

Evening with Keillor like a visit from Twain

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For The New Mexican

Garrison Keillor's first order of business Tuesday night: leading a bunch of strangers in two verses of *America, the Beautiful*.

REVIEW

While the ostensible reason for this might have had something to do with the upcoming anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the gesture was nevertheless quite apropos for what was in store. The host of the popular Public Radio International show *A Prairie Home Companion* brought with him a slice of disappearing Americana, replete with gospel tunes, yarn-spinning, ballads (love ballads and otherwise) and tales about life in his home turf of rural Minnesota.

A fund-raiser for Albuquerque's Sandia Prep, an independent college-preparatory school, the performance at Sandia Casino's outdoor amphitheater made for an evening that was not only chock full of laughs and great singing, but one that was also seasoned with touches of poignancy.

Perhaps a few of the people in the audience went home disappointed. This was, after all, not exactly the kind of performance that you hear on the radio show, since it featured none of the colorful characters of Keillor's fictitious town, Lake Wobegon (a place "where the woman are

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strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average"), nor any of the off-beat commercials for fictitious products — which are two of the show's most charming elements.

Barring those certain and specific expectations, however, this was a refreshing performance. Not only did Keillor donate his time and energy for the Sandia Prep cause, but the show was completely lacking in commercialism.

It was not about hawking Pepsi Blue or Doritos. It was not about selling CDs or T-shirts. Nor was it about pumping up hormones or deifying some mediocre performer. Rather, it was about painting a picture of American life with tales, songs and images rife with universal elements that seemed to resonate with each member of this most eclectic crowd.

Take, for instance, the story about the boys who bullied Keillor during his school days but were eventually placated by his stories or the yarn about his Uncle

Howard, who never praised his children. Each of the tales was laced with quips reminiscent of Mark Twain, lines like: "Don't be a \$10 haircut on a 59-cent head."

The centerpiece — at least for the first hour — was singing. First, Keillor, who is a talented bass/baritone in his own right, stood onstage in a double-breasted suit, bow tie and red socks and sang of a cat that becomes enormously successful by doing commercials.

Keillor then launched into a tune telling the story of how the great opera composer Georges Bizet was really born in Omaha. Pianist Rich Dworsky, whom Keillor referred to as "an honorary Christian" and who also is part of the PRI program, provided piano accompaniment.

Shortly thereafter, Keillor was joined by the other members of the Hopeful Gospel Quartet, a singing group that, he said, first started singing in tiled stairwells.

It was as if Keillor was pulling out the big guns. Not only did the group as a whole

take us through moving renditions of songs like Merle Haggard's *Mama's Hungry Eyes*, the gospel classic *When I Have Crossed the Bar* and the Lucinda Williams tune *Big Red Sun Blues*, but the less famous members got their turns at center stage. Most notable was the work of Mollie O'Brien, a Coloradoan with an explosive voice, a voice so rich and powerful that it seemed it could not be restrained.

Most of the second hour was devoted to Keillor monologues — first the story of how he, as a school boy, found himself confronting a flutulent principal, and later on, the story of his Aunt Eva, an eccentric woman who was at times a substitute mother, a woman who grew tomatoes so plump and ripe and perfect that "when you bit into them and felt the juice running down the sides of your mouth, you knew that God loved you."

Keillor examined his fingernails as the story tripped off his tongue easily and naturally, as though we were standing in the middle of his living room.

Perhaps those who compare Keillor to the great American writer Mark Twain are not really all that far off the mark, as here we have someone who captures the American character, its neuroses, its folk and gospel music, its innocence and — most of all — its humor, and lays it out for us in a very accessible and entertaining ways.