

Keillor puts his distinctive stamp on new opera

By MATT PEIKEN
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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" is a stilted title for a comic opera about a stilted couple in a classic midmarriage jam. It premiered May 24 as a semistaged 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, irreverent 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.

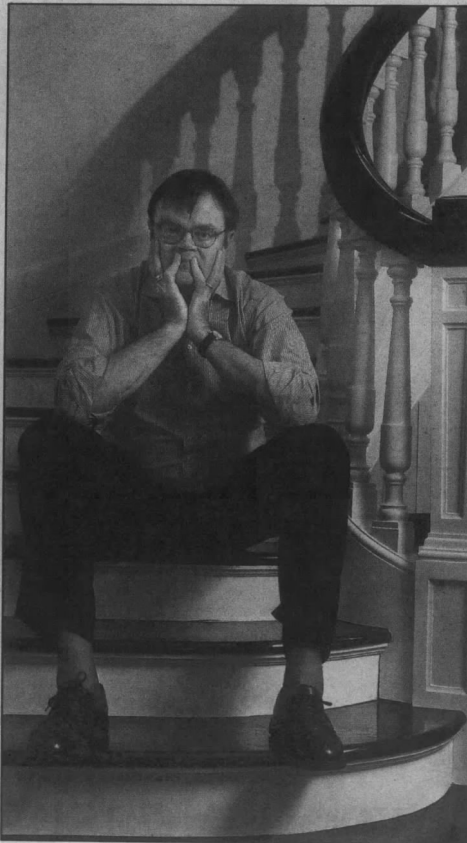
Keillor came to the idea through his own dips into America Online's chat rooms.

"I've hung around in the fringes and watched people," Keillor 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 gooses 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 ...*



Garrison Keillor's first opera debuted on May 24. Keillor said he was pleased with the debut and audience members gave the work mixed reviews.

KIRT PHOTO

*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."

For the first time, he's written a performance piece without including himself as a voice. He found the exorcism "enormously liberating."

"I was going to narrate, but I figured having this tall, lethargic person on stage speaking in a slow, deep voice would be like bringing a stuffed antelope to the dance," he says. "The

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WVIA public radio (89.9 AM) will broadcast "Mr. & Mrs. Olson," Garrison Keillor's first foray into opera, sometime in July, probably in the regular Saturday-afternoon opera slot. Further details will be announced.

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frustrating thing about doing a radio show is I have no outside perspective on it whatsoever. I wanted to create something that has a life beyond me."

Still, it's easy to see Keillor, who turns 60 in August, threaded throughout his opera. Conditions of the heart — of questioning, exploring and wanting — have stamped his personal life along with the characters in his work for years. In some respects, Keillor allows, he's playing out facets of his own life through his fiction.

"But I would hope it's more universal than that," he says. "I'm not interested in writing about my life or the troubles of the well-to-do, and I'm certainly not interested in writing about the burdens of the semi-well-known. Lake Wobegon is a good vehicle for me, and I'm finding that this little opera of mine is, too."

The tone, process and idea, itself, are familiar ground for those who have worked with Keillor before. The mix of fantasy, absurdity and classic opera are "par for his course," Jette says.

"He's a big opera buff, and his knowledge of classical music is very broad and deep. There's this implication he would really like to be singing this stuff himself," says Jette, a frequent performer on Keillor's radio program.

"What appeals to me about his brain is this steely-eyed way of looking at the world. It's a slightly embittered take, but it's kind of affectionate, too," she says. "He can al-

most put you in a trance, and sometimes his things have a way of hitting you in this soft spot you didn't even know was there."

Andreas Delfs, music director of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, anticipated a score that's both familiar and challenging — comic spins on classic arias. The keys for his orchestra, he says, are performing straight and clean, letting the libretto's humor sing for itself and reining in his musicians to let the laughter roll through.

"I wasn't expecting a new 20th-century masterpiece. I was expecting what Garrison does best — looking at his surroundings and putting a spin on it that's uniquely his," says Delfs, who had never before worked with Keillor. "The music has to be beautiful and well-rehearsed, although it will put the expectation of opera audiences on its ear."

Keillor acknowledges the draw of his name — Minnesota Public Radio broadcasted the performance, and more than 120 public radio stations nationwide carried it live. In the theater, he anticipates an audience far more disposed than his own to classical music.

"My audience is an odd mixture. It's not an audience made up of people like me," he says. "I would be so enormously happy if I stood around during intermission (this weekend) and saw people with metal in their lip or who don't know where the bathrooms are at the Ordway. But I'm not trying to reach out to anybody. I'm just trying to finish."

Keillor has built his career as a multitasker, and that hasn't changed with this opera. He's editing an anthology of poetry, due for

fall release through Viking Press, and working on a novel based on a romance advice columnist named Mr. Blue (Keillor has penned a monthly advice column under that name for Salon.com). After watching the premiere performances of his opera, Keillor is touring "A Prairie Home Companion" for five weeks.

Despite rumors he's considering leaving the program, Keillor says he continues with "A Prairie Home Companion" for much the same joys he's finding with "Mr. and Mrs. Olson."

"If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have said, 'Yes, I can see the end.' But this season, for some reason, has been more enjoyable for me than

any in a long, long time," he says. "People seem to be having a good time backstage, and that helps me have a good time. The prospect of people laughing is always pleasant to a writer, and I'm fortunate enough to be in a position to hear that every week."

"Also, the sociability of performance is a real key, compared to the lonely marathon that is working on a novel. I've been working back and forth with (composer/arranger) Andy Stein almost every day. I've had a meeting of the minds with Andreas. My old friend Vern Sutton is my stage director. I've known Maria Jette for years. I have in-laws in the chamber orchestra. This is about being with friends."

People have already shown "inklings of interest" about producing his opera elsewhere, but Keillor says he'll gauge success this weekend the way he measures all his performances — by the laughter.



Garrison Keillor and Lynn Peterson warm up with gospel songs on "A Prairie Home Companion" in the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn.
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