

A Keillor on the loose

'Hello Love' a Wobegon valentine to PBS viewers

HOW OFTEN can you actually savor a television program? Taste its delicious flavor like chocolates from your box of valentine candy? Not very often. But Valentine's Day offers you just such an opportunity.

"Garrison Keillor's Hello Love," on Ch. 13 tonight at 9, is one tasty bonbon you shouldn't overlook. This talented storyteller, who chronicles the fictional Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot, and the decades cannot improve," celebrates love, in



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song and monologues, taking us back to childhood days. Remember those lace-trimmed valentines the girls in school would make? Keillor vividly does, in detail, during his News from Lake Wobegon monologue, which reflects on growing up in the Midwest.

He even brokenheartedly recalls getting a valentine addressed to him but with someone else's name crossed out. Surely that's happened, too, to someone

out there in TV land.

What's so amazing about this talented individual from Minnesota Public Radio, whose voice is like a warm, friendly whisper, is that he trusts in words. He's never fallen into the trap of assuming viewers have short attention spans. Our politicians, who have to talk in sound bites, should take a lesson from him. He delivers long-winded, funny monologues, and expects you to follow along. It's not hard, either, especially when he's delivering his poem "The Ballad of the Finn Who Would Not Take a Sauna."

For those who haven't heard it, it relates how the "iron rangers," the tough rangers who travel around on snowmobiles in northeast Minnesota (where it's winter nine months a year), go into shacks with boiling rocks, take a sauna, jump into a frozen lake and "claim it was enjoy'ble." All, of course, but the Finn who would not take a sauna. "It isn't that I can't, I simply do not wanna. To jump into a frozen lake is not my fondest wish. Just because I'm a Finn, does not mean I'm a fish."

But wait until you hear what happens when the Finn falls in love and has to prove his manhood by jumping into the frozen lake.

Keillor, with an organist, and his sound effects man Tom Keith at his side, keeps a radio format even though it's television. He greets his audience in song, making everyone feel glad to have tuned in. Musically, the hour carries out the love theme, even when Doc Watson, accompanied by Leo Kottke on guitar, and bass player Michael Coleman, do a great upbeat number, "Just a Little Lovin'."

Also on hand are Emmylou Harris and her Angel Band, who do several numbers, including "The Sweetest Gift, a Mother's Smile."

The music numbers are folded into the hour like



WITH AN A-FINN-ITY for the Scandinavian antics of Lake Wobegon, Keillor'll steal your heart tonight at 9 on Ch. 13.

whipping cream into a batter. The pacing is perfect; Keillor is never rushed. He glides with ease from the latest news from Lake Wobegon, where it hasn't snowed yet — "the town looks old without it and curled up at the edges" — to an occasional commercial like "Touch and Glow," for growing large recreational vegetables. And then come his stories.

THE BEST of the night is when he relates how Clint Benson, the mayor of the town, and his wife, Irene, became the first family in town to own a cordless telephone. It's a hilarious monologue as he tells how Clint went around town demonstrating the phone, calling Clarence, his brother, from Carl's backyard, and finally forgetting where he put it. He had to use Carl's phone, to call Clarence, to give him his number so he'd ring the phone and he'd hear his telephone ring. Problem is, it chirps. And when it did, another neighbor picked it up and on the story goes, getting more complicated and funnier and funnier as it goes along.

Then there's "Buster the Show Dog," his cliffhanger for the night. I kid you not, as Jack Paar used to say, this is one terrific show. Tuning in Keillor is akin to dropping in to the town's general store to warm yourself by the potbelly stove, but in truth what you were looking for was some town gossip and good storytelling. Keillor's the best, a national treasure.