

Keillor lights up Shed

Popular radio host adds local flavor to Minnesota mix

By Clarence Fanto
Berkshire Eagle Staff

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LENOX — "It's not a concert," Garrison Keillor intoned with a sly look on his face and a wink in his voice. "We're here to have fun." It was seconds before 6 on Saturday evening and Keillor, who at 6-foot-4 cuts an imposing figure in his formal garb and is often compared to Mark Twain and Will Rogers, was completing his warm-up of the sellout audience at Tanglewood's Koussevitzky Music Shed.

In a whirlwind, bravura demonstration of his many-talented prowess, he had just run through a pair of vintage rock standards with his band (including a pretty fair rendition of Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire") and he had recited the accomplishments of classical piano virtuoso Emanuel Ax, his major guest star, while saluting the setting as if he were a Berkshires regular.

As the red on-air signal lit up and the engineer cued the band and the host, the mesmerized crowd of 13,483 was about to witness a live, two-hour broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion," public radio's near-legendary variety show that has achieved cult status as the crown jewel of vintage, live broadcasting since it first went on the air in 1973.

Actually, as Keillor related minutes later, it was not his first time in The Shed — he had attended a Boston Symphony concert years ago with violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, whom he later wooed and wed. When he was 94, Nilsson, his third wife, presented him with a blond-haired princess of a daughter, Maia. After a tempestuous, well-chronicled private life, Keillor seems to have achieved a semblance of comfortable domesticity. Jenny and Maia could be seen in the wings, awaiting the conclusion of the broadcast; the host carried Maia on his shoulder for his final, on-stage bow.

Keillor, a Minnesota-bred writer, humorist and the quintessential storyteller of our times, requires no comparison to literary figures of the past: He is a distinctive, one-of-a-kind original who attracts a devoted flock of followers intent on building their Saturday evenings.

KEILLOR, continued on A4



Sharon DeGale / Berkshire Eagle

Garrison Keillor carries his 2-year-old daughter, Maia, on his shoulders after rehearsal Friday night for Saturday's show in the Shed.



Garrison Keillor, right, and his team of radio personalities run through scenes to prepare for Saturday's live on-air performance of 'A Prairie Home Companion' at Tanglewood.

Keillor from AI
around his weekly wireless visitations. Off the air, he has written 13 books, including a half-dozen bestsellers; he has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and currently contributes to *Time* magazine, and he writes a fascinating personal advice column for *Salon*, the online magazine. No surprise, then, that reserved tickets became as scarce as hen's teeth shortly after they went on sale in early spring. The Tanglewood performance concluded the show's 25th anniversary tour. Keillor discontinued the broadcast for two years, beginning in 1987, to write the *Great American Novel* in Denmark; he returned to New York City less than a year later, without a novel but realizing how much he missed live radio. Reviving "Prairie" as "The American Radio Company," Keillor returned to his roots in St. Paul, Minn., and to the original name for the program, in 1993.

Those who witnessed the Tanglewood show or heard it on the air this weekend (regionally via the WAMC Northeast Public Radio Network) were bound to have been impressed by the consummate professionalism, the smooth melding of script, sound effects, live music, skits, monologues and the rest of the eclectic mix that makes "Prairie" a singular pop cultural phenomenon. But an afternoon spent backstage during the hectic, seemingly chaotic final hours leading up to airtime revealed the not-so-secret elements that attract an estimated 2.7 million listeners a week on nearly 500 public radio stations nationwide to Keillor's unique brand of down-home Americana.

Keillor's road trips are designed not only to forge an even more personal link with his listeners — nearly one million people have attended live "Prairie" broadcasts — but to inject local flavor to spice up the Minnesota-based mix of ingredients.

Thus, the Berkshire Highlanders Pipe & Drum Band was warming up for its stint, Norumbega Harmony, a Cambridge-based singing group, was preparing several Shaker hymns (Keillor promoted Hancock Shaker Village several times during the broadcast), and, most notably, the

Surplus from AI
ing proposals in a version to be sent to Cellucci for approval. The new cash may affect debate over proposed state tax reductions. This fall, voters will decide on tax cuts that together could reduce state revenues by about \$2 billion a year. House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran wants a reduction of the state income tax to 5 percent, conditioned on a strong economy. Senate President Thomas F. Birmingham opposes the reduc-

tion, and would prefer that the surplus go to programs like the Senate's plan to expand senior prescription drug benefits. Cellucci's administration and finance secretary, Steve Crosby, said that the governor must perform a "delicate balancing act" of spending and restraint. His strategy is to strike the proper balance between depressing the rate of the growth in core state spending, while meeting the demands of key programs, and avoid any fiscal crises," Crosby said.

revered pianist Ax, a summertime fixture at Tanglewood, was on stage doing a run-through of Debussy's 12-minute "Estampes," (Prints), which he would perform complete during the first hour of the broadcast. It turned out, however, that Ax — who confessed backstage that he was "totally panicked" — had an equally major and unexpected role to play. He had been recruited as the star and the linchpin of Keillor's trademark skit, "Guy Noir, Radio Private Eye," a spoof on the Sam Spade rumpled detective character of the '40s.

