

By Milton Bass

... and all the children are above average

Audience reaction to 'A Prairie Home Companion'

As a person who has been in the company of several thousand audiences during the course of my professional career, I have made some observations and drawn some conclusions about them, some of which you may agree with and some which might be considered elitist.

First of all, I have learned that audiences are not to be trusted. Their reaction to the pleasure, worth and significance of an event can be so diametrically opposed to reason and taste that one cannot base decisions on their judgments. "But the audience loved it!" is one of the lamest excuses ever thought up by fourth graders. Yet, quite often, in self justification, a reviewer will report that despite his own misgivings, "the audience loved it."

Secondly, audiences have become so self-conscious over their possible inability to "get it," that they respond wildly and enthusiastically to anything that might be considered amusing or beyond the ordinary. I have sat through the decades when the standing ovation turned from a tribute into an inane right. I have seen performers brought back for bow after bow when the curtain should have fallen on their heads immediately.

There is a legend about a young tenor's first performance at the Milan Opera House. At the end of his first solo the audience yelled and clapped so loudly that he was forced to sing it again. This happened three times in a row until finally the young man held up his hand and announced that he didn't have the strength to do it again. "You will keep on doing it," the audience responded, "until you get it right."



Garrison Keillor

The audience at Tanglewood on some nights is especially tight. It has become custom since the turn of the century for concert audiences to be quiet between movements of a symphony, but nowadays there are always a few who are either new to the game or are so overcome that they have to respond by instant applause. This is picked up by a few other nervous concertgoers but once they realize that the majority are sitting silently, they make believe they were swatting mosquitoes and sink back in their chairs.

Which brings me to Garrison Keillor, who recently presented his radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," from the Shed at Tanglewood. The event sold out almost immediately after being announced and according to the reviews, the audience loved every minute of the multi-hour program.

I have had a problem with Gar-

risson Keillor during the past quarter century. His radio show received cult status almost immediately when it started 25 years ago. It was so different from the commercial radio shows that it provided an opportunity for culture snobs to embrace a public medium and make it their own. There are still people who make a big deal out of not watching commercial television or listening to commercial radio

shows. I will not spell out details of what they are missing. As a wannabe culture maven, I wanted to like "A Prairie Home Companion" and listened to it faithfully every Saturday night I was not out getting drunk at some cheap bar. I listened and I listened and I listened, and I was mostly bored, bored, bored. There were some funny moments, there were some good musical interludes, there were some clever sketches and monologues. But they were so far apart that I would get down on the floor and do pushups to exhaust my body as well as my mind.

The big giveaway from audiences are the nervous titters that are perpetually there during what is supposed to be a comic performance. The people are so ready to laugh and applaud that they sometimes go nuts during the announcement of a station break. The reaction to a joke that is really funny can be frightening because so much tension is being released at a nuclear cadence. This is also true of the Mark Russell political diatribe on Public Television.

The most obvious tension point

on Keillor's show occurs when he does his monologue, "The News From Lake Wobegon," which goes on and on and on until you have the vague feeling that it might never stop. Most of the ideas and words have neither luster nor brilliance and you wonder why the man can't sense what is happening.

But listen to the audience rather than Keillor, and it becomes a game that occupies the mind. The titters and giggles that break out like a light summer rain are perpetual and it's a wonder some of the people don't have nervous breakdowns before the ordeal is over.

I have found Keillor's books to be much more rewarding than his radio shows, but maybe that is because it is easy to drift off in your own ruminations while reading them. In any case, I wish him well in his chosen career.

Camp Care Packages

Any Camp, Anywhere! Loaded With Goodies ...

(also great for travel, birthdays, etc.)

THE GIFTED CHILD

21 Chestnut Street, Lenox, MA 01461 • 413-547-8111 • 25 Pleasant St., Pittsfield, MA 01201 • 413-439-3335

The Lion's Den

FOOD • DRINK ENTERTAINMENT

THE BERKSHIRE'S FINEST AND FRIENDLIEST PUB.

Serving pub fare from soups, salads and sandwiches to delicious desserts.

Come try our selection of