

Variety review

Keillor eccentric, but Madison loves his wit

By Michael Muckian

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Garrison Keillor threw a party Saturday — well, as much of a party as might be expected from the somnambulist author and radio host — and 2,200 people showed up.

It was the last broadcast for 2001 of "A Prairie Home Companion," the 27-year-old public radio phenomenon that mixes folk music styles with folksier humor from the fictitious burg of Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Keillor and company packed the Oscar Mayer Theater for a 5 p.m. performance that showcased his peculiar sense of warmth and wit. Due to the high demand — the show sold out in two hours — Civic Center officials opened up stage

seating, allowing 80 people to get up close and personal with the rangy, eccentric front-porch philosopher.

Two hours of music and Keillor's absurdist take on life proved the Ankora, Minn., native one of the more cogent social observers in a world of increasing intellectual mediocrity.

That's not to say Keillor himself isn't a tad on the absurd side. Lamponed in one of his own skits as "a tall man with weird eyebrows," Keillor struts and wanders across stage, vaguely aware of the audience that's present. His rubbery, slightly amphibious countenance mugs and twists as he tussles, not with his performance but with the material

'A Prairie Home Companion' with Garrison Keillor, Lou and Peter Berryman and other guests Madison Civic Center

he has written for the evening's show. Seeing Keillor live is an entirely different experience than listening to the sonorous, soothing voice we're used to on WHA.

Saturday's show took advantage of its Madison location, showcasing local performers the Knob Hill Boys and Lou and Peter Berryman, as well as poking gentle fun at the host town.

"Madison is the seat of Dane County," Keillor said. "That's spelled D-E-I-G-N and means that the residents all have the right point of view and wish others did, too."

The Berrymans, who were celebrating 25 years as a performing couple that same night with a concert later at Zion Lutheran Church, sang five humorous numbers about Wisconsin and Minnesota and showed the audience how to yodel as a couple.

Denver-based singer Mollie O'Brien rounded out the program with a variety of songs, including a sweet duet on the Elvis Presley classic "I Can't Help Falling in Love With You," with Keillor himself. The host proved to have a very

serviceable if somewhat light baritone throughout the evening.

Familiar skits included "News From Lake Wobegon" and "Guy Noir," which allowed fellow performers Tim Russell and Sue Scott to impressively showcase a variety of accents and character voices. Program regulars Richard Dworsky and The Guy's All-Star Shoe Band rounded out the talent.

The evening closed with an audience singalong to "Auld Lang Syne," an homage to the season's last show and a reflection on the events of the previous tumultuous year.

Based on his warmth and gentle humor, Keillor is an acquaintance who won't be forgotten for some time.