

'The Body' in a 'Wobegon' War of Words

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ST. PAUL, Minn.—He likes to portray himself as meek and mushy, so bland, as he puts it, that he makes linoleum look like great art.

But these days, Garrison Keillor has an edge to him.

He's taking on Gov. Jesse Ventura. And his radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," normally such a mellow mix, bristles now with insults directed the governor's way:

"You have the IQ of a salad bar."

"If you were any dumber, we'd have to wa-

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FEUD: Garrison Keillor Tangles With Jesse 'The Body' Ventura

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"You couldn't pour water out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel."

This is more than just a personal tiff. This is a culture clash.

Keillor is a Minnesota icon. An aloof, inward man, he somehow compels 2.6 million listeners to tarry in the on-air block party he creates every Saturday night, to listen to his stories and dance to his music and to feel as though they know him and he knows them, as though they might all one day meet to swap jokes over a backyard grill. "A Prairie Home Companion" is celebrating its 25th anniversary this season, and it's attracting more fans than ever.

So when Keillor starts slamming the governor, folks around here listen.

And of course, this isn't just any governor. This is Jesse "The Body" Ventura, the gun-packing, blunt-talking, bald and brawny head of state, the former board-draped wrestler, the ex-Navy SEAL. The only governor who's not only a tourist attraction but also the inspiration for his own line of action figures. And a Minnesota icon in his own right.

Ventura makes a just-about-irresistible target for a humorist. And Keillor has succumbed to temptation with gusto, touching off a very public spat with the governor that has set Minnesotans buzzing and added a caustic new twist to the gentle humor of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"I'm all in favor of a good feud," Keillor says.

Good thing, because he's in the middle of a doozy.

It started when Keillor described the new governor in Time magazine as a "great big honking bullet-headed shovel-faced mutha who talks in a steroid growl." Next, Keillor whipped out—in three weeks—a satirical novel about a wrestler turned governor: "Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente." Ventura promptly accused Keillor of "cheating" him by rushing the book to print before his own ghost-written autobiography, "I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic From the Bottom Up."

Next move, Ventura: The Gov announced plans to kill state funding for Minnesota Public Radio, which produces "Prairie Home Companion." He denies he was out for revenge. Previously, however, he had responded to Keillor's snipes with this credo: "I don't get mad, I get even."

Whatever his motive, Ventura argued that Minnesota Public Radio does not need state funds, which pay for transmitters in rural areas. He accused unnamed public radio fat cats of getting rich while accepting taxpayer subsidies. Then he joked that he would like a peek at Keillor's income tax returns.

Instead, he has received a weekly on-air wallop.

"We have a lot to fight about," explains Keillor, a tall, geeky-looking type with glasses sliding down his nose and hair ever flopping on his forehead. The antipathy, he adds, runs deep: "The governor owns Jet Skis and loves to get on them on a quiet Sunday afternoon and ride the hell out of them. I'm the person sitting on the porch of a cabin on shore, quietly wishing the person making that infernal buzzing noise would hit a dock and break a leg."



Gov. Jesse Ventura

Ventura's tell-like-it-should-be style makes him an easy subject for parody. The governor has said, for example, that college athletes should be exempt from taking classes so they can concentrate on their games; that drunken Irishmen must have laid out St. Paul's crooked streets; that if Native Americans are allowed to spear fish according to their traditions, he should be able to catch his dinner by tossing bombs in a lake, Navy SEAL style.

But Keillor so far has refrained from picking apart the governor's pronouncements. Instead, he delights in sending up Ventura's populist image, depicting him as a thick-headed egomaniac in love with power but fed up with the burden of running a state.

In one recent skit, Keillor had

the governor saying he preferred Hollywood to St. Paul because he could dress in Day-Glo bikini briefs and a feather headress without the media getting on his case. "People really appreciate me there," he had the governor say. "They don't come up to me and bitch about the schools and stuff."

The insults Keillor reels off with such zest mark a departure for "Prairie Home Companion."

He usually fills his two hours of air time with a homespun blend of folksy music and clean-cut skits, like his "Guy Noir" parody of detective novels. In his sleepy, halting voice—a voice that seems to get where it's going almost by luck—Keillor introduces the tunes and reads hilariously serious mock advertisements for "sponsors" such as the Ketchup Advisory Board, the American Duct Tape Council and Bebo-pareop Rhubarb Pie. Each week, he also runs through the news from Lake Wobegon, the hometown he invented for himself and for all who long to return to—or are glad to have escaped from—small-town America.

That format has proved enduringly popular. "Prairie Home Companion's" audience has doubled in the last eight years, and it's now broadcast live on 467 stations.

Although the average listener is at least 35 years old and college educated, the program attracts all types. Ten-year-olds ask Keillor for autographs. Gen-Xers and retirees alike line up at 6:30 a.m. to secure tickets to live broadcasts. Listeners tune in from Tasmania on the Internet. And the show's top markets are not in the rural Minnesota of Lake Wobegon but in San Francisco, Washington, New York, Boston and Seattle.

Even he slams against Ventura, so seemingly parochial, play well to a broader audience. It doesn't hurt that actor Tim Russell does a wicked impersonation of the governor's distinct Minnesota accent, flattening his vowels so fast they all but bounce.

"You start reading as the governor," Russell says, "and the audience just goes nuts."

It's unclear whether Ventura is among that audience. He did tell an interviewer a while back that Keillor "makes Minnesota proud." But he hasn't commented on "Prairie Home Companion" since Keillor started spoofing him in earnest. He doesn't have to. While the show is a hit by radio standards, it attracts less than half the audience of, say, a typical televised wrestling match. It hasn't made a dent in Ventura's 72% approval rating.

So the governor can dismiss the show this way: "Lake Wobegon is fiction. I'm the real thing."

Yet Lake Wobegon has retained its appeal far longer than most real-life politicians. Fans say they find the weekly monologue calming. It's like "a letter from home," one California listener wrote Keillor. Mary Kay Schoen, a technical writer from Washington, agreed: "In D.C. I have the feeling I'm living in let's land," she said. "[Lake Wobegon] seems like the real world."

Keillor is a master at creating that world.

Perched on a stool at the edge of the stage, his tuxedo pants hiked up to reveal red socks, his eyes closed as he conjures the words, Keillor spins tales of family spats and neighborly on-upmanship, of homecoming dances and stinky manure, of

can't-fail business schemes that everyone knows are doomed. His verbal portraits of self-righteously stoic Lutherans and grimly guilt-ridden Catholics "take you to the edge of absolute blasphemy," longtime listener Jim Hughes, a Vermont retiree, said admiringly. "You're hanging over the pit. Then at the last minute, he pulls you back."

Keillor sketches out his Wobegon monologues before each show, but as he unfurls them, the stories often meander in directions that surprise him. That's part of the fun of listening: trying to figure out how he'll pull the stray strands into a coherent whole.

"Sometimes we'll be riding in the car and we'll hear him and we'll just keep on driving until the show's over," said Frank Lunetta, a fan from St. Paul. "We waste a lot of gas."

In addition to the Wobegon segment, Keillor writes all of the show's humor. He skewers himself at times, having a character tell him, "You have the personality of a turtle on Valium."

These days, however, he more often jabs at the governor. "Don't strain yourself making sentences," one of his characters advises Ventura. "Just grunt."

For all the mileage he's gotten out of his feud, Keillor said he's weary of the game and plans to write the governor out of his scripts. "It's only interesting for a while," he said.

Such restraint, if he shows it, may disappoint some listeners.

"You anticipate certain things," Hughes said. "Like the monologue. Or the razzing of Jesse Ventura."