there is rock, jazz and what he called powerful American mainstream music, with "a crack orchestra" led by Rob Fisher and a focus on piano rather than guitar.

Keillor, who also writes for *The New Yorker* and who is somehow finding time for a novel and the text of a cantata about evil, writes most of the material on his show, including the weekly "Story of Gloria, a Young Woman of Manhattan." It stars Ivy Austin, who commutes to the program from Los Angeles.

The audio technicians commute weekly from St. Paul and so does the sound-effects man, Tom Keith, who is himself the host of a radio show back home.

Bob Elliott of "Bob & Ray" is a regular on the "American Radio Company of the Air," and guests have included Eileen Farrell, Maureen McGovern, Peter Schickele, Joe Williams and Dick Hyman.

The program's producer, Minnesota Public Radio, envisions 26 shows next season, six more than this season, to be heard at the same time, but every week instead of being interspersed with reruns of "Prairie." The alternation had confused listeners.

With an expected budget of \$3.2 million, Minnesota Public Radio is seeking another sponsor, in addition to the American Booksellers Association.

A second season may woo back more of the 4 million listeners who tuned in to "Prairie" when it was live.

Some took Keillor at his word three years ago when he bade them farewell, announcing that he was going to live in his wife's native Denmark.

He did live there four months, then moved to New York. "It was one of those embarrassing decisions that didn't work out," he said. Why? "For 100 reasons." Could he name one? Long silence. "I only know two jokes in Danish," he said.



Garrison Keillor is creator and host of "American Radio Company of the Air."

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GARRISON KEILLOR, humorist