

# Keillor is at home running the show

Star writes, acts, directs popular stage, radio event

By Rich Copley  
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**G**arrison Keillor steps off the stage at the Fitzgerald Theater and whispers something to guest musician Geoff Muldaur. A second later, a stagehand rushes out to pianist Richard Dworsky, who's in the middle of playing *Lower Man*, and shows him a sheet of paper. It reads: "Heads up for Chicken."

A minute later, Muldaur strides on stage to reprise *Chicken*, which he played earlier in the show, though no reprise was planned.

Why?

Because Keillor liked it. "A *Prairie Home Companion*" is a lightly rehearsed show in which the game plan changes in seconds.

Calling all the shots is Keillor, who writes most of the text in the days before each show. He then performs with longtime collaborators, perfectly in sync with him.

It's simultaneously a stage show for the live audience and a radio broadcast for more than 2.5 million listeners across the country.

For those with tickets, expect plenty of visual elements, starting with the facade of an old Victorian home at the back of the stage. Logos for things like Powdermilk Biscuits and the American Duct Tape Council drop down from the rafters when they're mentioned.

Keillor comes dressed to kill in a tux with a red bow tie and matching red socks.

But then there are discoveries such as this: Most of the voices in the sketches come from three actors: Keillor, Sue Scott and Tim Russell. Recently, Russell was doing a *Jekyll and Hyde* routine playing presidential hopefuls George W. Bush and Al Gore.

Sound-effects man Tom Keith often becomes the star of the show for new audiences, according to Alan Frechtman, public relations manager. Stationed to

Please see Keillor/D2



Garrison Keillor, right, calls all the shots during "A *Prairie Home Companion*," his stage show and simultaneous radio broadcast. His longtime collaborators perform perfectly in sync with him.

## Show info

■ Tonight's live performance of "A *Prairie Home Companion*" at Norfolk's Chrysler Hall is sold out. But you can catch it on the radio. The two-hour show will air on WHRV-FM (89.5) from 6-8 p.m. Musical guests are Middle Peninsula guitarist Stephen Bennett, Virginia blues duo Cephas & Wiggins, and Robin and Linda Williams and Their Fine Group. See the show's Web site at [www.phc.mpr.org](http://www.phc.mpr.org).

## 'Prairie Home Companion' lives in its own universe

**F**irst-time visitors to "Prairie Home Companion," a community unto itself, might be scratching their heads. Here are some oft-mentioned names and places:

■ **Lake Wobegon:** "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown," Garrison Keillor says to start his weekly monologue. Lake Wobegon doesn't really exist, though Minnesotans will tell you it could be any of hundreds of little towns in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. Keillor was actually born in Anoka, Minn., and lives in St. Paul.

■ **Show sponsors:** A *Prairie Home Companion* has numerous fictional sponsors, including Cafe Boeuf (with

its famous Boeuf dinner for two), the American Duct Tape Council (always introduced with a duck call), Powdermilk Biscuits, and Guy's Shoes.

■ **Recurring sketches:** Guy Noir is a bumbling detective who, among other things, has had his flounder business taken over by a cruise line agent. The *Lives of the Cowboys* brings a pair of Old West cattlemen face to face with the modern, and often weird world.

■ **The actors:** Tim Russell, who does a great Al Gore and George W. Bush, has been with the show for seven seasons. Sue Scott's range includes ditz supermodels and gritty cowgirls. Sound effects man Tom Keith also chimes in. They provide most of the voices on the show that aren't Keillor's.

## Keillor

Continued from D1

Keillor's left, Keith and his props include half a door sporting a red "Sorry We're Closed" sign and a crate of noisy items including lots of kitchenware.

Keith, who started with Keillor as an engineer 26 years ago, says he's a self-made effects guy because the art of radio sound effects was dead when he got into it.

Behind Keillor, Keith, and the actors is The Guy's All-Star

Shoe Band, led by Dworsky.

"I joined the show when it was based in New York, and the first time I realized how big it was was when we went to Akron, Ohio," Frechtman says. "When Garrison said, 'Coming to you live from Akron,' the audience went crazy."

The show is rehearsed much like a church service, where the musicians put their stuff together at a different time from the actors, who rehearse at a different time from the solo musicians.

It all comes together for the first time on the air.

If "Prairie Home" is a

church service, Keillor's news from Lake Wobegon is the sermon.

As Muldaur played a quiet blues tune, the band slowly filed off the stage for the signature monologue.

"For most of the show, the audience is really on edge," Keith says. "But when he says, 'It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon,' they settle in."

Even cast and crew who've been with the show for more than a decade stop and listen.

Keillor does the 20-minute piece with no script, no notes.

Clocks all over the stage and backstage keep Keillor's crew

on their toes, telling them how much airtime they have left.

The radio show has to fit into two hours.

Keith remembers a show in which they were in the middle of a sketch and time was running short.

Keillor started going behind the actors, reached over their shoulders and marked out big pieces of the script.

"They never missed a beat," Keith recalls.

Frechtman says, "It's such great live theater, sometimes we forget it's going out to millions of people on the radio."