

# Garrison Keillor's next stage is comic opera

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — It's midafternoon, and the morning's newspapers lie unopened in the parlor of Garrison Keillor's home in St. Paul. Keillor kneads the lids of his droopy eyes as he talks about the latest deadline he has broken.

The feeling is as familiar to him as his own voice. At the same time, even with a quarter-century of novels, monologues and radio shows behind him, this is something altogether different. Keillor is tying up loose ends in his first stab at a concert-length opera.

"I'm frightened that I'm not panicking," he says. "When you do a weekly radio show, something that's two years away sounds like no problem at all. I'd agree to climb Mount Everest or go diving with white sharks if it's two years away. Of course, the time goes very quickly, and you make all sorts of mistakes and take bad turns. So here I am, with everybody waiting on me."

"Mr. and Mrs. Olson"

## In a draft to the libretto, there's a pizza commercial to the tune of 'O Sole Mio'

is a stilted title for a comic opera about a stilted couple in a classic midmarriage jam. Finished or not, it premieres Friday as a semi-staged concert through the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Anyone familiar with "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor's weekly variety show for Public Radio International, will recognize the humor — cheeky wordplay, slap-your-forehead cornball rhymes and references only a Midwestern Lutheran can truly appreciate. It's all couched in unabashed, (ir)reverent bows to classic operatic repertoire.

Keillor would never have thought of doing this, he says, let alone commit to it, if not for the suggestion of a friend with the chamber orchestra. Keillor stared at a blank slate as recently as December, having

ditched his original storyline based on the troubles of a small-town opera company.

"One thing you learn after you've been a writer for a long time is when to abandon ship," he says. "Young writers suffer over lost causes much more than old guys like me. You just go to bed at night, wake up the next morning and see the light, and you don't look back."

For Keillor, that light was the glow of a computer screen. His new starting point was the image of a man and woman flirting over the Internet, and he liked the idea of how this would look onstage. In Keillor's opera, Mrs. Olson meets a man online, agonizes over the prospect of a face-to-face encounter, then takes the plunge — with a waterfall of consequences.

Keillor came to the



Associated Press file photo

Garrison Keillor at work in St. Paul, Minn.

idea through his own dips into America Online's chat rooms.

"I've hung around in the fringes and watched people," he says. "The political chat rooms are kind of boring, but the ones that purport to be romantic are really interesting. Given anonymity, people will say and do all sorts of things and indulge in behaviors they probably wouldn't be quite so bold about otherwise."

The story unfolds largely through the wanderlust of Mrs. Olson, but Keillor uses the operatic platform to tweak and toy

with all sorts of pop culture terrain. In one of his latest drafts to the libretto, there's a pizza commercial to the tune of "O Sole Mio." Keillor goes Oprah Winfrey and Richard Gere and scripts the chamber orchestra into its first stab at hip-hop.

In a song featuring Mrs. Olson (soprano Maria Jette) and the couples' nosy plumber (bass Brian Jauhainen), the plumber pulls out a boombox and raps:

*You been trying too hard to be the perfect wife  
And laugh at his jokes  
and adorn his life*

*And make a beautiful chicken ragout  
And stay a size 2 ...  
And go to all the soccer games*

*Of your beautiful children with Celtic names*

The rhymes grow more outlandish. In other tunes, Keillor pairs "eyeballs" with "bibles," "libidos" with "Speedos" and "effervescence" with "antidepressants."

One typical stanza: *There's no such thing as euphoria*

*In Sioux Falls, Duluth or Peoria*

*Love's not passionate or torrid*

*In East Grand Forks or Fargo-Moorhead*

"I enjoy that sort of Cole Porter-ish patter song," Keillor says. "The oddity of the rhyme is part of the payoff."

Anyone expecting an operatic version of his radio show will be disappointed, he says. Unlike the residents of his Lake Wobegon, Keillor populates his opera with "Twin Cities people, college-educated, middle-class, and they're not people I've told stories about before."