



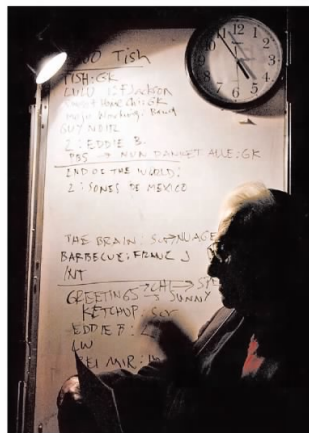
Garrison Keillor, the host of "A Prairie Home Companion," prepares for the live broadcast of his radio show in the Auditorium Theatre Saturday.

Tribune photos by Stacey Westcott

Working the 'Prairie'



Ninety-year-old Chicago saxophonist and vocalist Franz Jackson rehearses Saturday afternoon.



Studs Terkel, another 90-year-old and guest, reads his lines backstage before his "Cooking With Studs" bit.

By Robert K. Elder
Tribune staff reporter

AN HOUR before air time last Saturday, Garrison Keillor's radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," remained an amorphous entity. A dry-erase marker board posted on the stage right wall in Chicago's Auditorium Theatre announced skits and band names. "Garrison has an idea of the layout. Of course nothing is permanent and can't be changed. Usually, it's a blur," said staff member Alan Frechtman.

Since 10 a.m., Minnesota-native Keillor watched his show take shape. He chatted with guest bands after sound checks and rehearsed selections of the serial "Guy Noir, Private Eye" with his fellow radio performers. As curtain call drew closer, he grew quiet and aloof, sitting down to polish a last few script changes on a laptop computer. Upstairs, in the catering room, special guest Studs Terkel sat waving his arms, rehearsing "Cooking With Studs," a Thanksgiving sketch Keillor wrote for the two of them.

"This is great stuff," Terkel said. "Garrison knows I can't hear a damn thing, so he makes it easier for me. He just writes it so I can talk and talk."

At 4:55 p.m., Terkel watched from the wings as Keillor welcomed a sold-out house, leading them in a sing-along rendition of "Sweet Home Chicago." (The show was broadcast on WBEZ-FM 91.5.)

"The warm-up is a way for the audience to connect with Garrison and the band," Frechtman said. "It's kind of like throwing a few pitches before a game."