

## Garrison Keillor a sight to see (and hear) at Frazee

*Radio celebrity treats audience to variety format*

By MARTIN GOTTLIEB  
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**KETTERING** — Maybe the reason Garrison Keillor went into radio has to do with the way he delivers "The News from Lake Wobegon."

He is likely, at various intervals, to close his eyes and go into an apparent trance-like state. One gets the feeling he's bringing up the words from someplace even farther away than the edge of the prairie.

He finds the words with amazingly regularity. You never hear him say, "Oh, wait, I forgot to tell you something." It all flows. It just doesn't exactly comport with the rules they teach in public speaking classes. Eye contact? Keillor seems to feel

there's a time and a place.

Rules or no rules, Keillor's approach to variety entertainment does work well, even when he can be seen. His fans at the Frazee Pavilion for the Saturday broadcast of the weekly *Prairie Home Companion* (which sold out early) surely enjoyed the show even more than they enjoy the weekly broadcasts.

There was the Lake Wobegon setting, consisting primarily of a house on Chestnut Street. Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery wasn't there. But we haven't heard much about it lately. Maybe Ralph has retired.

It turns out that, during *PHC*, all the performers are on the stage pretty much all the time. The actors sit in back on the left, and the singers in back on the right until it is their turn — as it is frequently — to come to the microphone. Part of the extra fun for those present is that the company seems to be having a great time, enjoying their work and each other.

People whose names listeners have heard for years — Tim Russell, Sue Scott — turn out to have actual faces, too, though, surprisingly enough, only one each. They and relative new-guy Fred Newman on sound effects are simply mind-blowing in their versatility.

The music ranged — as range it always does when Keillor is around — from opera to a take-off on opera to a decidedly unusual form of Bob Dylan to the often-present Hopeful Gospel Quartet to categories some people would probably have difficulty labeling.

Notable by their absence were marquee-name guest stars (not missed), world-battered detective Guy Noir (who apparently isn't interested in a city that doesn't have any secrets interesting enough to keep) and Jesse Ventura.

The governor of Minnesota is often present in Keillor's monologues, if not in person. Having announced last week his decision not to seek re-election, he seemed

likely to come in for some attention Saturday. But maybe Keillor didn't want to gloat. Ventura only came up in Keillor's brief pre-show remarks to the audience. (He asked for our prayers that Minnesota may find a replacement source of comedy.)

Keillor came on stage in a dark suit (over his always red socks) that was way too hot for the day and that eventually got replaced, though not before he sang Elvis Presley's *Treat Me Like a Fool*. Seeing an Elvis song done by a man who (as he says) came perilously close to turning 50 a decade ago, and who is wearing a dark suit, and is having his 6,503rd consecutive bad hair day is an experience worth having.

Dayton and Ohio provided Keillor with plenty of fodder, as to inventors and presidents. Keillor didn't lament that Ohio's forgettable presidents have been forgotten, but he did pause over some forgotten inventors, those who never quite hit it big. He mentioned the alleged guy who

came up with the motorized toe-nail clipper and the alleged guy who came up with the solar powered umbrella. (The latter, he admits, had certain "conceptual" issues.)

Through Keillor's prism, Ohio is also the home of humorists. He paused over, among others, Jonathan Winters, James Thurber and Erma Bombeck. He said Bombeck isn't generally given credit for the line "guilt is the gift that keeps on giving," but deserves it.

*Prairie Home Companion*, especially seen in person, makes one wonder what ever happened to the variety format as an American art form. In the Keillor format — with expert performers being hustled on and off the bench like so many basketball players — the audience and players form a special connection that is satisfying for both. Why the format should be confined largely to "listener-funded" National Public Radio is hard to, shall we say, see.