Ax was going over Keillor's script for the 16-minute skit that casts him as Max Sanders, a classical piano player obsessed with stage fright and his efforts to overcome it. One suggested solution: Perform John Cage's 4.33, a composition that consists of four minutes, thirty-three seconds of silence (for any instrument). "It's always hard to walk on the stage," Ax confessed, when asked whether he was more anxious about his Debussy performance or about his comedy acting debut. Also on stage running through their material were pianist Richard Dworsky, the composer and arranger who has served as the show's music coordinator for 14 years, and members of the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, the show's house orchestra made up of an improbable combo: Andy Stein, a Manhattan-based violin and saxophone player; Pat Donohue, a guitarist from St. Paul; Arnie Kinsella, a percussionist from Staten Island, N.Y.; and bass player Greg Hippen, who crosses over from classical to jazz to rhythm and blues.

And, waiting in the wings to rehearse their skits and bits, were members of Keillor's acting troupe — Sue Scott, a character actress and mistress of many voices, and Tim Russell, also a vocal chameleon.

The cast member who arouses the greatest fascination, besides the host himself, is Tom Keith, the wizard of sound effects and character voices who travels with props and is able, using his own voice, to simulate fireworks, firecrackers and much else.

You have to see his prop kit to appreciate the wizardry — old, hard-soled leather shoes to simulate walking, a box of cornstarch to re-create the sound of walking in the snow, an old-fashioned

doorbell, and a pair of sandpaper blocks (for the sound of a train). Pulling everything together like an air-traffic controller in the hours before the broadcast is producer Christine Tschida, stopwatch in hand, timing segments and anxiously awaiting the Main Man. ("We've got to get Garrison to the stage for a script rehearsal," she tells an associate shortly before 3 p.m.)

But Keillor is sequestered backstage, unapproachable, furiously pounding away at his laptop, writing, rewriting and seemingly oblivious to the commotion.

After some preliminary rehearsal late Friday afternoon, he shambles into the Shed around 2:30 Saturday afternoon, somewhat disheveled, scowling, shoulders stooped and deeply preoccupied, wearing a T-shirt, Bermuda shorts and sandals. At this point, just another Guy from Minnesota. But all that changes the minute he walks on stage, a commanding presence, to run through most of the scripts, skits and songs; there's no rehearsal for his 20-minute *News from L. le Wobegon* monologue.

It would take an army of academics and psychoanalysts to come up with an astute understanding of the demons still driving Keillor at 57. Despite a stunning track record as a writer and broadcaster, despite the national arts and humanities medal awarded at a White House ceremony last September, despite a cottage industry of "Prairie" memorabilia available online, on the phone or at a store near you, the man seems still skeptical of his own success.

In person and off-stage, Keillor appears bemused and bewildered by the worship of his listeners and by the grip he continues to hold on the American imagination.

On stage, however, any lingering insecurities peel away and a commanding, charismatic figure takes charge. Keillor knows exactly what he wants, how he wants it, and his supporting cast appears to be in awe of his prodigious talent, and his 24/7 commitment.

The rehearsals seem disjointed and unfocused, more like an early warm-up than the final run-through. "It feels a little rocky up here, I'm a little lost," the host acknowledges.

After reading through the "Guy Noir" segment, the longest element of the show other than the monologue, Keillor promises some revisions and some cuts. After some 90 minutes of stop-and-start rehearsals, he disappears to a room backstage, where he'll be rewriting almost up to the air, apart from the requisite shave and changeover to his debonair black suit and red tie.

The broadcast is seamless, as perfect as one can imagine; the problems that cropped up in rehearsal are resolved; some of the weaker material has been trimmed.

The crowd is well-pleased, and then some.

D2 — Monday, July 3, 2000

ENTERTAINMENT

On the Web: www.BerkshireEagle.com

Crowd at Tanglewood connects with Keillor

By Clarence Fanto
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LENOX — It was clear from the opening seconds of Saturday's special event at the Koussevitzky Music Shed that this would be an awesome evening.

As the final stop on its 25th anniversary tour, Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" originated its live, national public radio broadcast from Tanglewood "in the Berkshire Mountains, one of the nation's most beautiful places," as the host put it at the top of the show.

Keillor spent several minutes extolling the virtues of the Boston Symphony's summer home as the leading site in the country for music as well as scenic beauty, for reasons that soon became apparent: his third wife, violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, spent a summer at Tanglewood in the Boston University Tanglewood Institute for high school-age performers some 10 years ago.

