



COURTESY, 'A Prairie Home Companion'

Famed teller of Lake Wobegon tales, Garrison Keillor (right) performs with actors Tim Russell and Sue Scott during a live broadcast of 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

## 'A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION'

# Keillor brings famed radio show to Laramie

By JUDY HAMILTON  
Star-Tribune staff writer

Garrison Keillor, Minnesota's famed teller of Lake Wobegon tales, draws crowds to his live radio shows that many entertainers would envy.

Whatever the seating capacity of a facility, it's almost always full.

That will definitely be the case Saturday in Laramie for the live afternoon broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" — the show named such, by the way, for the Prairie Home cemetery in Moorhead, Minn.

The broadcast from the 1,900-seat University of Wyoming Arts and Science auditorium, in cooperation with Wyoming Public Radio, sold out

in about a day. A second, evening show, added to accommodate fans but which will not be broadcast, sold out in two days. And that's with tickets priced from \$25 to \$40 each.

"That happens everywhere," said Christine Tschida, the show's producer. "The show is very popular, with more than 3 million listeners every week and so when there's a chance to come and see something they enjoy listening to, they take advantage of it. For some people, they consider it a lifetime experience to come and see this live radio show that they may have grown up with."

In fact, she said, because so many people want to see the show when it's on tour — it will

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visit six cities outside the home base of the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn. this year — the availability of large facilities is a definite consideration when selecting a site.

Described sometimes as an old-fashioned radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," first introduced as a weekly radio show on Minnesota Public Radio in 1969, features live music by a core group of performers as well as guest artists, comedy and, perhaps most popular of all, the storytelling of Keillor, who writes his own material and is also known for his published works. His signature monologue, "The News from Lake Wobegon," is a mainstay. Lake Wobegon, by the way, is a fictional town that he says "time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

Making fun of his Midwestern roots and his upbringing is part of his style. Wyoming Public Radio program director Roger Adams says of Keillor, "I think the truth of it is that he is our time's Mark Twain and Will Rogers rolled into one." His appeal, Adams said, is that "he takes us to a time people pine away for." His humor is the down-home kind and people respond to it.

Laramie was selected as one of the tour sites for the show by Keillor himself from a list of stations that had submitted requests, Tschida said. One of the reasons is the limited number of opportunities for a broadcast in less sparsely populated areas of the country.

Among the regional performers who will be part of the broadcast are Spencer, Dale and Norinne Bohren; Mike Dowling; and Stephanie Davis. Tschida said the show keeps lists of potential guest artists in areas of the country, and takes some input from local stations as well.

The very first show broadcast 30-some years ago, at \$1 admission for adults, drew a total audience of 12, but even then crowds were an integral part of what goes on,

said Tschida, who has been with the show for 11 years.

"The show has always been a live broadcast so that has always been an element of what makes the show successful and how the show is put together," she said. "It's performed in a theater in front of an audience and that's what the show is."

An audience at the live broadcast has an enjoyable experience that is entirely different from those enjoying the same show at home, she said.

"When you're listening at home, a person is invisible to you until Garrison says, 'I want to welcome to your stage Stephanie Davis,' and then she opens her mouth and she's visible. But in the theater, Stephanie Davis will be getting out there and set up while something else is going on. So in terms of radio, to be sure there's no dead air, everything is happening simultaneously. Garrison is talking about Laramie or about the state of Wyoming while the next guest is getting ready and plugging into the amplifier and getting the microphone adjusted, getting ready to do their song.

"So things are always overlapping on the stage and that's visible to the people in the theater. At home, you don't think of that."

The five-piece live band is especially interesting to watch, she said. "All the listeners may not be aware of all the little bits of music that appear in the scripts — the underscoring, the segues from one scene to the next," Tschida said.

The broadcast is not an off-the-cuff presentation, but is completely scripted, with Keillor writing the material one week at a time, every week, Tschida emphasized.

Tschida said it is the variety and the talent that is involved every week that appeals to her. "It's an amazing collection of musicians and actors, and you hear such wonderful work week after week."

While it sometimes amazes her when she realizes how

long the show has maintained its popularity, she said she also isn't totally surprised "because it's really good, and you see so much out there on television or in the movies that is merely mediocre."

Oh, and while the Laramie shows are sold out, Tschida has a tip: Go directly to the theater on show day and there's a good chance of getting in. "There are always always seats the day of the show. There are always going to be turn-backs from the artists, there is always going to be a family of four that someone got a cold."

The live broadcast begins at 4 p.m. Saturday, but the audience should be in their seats at 3:45 p.m. The evening performance is at 8 p.m.

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