

BILL WUNDRAM

A night when smiles overcame the somber

There was an instant clamor, applause, when he strolled to the stage in Iowa City Garrison Keillor is never in a hurry; he ambles, and was in his traditional black outfit because black — he claims — has “a thinning effect.” His socks were orange, not red, and he apologized for that because, “the socks I get today don’t hold the dye after washing.”

He broke into sweet song, the lovely “Iowa Waltz” ...
“Iowa, Iowa — winter, sweet summer and fall.”

The shock of black hair stretched vertical down his forehead, nearly to his eyebrows, while he slouched on a stool in Clapp Hall, holding his new book, “Lake Wobegone Summer, 1956,” which is a sort of Huckleberry Finn in hormonal overdrive.

He dawdled with his glasses, not exactly speaking to — but visiting with — the sellout of 1,000. He spoke ever so slowly in that sonorous voice that has made him one of the most popular figures in radio, not to mention one of the major-selling authors of our time. His eyes were sometimes closed, but no eye contact was necessary with the crowd that he had entranced.



Garrison Keillor: “People are afraid to laugh.”

While Leno and Letterman tiptoed into the tragedy last week, Garrison Keillor approached it from a novelist’s view and spoke with a MidAmerica touch of the agony — followed by soft humor. It was the tonic we needed, and he felt that we should whistle a tune and sing a lovely song together.

His audience was rapt to hear this author’s litany of the terrible moments in New York City. He was there, had worked until late the night before, had adjourned to an apartment on the Upper West Side and was awakened by a friend yelling: “You won’t believe this.” Garrison turned on the radio because much of TV was blacked out, the antennas being atop one of the World Trade Center towers.

“On the radio, they were hysterical. Reporters were scooping up news by the handful. Otherwise, it was a beautiful summer day, and I walked to the street and did not find stunned people, but thoughtful people. No honking horns.”

Repeatedly, he pulled at his fingers as if feeling for an emotion while touching us with a story-teller’s vision of the dreadful time.

“The first day quiet was the truest account; what was happening was not the right tone of the public man. There was no defiance, only quiet. The next day I listened to the cries of women and heard the shuffling of feet on the streets.

“We are adept at criticizing ourselves, and we have a lot of material to work for.” That brought a quiet murmur: “We are too ignorant of the real world; we are too big, not smart enough; thousands are demoralized and fearful.

“But two days after it happened I went into the Village and people were ordering wine and calamari and living again. They were talking, and not talking entirely about what had happened.”

He sighed. He smiled. He held out his arms and said — as if speaking to all of MidAmerica: “It’s good to be back.”

He lamented the agony and said: “People are afraid to laugh.” He wanted to correct that. He read hilarious moments from his latest best-seller, answering audience questions about Pastor Ingqvist and his pontoon boat and Lake Wobegone. He is so quick, so funny, so Midwest. He told how his former popular singing companion, Kate McKenzie, had made the mistake of falling in love. “She has been married, and now I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

He asked all to close the evening by singing Greg Brown’s “Iowa Waltz,” which he says should be the state song. He coaxed with the words, and between choruses led whistling of the song. “Iowa, Iowa, winter, sweet summer and fall. Come with me, come with me, to the beautiful Iowa Waltz.”

The audience left the auditorium into a pouring rain. After an evening with Garrison Keillor, did any even notice?

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