

Garrison Keillor returning to roots

Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune

MINNEAPOLIS — If Lake Wobegon has a band, now would be a good time to strike it up — play a little of that song that goes, “Well, look who’s comin’ through that door. ...”

Yes, Garrison Keillor is coming back.

After almost five years of self-imposed exile, most of it spent in New York City, Keillor has decided to make St. Paul’s World Theater home base of his weekly public-radio program once again. He plans to move back in July, and already has bought some wooded land in western Wisconsin and a small log house built by Swedish immigrants a century ago, and plans to move it onto the property.

“We looked at other places. And then we were struck by the obvious: St. Paul, the World Theater, why not? It was good once, it can be good again. So our new home will be our old home.”

That doesn’t sound much like the bitter Garrison Keillor who shut down “A Prairie Home Companion” in 1987 at the height of its popularity and left Minneapolis-St. Paul complaining that a prying local press had robbed him of his privacy and made it difficult for him to do the unobtrusive observing and listening that was crucial to his writing.

“I think five years of exile solves a person’s problems very neatly, very nicely,” Keillor said in an interview last week. “When you live in one place for 45 years, as I did, you accumulate a lot of history. Every street corner and every building, everything you lay eyes on, has associations for you and stories.

“After five years away, it all seems entirely fresh,” he said. “It’s like moving back to a new place, except some of my best friends are here, people who’ve known me long enough and know me well enough to be able to tell me when I’m wrong, tell me to

cut it out.”

Keillor professed not to worry about living a fishbowl existence again.

“I’ll be coming back as a beloved old artifact,” he said. “And an old artifact is only so interesting. I’m a museum piece. I’m an old radio announcer/ ...”

“The main reason for moving back is that I can’t talk about Lake Wobegon and not live here,” he said. “If you talk for a living, you develop an ear. You soak up what you hear around you, and you imitate people unconsciously.

“I’m starting to get a New York accent, and that’s not good. I just got through recording a whole album of stories, and I listened to that voice, and it’s much more a New York voice than I’m comfortable with.”

Minnesota Public Radio president Bill Kling said he expects an enthusiastic reaction from the 273 public radio stations that carry Keillor’s show.

Keillor plans to do 32 original editions of “American Radio Company” next season, beginning in October. He said about 18 editions of the show will originate from the World Theater, with eight to 10 from New York and the rest performed on the road.

He hasn’t decided whether to reclaim the “Prairie Home Companion” title. More likely to change with the move, he said, is the show’s musical orientation. Unlike the folk-flavored “Prairie Home Companion,” “American Radio Company” has favored Big Band music, Broadway show tunes and classic pop. Keillor said he is interested in doing more musical experimentation, such as having the house orchestra play classical, folk and gospel music.

He plans to live on 80 acres in Wisconsin. Home will be an old log house he will move by truck from its location near Grantsburg, Wis. Old Swedish newspapers under the house’s wallpaper date to the 1880s, Keillor said.

And who will be living in his little house in the woods?

“Well, my wife and I, I surely hope,” Keillor said, sidestepping a question about the rumored breakup of his marriage. “If not, I shall be very, very lonely.”



Garrison Keillor