

Keillor Finds Rapt Fans For Blend Of Old, New

N.Y. Show Searching For Its Own Identity

By JUDITH GREEN
Knight-Ridder Service
SAN FRANCISCO — Banner up. Rug down.

The makeshift stage in Masonic Auditorium is ready. On the blue banner: "GARRISON KEILLOR'S AMERICAN RADIO COMPANY," framing a school textbook map of the United States: pink states and mint-green states, pale blue and buttercream states.

On the floor: an oriental rug, red, orange and gold. It travels with the company. "It's nice and warm, don't you think?" That's producer Christine Tschida.

At the back of the hall, the tech people have piled a mound of machinery, needed to "uplink" the show to National Public Radio's satellite. A transmitter. Mixer boards (where music and voices from 50 microphones are hand-blended into composite sound for the radio).

Looped and coiled around them are about four miles of wires and cables, wrapped in shiny black electrical tape and tangled beyond remedy.

All the crew guys wear Santa hats and have preoccupied expressions. In a bare dressing room behind the stage, a writer frowns into the screen of a lap-top computer, polishing the last rewrites.

It's 10 a.m. Dec. 15 — five hours until the show goes up.

The Coffee Club Orchestra warms up on the small stage: 11 musicians hired locally, led by violin, cello, first woodwind and drummer from New York.

Conductor Rob Fisher is the show's music detective and arranger. No matter how small (a chirping doo-wah descant for "What a Wonderful World") or how immense ("The Nutcracker" ballet, compressed into eight minutes and rescored for a 15-piece band), it's up to Fisher to find it, adapt it, make it sound good. "Everything has to be made to order," he says.

This show is music-heavy: In addition to "Nutcracker" and "Wonderful World," it has the Pachelbel canon; a new song, "Hanukkah in Santa Monica," by Tom Lehrer; a multi-verse Danish Christmas carol with a brass chorale; and "Santa Lucia" for accordion and orchestra. The day Fisher left New York for the West Coast, 91 pages of music arrived by fax.

"They have to be good readers," he says of the musicians.

Every song must be re-keyed to suit the singers: versatile soprano Ivy Austin, who can be Joan Baez one

minute and Lily Tomlin's bratty Edit-h Ann the next; Richard Muenz, who croons in the voice of Bing and reads mock public-service announcements in the voice of God; and, of course, Garrison Keillor, creator and star, whose pleasant, nondescript baritone opens every broadcast with the nostalgic "I hear that old piano," just as it used to open "A Prairie Home Companion" with Hank Snow's "Hello, Love."

"My singing proves anybody can," Keillor says. "I'm a low common denominator."

As befits a featured attraction, Keillor skips the first hour of rehearsal: the set-up, the sound checks, the first reads.

He arrives on stage at 11 in an old black sweater, off-white pants, moccasins and his trademark red socks. (He has 17 pairs. He reportedly wears them since telling the world in a Lake Wobegon monologue about wearing red socks as a nerd in high school.) He's 48, a big man, 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with baby-fine brown hair.

Today he also has an abscessed tooth. He's stoic. Everyone else is in pain. Staffers from sponsor KQED-FM send out for a doctor, a dentist, penicillin; his manager worries, his producer frets.

Keillor, a perfectionist, goes ahead with rehearsal, checks every musical and sound-effects cue, even hears the station breaks, fillers and other people's songs.

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AP Photo

Garrison Keillor emotes during a performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" at Middlebury College in 1983.

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Keillor

(Continued from Page One)
The one thing he doesn't renege on is the monologue. It's been a quiet week in Lake Umbagog, my home town. ...

It was "A Prairie Home Companion." Supervisor of this show, Keillor talks about 20 minutes of the two-hour show each week to chronicle the people and events of Lake Umbagog, Minn., a loose reworking of his own home town of Anoka, Minn. He had thought to leave it behind when he closed that show in 1987, but Lake Umbagog sketches kept their grip on his listeners. In the second year of "American Radio Company," he brought back the monologue by popular demand.

But it seems that one way he holds everyone in the hall spellbound, including the onstage musicians and crew, is to let the monologue unfold live on the air. No script, no rehearsal.

Though initially greeted with raptures by public radio stations, "American Radio Company" turned out to be not what they expected after 13 years of the familiar, cozy-muffins "Prairie Home Companion."

