

Knight-Ridder Tribune

Keillor takes radio to the small screen

By Ken Parish Perkins
Dallas Morning News

Garrison Keillor, writer, master storyteller and radio star, has been all over the place lately. His book, "WLT: A Radio Romance," remains a strong seller in bookstores. Each Saturday, he writes, produces and hosts "American Radio Company," aired on 235 public radio stations.

Now he's even on the tube. In fact, "Garrison Keillor's Hello Love" is the second of three specials for PBS. The first aired in November; the third is set for April.

Garrison Keillor, television star? Well, yes. And no.

Loyal Keillor fans nervous about Keillor leaving his radio days need not worry. Nor will they be disappointed by his television presence, although those who never have seen him will agree that his glasses look too large for his face, his grin is a bit one-sided and his facial expressions are as descriptive as imagined.

"Hello Love" (Friday, 9:30 p.m.) does more than provide a glimpse into what it was like to be in the audience during a taping of "A Prairie Home Companion," the variety radio

WHAT: "Garrison Keillor's Hello Love."

WHEN/WHERE: 9:30 p.m. Friday, KHET Channel 11 on Chronicle, Channel 10 on Oceanic.



Keillor

show that Keillor hosted for 13 years on public radio.

The hour-long show is "A Prairie Home Companion," stitching together music, monologues and sketches from the video archives of the program, with some new material created by Keillor especially for Valentine's Day.

"This program celebrates something we don't want to seem too interested in," Keillor says during "Hello Love." "We Midwesterners are naturals for radio. We have a wonderful sense of indirection, and we never look at people when we talk to them, anyway. We don't want to look too interested. So when we say to someone, 'I love you, I need you, please be with me and be my love forever,' we say it over our shoulder as we look for our car keys."

Most of the footage in "Hello Love" is taken from some of the 18 broadcasts videotaped by the Disney Channel, which had planned to bring Keillor to cable TV. It never happened. And when PBS brought up the idea of taking the "best of" collage of sketches and airing them in quarterly specials,

Keillor said sure, let's do it — but under one condition: that nothing change in the process.

PBS obliged. "Hello Love" is an oddity because it is radio on television. But it's a nice and effective oddity. In fact, set the VCR. It's a collector's item because it's Keillor doing what he always does but with the added treat of seeing him do it.

Viewers who never have heard his tales of Lake Wobegon — the mythical "town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average" — will find it surprisingly intriguing.

"Hello Love" features guitarists Doc Watson and Leo Kottke performing "Just A Little Lovin'," Emmylou Harris and her Angel Band singing "If I Could Only Win Your Love," as well as some regulars, such as sound effects wizard Tom Keith.

But mostly it's Keillor, dressed in a white, long-sleeved shirt with black trousers and suspenders, standing on a dimly lit stage, singing and telling amusing stories into a boom microphone. There's no special set; the backdrop is a brick wall at the rear of the stage.

American Public Radio, which distributes Keillor's show, says the television specials aren't designed to give Keillor more exposure to boost

"American Radio Company," which has yet to reach the number of people of its predecessor. Keillor left "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1987 with the intention of moving to Denmark and concentrating on his writing.

Two years later, he was back on radio, broadcasting from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and later the Lambs Theater in midtown Manhattan. This year, Keillor is testing Symphony Space on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Last year, Keillor took his show on the road, doing live performances in various cities.

For those who might not have heard his radio show, he begins "Hello Love" by saying, "I do a radio show every Saturday night around supper. A live radio show coast to coast in a theater with all kinds of music and stories."

If "Hello Love" is a ploy to land more listeners, it's a good ploy. "American Radio Company" may not be "A Prairie Home Companion," but it's still great radio, which is all but a thing of the past.

Even Keillor acknowledges this fact. Midway through "Hello Love" he introduces Tom Keith as "the greatest sound-effects man in radio today," but later adds, half-jokingly, "although this is not the compliment it once was."