

# Keillor comes full circle, back to the Midwestern World

**Garrison Keillor's "American Radio Company" — Saturday at 5 p.m. on KSJN, 99.5 FM, and Minnesota Public Radio stations statewide**

**G**iven Garrison Keillor's affection for Biblical references, it's tempting to characterize tomorrow's broadcast of his "American Radio Company" from St. Paul's World Theater as the second coming of Lake Wobegon's prodigal son.

More than five years have passed since Keillor decided to stop production of "A Prairie Home Companion," the folksy radio variety show through which he had become a national star, and headed east in search of peace and writing time.

More than three years have passed since he got homesick for radio and launched the more cosmopolitan "American Radio Company" in New York City.

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# Holston/Keillor plans 32-show season

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Now he's back where he started. Although Keillor has broadcast "American Radio Company" from Minnesota venues several times in the past three years, tomorrow's show will be his first as a resident Midwesterner (he has a cabin in western Wisconsin) since June 1987. This may not be cause for killing a fatted calf, but it should be reason enough to eat your hot dish tomorrow with the radio tuned to Minnesota Public Radio.

Tomorrow's show, for which bleachers have been added to the 916 permanent seats in response to the heavy ticket demand, will be the first of six consecutive broadcasts from the World Theater.

## Part-time road show

After that, Keillor will take the show to New York for four weeks and perform a Christmas show from Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Then, after a brief vacation, he'll return to the World Theater for six more shows in January and February. It's probably safe to assume competition for tickets to those shows will be less heated, particularly competition from non-Minnesotans. After another road trip, including a month in New York, Keillor will bring "American Radio Company" back to St. Paul for four more broadcasts, capping its longest season to date — 32 performances. "We have three nice runs at the world, at the beginning, kind of the middle and at the end of the season," said Christine Tschida, the show's producer. "So it continually comes back to the World Theater and really establishes it as our home base."

Tschida said listeners this season should expect more emphasis on Keillor's Lake Wobegon monologues and a slightly different approach to the musical content, though three-season veteran Rob Fisher will still be in charge.

"We had a lot of shows with a big orchestra last year, the Coffee Club Orchestra, and the musicians are terrific," Tschida said. "But a lot of them are based in New York, so we're going to be using some local musicians and we're going to be going a little bit smaller and simpler. Garrison likes to sing, and he feels his voice is probably better in front of a simpler instrumentation."

## Another opening

In the season opener, Keillor will be working with a six-piece band, guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins and a 12-member choir from Plymouth Congregational Church. Support in the sketches will come from actress-singer Ivy Austin, the last remaining member of the Broadway Local Theater Company that Keillor assembled in 1989, and sound-effects whiz Tom Keith, an indispensable contributor to both of Keillor's radio series.

A number of Minnesota performers, including singer-songwriters Kate MacKenzie and Ann Reed, jazz pianist Butch Thompson and mandolin marvel Peter Ostroushko, will be featured on the first half dozen broadcasts. MacKenzie, a "Prairie Home Companion" mainstay and occasional "American Radio Company" guest, said many local musicians are excited about Keillor's return here. "He always provided such a wonderful forum for musicians in town and really did a lot for so many of us, getting our music out and heard around the country," she said.

But there's not a lot of clamoring by local musicians to get Keillor's attention, she added. "Around here, he's one of ours. People are just happy he's back." Many of the shows will have themes. Tschida said that, among other things, Keillor "wants to do a Bean Festival and a Rhubarb Pie Festival, with an actual bake-off." Keillor and other writers develop those themes in quirky response to "where you're going to be, what time of year it is or what holiday is coming up," she said. "For instance, Saxophone Day is the first weekend in November. So we thought, well, we'd better book a saxophone player on that date. Then it also came up that it's the anniversary of [existentialist writer] Albert Camus' birthday, so Garrison said maybe we ought to do a segment on 'sax-istentialism.'"

This weekend, however, they're keeping it simple. Tschida said the theme of the season opener "is the season opener and [getting] back to the World Theater." And not a moment too soon, some would say.

## World history

Minnesota Public Radio bought the World Theater in 1981 mainly to

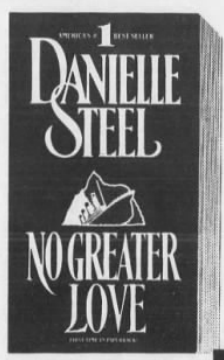
provide a permanent home for "A Prairie Home Companion," which was developing a national following. Three years later, falling plaster drove Keillor and company out of the deteriorating 1910 vaudeville house, and MPR announced plans for a \$1.5 million restoration. When fundraising efforts fell far short, MPR took out a second mortgage on its headquarters building in downtown St. Paul, then appealed to the city and the Legislature for financial help. The project wound up costing more than \$3.5 million and was barely half-paid for when the theater reopened in 1986. A year later, Keillor said he was weary of the rigors of weekly radio and the scrutiny of the local press, and he left town.

In 1990, after the World Theater had posted a \$150,000 annual loss for three years running, MPR laid off 10 of the theater's 12 full-time employees and turned it into a rental hall. Since then, the World has been used for comedy concerts, debates, even a televised town

meeting. More often than not, however, it has stood empty. So the city of St. Paul has at least as much reason as local musicians be heartened by Keillor's return. Teresa Sterns, a project director in St. Paul's department of planning and economic development, said no one expects much direct economic impact. "He's scheduled for 16 performances in a 900-seat theater," she said. "The only reason there'll be any impact at all is that the show's at 5 p.m., so it's likely people will eat something afterwards."

"What it does do is help us market our family-friendly, down-home kind of downtown," she said. "Garrison Keillor having a folksy image and having international recognition with that image helps our downtown because, once again, we can say: 'St. Paul — Home of Garrison Keillor.'"

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