The show had a rocky first year. Its musical lineup may have been a tad more eclectic, its stories a little more topical, but those were the problems. Audiences were willing to buy into the Manhattan "The Story of Clara," the place of the Middle America of dear Lake Umbagog.

So "American Radio Company of the Air" dropped the redundant half of its title, and Keillor's name

stands widely (as it did on "A Prairie Home Companion") and he enjoys mixing high and low culture in a manner both naive and subtle. For a parody commercial of a Danish bakery, for instance, he sings "When the Rolls Are Served 13 Years," a salve of a fine old evangelical hymn. "When the Roll Is Called Thy Yonder" of a fine old hymn. Likewise, guest artists Bobby McFerrin and his 10-member vocal ensemble, the Vocontra, bring with them the amazing discovery that the Pachelbel canon and Sally Old St. Nicholas have the same harmonic progressions (what musicians call a ground) and can be sung simultaneously. Keillor, who is on stage singing "Jolly Old St. Nicholas," waxes upon this with glee, or at times to glee as he gets in his taciturn Midwestern way.

He treats every guest with the same benign courtesy — even Big Lou, an accordion player with a short, tight dress, cowboy boots, bright red lipstick and teased blond hair. The though Mayor Art Agnos has balked at signing the ordinance. She plays a medley "Santa Lucia" with an expression of rapture eyes closed, chewing her teeth in an uncontrolled flutter.

There are many highlights. There's "Hankabab in Santa Monica," a one-minute play by Lehrer, a political satirist from the 1960s who now teaches math at the University of California, Santa Cruz. It's worth a bit, rhyming

Fame

(Continued from Page 7) or 1989's "Stanley and Iris." During filming of the latter in 1988, a Waterbury, Conn., veteran helped circulate bumper stickers that read, "I'm Not Fond's Husband, Jane."

"It's a good signpost," Miss Fondas said in an interview not long ago. "I can be painted into an image which causes a lot of hostility. I may not be that person but that's irrelevant."

Charles Horton ("Ben Hur") donates time to the National Rifle Association and lobbies against government funding for explicit art. Mike Farrell ("M.A.S.H.") is recognized as one of the nation's strongest voices for civil rights. Singer Jackson Browne, whose concerts are loaded with plugs for causes, said that some fans have taken to yelling, "Just sing!"

Ed Ames is so strongly associated with left-of-center issues that he believes his politics contributed to the 1982 cancellation of his "Love Great" series on CBS.

Mary Tyler Moore, herself a disability, is the international spokesperson for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. In the non-paying position, Miss Moore makes speeches, appears in public service announcements and travels to support the foundation.

Carolee Bernheise has adopted several causes. An animal-rights activist, she does not wear fur. And she dedicates her time to the Starlight Foundation, which grants wishes to children dying from cancer. She and her husband, director Louis Malle, hosted a benefit screening of Malle's film "Au Revoir Les Enfants" for the Starlight Foundation.

Lina Mercalli is on the board of the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential, an organization that works with mentally handicapped children and their families.

Some labor for causes linked to their on-screen characters. Richard Dreyfus, who stars as a senior partner Leland McKenna on "L.A. Law," has made two public service announcements advocating equal protection.

Ray Schneider ("Jaws"), who appeared in Home Box Office's death row drama "Somebody Has to Shoot the Picture," hosted an anti-death penalty screening of the film.

The compact disc for rock star Phil Collins' new album "Steppin' Out" is packaged in recycled cardboard. It bears the message, "Car pool when possible. Turn up your car regularly and keep tires inflated to the recommended pressure. These steps will conserve energy and reduce air pollution."

Not bad. But musician Peter Onorati and Raffi are insisting that their Club be issued in no cardboard packaging at all, saving even more trees.

Rock star Christine Hynde of the Pretenders is an activist for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. She spent one recent morning disrupting hunters as they stalked game in a Maryland corn field. The animal-rights group, whose other celebrity members include A.J. Long, River Phoenix and Jane Wollstone, opposes hunting, the fur industry and using animals for laboratory testing.

There's no script for the monologue; he simply stands alone on stage and talks to the audience, a born storyteller holding us spellbound with tales of a town and people we'll never visit and never meet, but that are more real than all of our neighbors and some of our families.

because the selling point. It's on the banner, he'd say. He's the salesman. He likes having the oriental rug.