"Our second date was at Tanglewood," Keillor sang in a guitar-accompanied account of their Berkshires courtship, which began eight years ago. "I'm not sure what we heard, it could have been Beethoven's Sixth or his Twenty-third." Portraying himself as "just another redneck in love with a duchess — love takes you places you could never go alone," Keillor immediately endeared himself to the large crowd, already primed for a lovefest with their hero, the creator extraordinaire of the nation's sole surviving live radio variety show.

Keillor moved on to a sharply written yet affectionate satire on how Americans celebrate Independence Day — beer, babes and fireworks, all to show the British how "we cleaned their clocks in 1776 and we're not like them in any way, shape or form." Sound effects guru Tom Keith supplied the accompanying aural depictions of fast motorboats, fireworks, baseball bats cracking a

home run and beer drinking.

Keillor made the most of his surroundings, at least on the air; famous for arriving on location just 24 hours before air time and spending all his waking hours alone in a hotel room or at the performance hall writing, rewriting and rehearsing, he nonetheless utilized research provided by his staff's local contacts to give the broadcast a distinctive, home-grown flavor.

The show's house band, the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, offered some Shaker dance reels, giving the host an opportunity to extol nearby Hancock Shaker Village as a lead-in to guest performers Norumbega Harmony, a 50-voice Boston-area singing group dedicated to the performance of Shaker tunes and anthems.

And, in a ditty set to the famous tune from Hovd's "Surprise Symphony," Keillor wittily re-created the not-so-imaginary frustrations of an orchestra musician on stage observing the increasingly

prevalent, distracting misbehavior (coughing, snoring, program-rustling) of some members of the listening audience.

Perhaps improbably, the leading guest star of the show was classical pianist Emanuel Ax, a central figure at Tanglewood for nearly 25 years, who performed Debussy's "Estampes" (Prints) complete, at 12 minutes-plus an especially generous allotment for classical music on "Prairie." It's an ideal work for an outdoor performance space, and Ax (not normally associated with French Impressionism) offered a languid yet compelling interpretation.

Even more surprising was Ax's leading role in the program's 18-minute centerpiece, an episode of Keillor's signature Sam Spade spoof, "Guy Noir, Private Eye." He portrayed a classical pianist from Manhattan's Upper West Side crippled by stage fright and seek-

ing counseling to alleviate his plight. The skit, which rambled on at inordinate length, had its moments of erudite as well as hilarity, but Ax made a promising debut as a comic actor, though we know he won't give up his day job.

There was more Berkshire flavor in the program's second hour, notably a performance by the Berkshire Highlanders Pipe & Drum Band.

This special edition of "A Prairie Home Companion" included the usual commercial spoofs for Powdermilk Biscuits, Bertha's Kilty Boutique, the American Duet Tape Council and the Ketchup Advisory Board. All of it reflects the creative genius of a true American original. Garrison Keillor, who has made an indelible mark on the culture of our time, manages to reinvent himself and the program each week, keeping it fresh and vibrant while retaining the predictable elements that have endeared him to several million listeners a week since the mid-70s.

The standard features are eagerly awaited like old friends. The personal greetings delivered from listeners' notes each week remain endearing — fans could be seen dropping notes into baskets at the entrance to The Shed for delivery to the host; Keillor included a generous selection of them, most clearly of local origin.

More problematical, at least on this occasion, was Keillor's monologue, "The News from Lake Wobegon, 'an the edge of the prairie," delivered without script, seemingly by a minister of undetermined denomination — or a patient on an analyst's couch — recalling his boyhood and exercising some persistent personal demons before a nationwide audience.

Brilliant, but chilling material, amounting to more than 25 minutes.

"A Prairie Home Companion" offers a kaleidoscopic sweep of life's high and low points. It connects with its audience — does it ever.

In a time of cultural "corporatization" and homogenization, Garrison Keillor and his weekly excursion into the deepest realms of the imagination are to be treasured as a living artifact of a time not so many years ago when individual artistic expression was more of a rule and less of an exception.

Folk Review

Movie Schedules

North Adams Cinemas 6 (Curran Highway); Dinosaur (PG) 12:30, 2:45, 4:40 & 7:02; Fucky & Bulwinkle (PG) 12:10, 2:40, 4:50, 7 & 9:15; Chicken Run (G) 12:20, 2:30, 4:35, 7:15 & 9:10; The Perfect Storm (PG-13) 12:40, 3:30, 6:40 & 9:30; Back at

A cautious 'I Capuleti e I Montecchi'

By Richard Houdek
Special to The Eagle

Opera companies can travel the safe road, lingering with the same

Opera Review

unveiled in the company's

was less congenial for her instrument, which seems constructed of three separate voices, a top that is often pushed rather than placed to achieve volume, a solid middle

was so crisp that it was possible in a refreshing change from the norm in opera, for the ear to penetrate even the thickest textures.

Neil Bezzen, the company's