

Author, radio host regales OU audience

By David Cathey
Staff Writer

NORMAN — Thanks to Will Rogers, storytelling has a special place in Oklahoma history. Thanks to Garrison Keillor, storytelling had a special place Tuesday at the University of Oklahoma.

An eager crowd of more than 900 in the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall in OU's Catlett Music Center broke into applause as the tall, gangly fellow from Minnesota crossed the stage in an understated gray suit.

Each long stride was accented by a circumstantial lift of the pant leg, exposing bright red socks and a pair of white-laced black shoes that looked better suited to run this weekend across the Cotton Bowl turf.

After an introduction by OU President David Boren, the author of "Lake Wobegon Days" and host of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" took the mike to a standing ovation.

Making himself comfortable on a stool, Keillor, 60, quipped about the vortex of fund raising Boren has created, then drew the crowd in with stories about growing up in the country, crazy relatives and the scatological expertise of young boys.

Keillor's voice played like a gentle and careful bassoon solo. And he used irony the way a fisherman uses a lure. But he did practice catch and release, taking a bow after an hour to another standing ovation.

The oral tradition in storytelling is as old as the human race. In American history, Mark Twain is the benchmark, followed by Rogers, who carried the tradition into the 20th century.

While Keillor has brought the tradition into the 21st century with style and considerable acclaim, he is not confident in its future, calling it "very slim."

"Consider how seldom anyone tells a story," Keillor said in an interview after

his performance. "Not in a performance like mine, but I think that the style of conversation has somehow changed."

"And that people tend to converse in opinions or refer to stories that they've read in the paper or seen elsewhere. People don't feel as confident about their personal experience."

Keillor also said the oral tradition is carried by two parties.

"It requires listeners, too. People aren't patient enough. Most people are anxious to take the floor themselves."

On storytelling, Keillor finds the method simple.

"In the end, people are waiting to see how it comes out. But if you signal the end too early, then it's not so interesting. You need to string them along."

He also said he prefers reading to listening because "reading allows the dead to speak. And I think as one gets older, one becomes more and more interested in the dead."

Keillor, who is a Grammy winner, began "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974. Despite the show's rapid success, Keillor did not start out to become a broadcaster. He said he always considered himself a writer first.

According to his "A Prairie Home Companion" Web site, Keillor writes every day. His daily morning routine includes a pot of coffee, pure quiet, a promising spot in the house and a laptop computer.

He considers writing a sacred calling — but no more sacred than gardening, dentistry or plumbing. He also pointed out a key difference between writing a story and telling a story.

"Writing is not an act of presentation, it's an act of discovery. The nature of the characters and their relationships change within the story."

Whether writing or speaking, Keillor keeps busy. He said he is "working away" on another novel and keeps busy with his



STAFF PHOTO BY JACONNA AGUIRRE

Storyteller Garrison Keillor speaks Tuesday to a crowd of more than 900 at the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall in the Catlett Music Center on the University of Oklahoma campus.

weekly radio show, which airs in the metro on KCSC-FM 90.1 on Saturdays at 5 p.m. and is rebroadcast Sundays at 1 p.m.

After Keillor's performance Tuesday, he was presented with a special gift from OU student representative Nathaniel Scott — an OU cap autographed by Sooner football coach Bob Stoops.

Keillor seemed amused by the gift and immediately put it on. If nothing else, he now has something to go with the shoes.

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