Down by the perimeter is the kingdom of Tom Keith, one man's effect guy. (He says that's his in-story name.) "A Prairie Home Companion," he hosts a talk-show for Minnesota Public Radio. He comes to New York on weekends for "American Radio Company."

He commands multiple voices: dogs, seals, pigs. He can also sound exactly like a cork coming out of a bottle and times spinning helplessly on an.

Keith has ransacked books on old-time radio for advice on sound effects but found little useful information, so he makes most of his own. His table contains, of course, coconut shells (horror hooves), low-heeled shoes with sandpaper sole (a walker on concrete), wine goblets (clink).

Also in his corner, he has a little Dutch door with knob, chain-bolt and dead bolt (indispensable for stories of New York) and a window with a Venetian blind. There are walnuts, for the nutcracker, and gatchwork, for Keith to crack on, should never have started those, he says readily.

Then there are his own inventions. A box of plain old cornstarch, massaged with the thumb, makes the thin cold squeak of footsteps in the snow, a heavy-duty aluminum pot lid is better than a gong for a chiming clock. The nutcracker and the mouse king's sword fight is actually a fierce duel for knife and fork.

When the mouse king breaks through the floor, Keith cranks a squeaky plate. "It's congenially hid," he says. "They used to crush peach crates and sled-wood strawberry boxes, but nobody has those any more."

The first-owners arrive before rehearsal ends — partly to get a head start on the perennial Nob Hill parking problem, partly to see if they can catch an early glimpse of Keillor still rehearsing on stage. Mammie sends 3,000. Every ticket sold before Thanksgiving, after just 20 on-air mentions, according to the station. The broadcast benefited KQED-FM, which netted about \$5,000 and a lot of publicity. The show is normally aired from New York, but spends several weeks each season on the road. The broadcast begins on time. It has to. The satellite time-clock starts ticking when the second hand sweeps 12.

A red neon sign lights up. "On the air." Four hours of Irish-themed comedy. Keillor, standing at the old piano on stage, sings the old piano song, advising the room slightly. "Way out in San Francisco the city by the Bay Where spring comes every week-and tries to stay."

The above packs a lot into two hours: music of all kinds, very comedy, jokes, satire. Keillor's musical

Shavano with East St. Louis and Bob Haskins with Arizona, that Austin has to sing it again.

Louise's Radio Theater this night, is about two lovely people, Pete and Jane, in a San Francisco bookstore on Christmas Eve, reminiscing about the Summer of Love, singing that old Don Byas standard "Green is the color of my true love's eyes," but finally unable to break out of their shells.

Keillor didn't write this one, but it bears one of his trademarks: the sardonic skewer. Jane tells Pete about her alternative deli, "Tropic Meats," for which she wasn't ready to be vegetarian but who weren't the animals they were going to eat but had rich, meaningful lives. Who could resist that? Or the story of named Shirley, Goodman and Mercy, who presumably followed her all the days of their lives?

At last, after the Cafe Bouaf commercial and the Venetian a wonderful African chant and the "Nutcracker" parody, which is kind of enlivened but has a couple of good lines ("This isn't the kind of the music you keep discovering more and more things in"), the audience gets what it's really been waiting for.

The lights go down. A single spot illuminates Keillor, who pulls up a wooden stool and begins. "It's been a quiet week in Lake Umbagog, my home town."

Like most of the Lake Umbagog stories, the one he tells is neither comical nor tragedy but a gentle mix of both, tempered with compassion and a very affectionate detachment. Keillor knows every fence post and picket, every virtue and frailty of his little town.

There's no script for the monologue; he simply stands alone on stage and talks to the audience, a born storyteller holding us spellbound with tales of a town and people we'll never visit and never meet, but that are more real than all of our neighbors and some of our families.

One senses from the undertone of resignation in his voice and the dark shadows on his face and eyes, repeated shut in concentration, the ambivalence Keillor feels at returning to "Prairie Home Companion" country. Through pure storytelling, enhanced by the mythic power of imagination, he made Lake Umbagog into an indelible icon of Americana. He thought he had finished it, and he wanted to make "American Radio Company" different, but his public was a wall too high to leap, too smooth to climb, forcing him to remain at work on a canvas that will never be finished.

After the monologue, there's a little more music, a little more talk, a sign-off. But that is all anti-drama. The audience came to hear about Lake Umbagog, to walk its streets and peek in its windows. Keillor, ever the polite Midwestern host, obliged. Even if he would have rather taken them somewhere else.

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