

Keillor's 'Prairie': Smooth, but too flat in spots

By Clarence Fanto
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LENOX — Garrison Keillor's pre-July 4th broadcasts of "A Prairie Home Companion" live from Tanglewood, now in their fifth year, have always managed to strike just the right chord of homespun Midwestern patriotism combined with irreverence and brilliant dissection of contemporary foibles.

So it was this past Saturday night under picture-postcard skies before a capacity Shed audience and sizable lawn crowd, as Keillor vowed to put aside political divisiveness "at least for the weekend" in favor of the qualities that unite Americans on Independence Day. But he couldn't resist noting, to prolonged cheers, that things are going well for the White House, the economy is improving and President Bush "is the star of a hit movie — it couldn't be better." Prowling the stage in his trademark tux combined with bright red sneakers, Keillor's unique combination of literate brilliance and spontaneity was replete with local references, much to the delight of the crowd.

Typically, Keillor delivered tribute after tribute to the beauties of the Berkshires in general and

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Tanglewood in particular, although his researchers failed him during a reference to the vintage baseball game taking place at Wahconah Park and to Jim Bouton as a Pittsfield native. He also presented skits that included an update of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" (the 200th anniversary of Hawthorne's birth was yesterday; the little red cottage where he lived and wrote "The House of the Seven Gables" in 1851 is on the Tanglewood grounds).

And politics emerged, however, briefly, during essayist and poet Calvin Trillin's bitter, envelope-pushing and hilarious poetic send-up of the Bush administration, with his most stinging venom reserved for George Bush's "Nanny Dick" Cheney, who cocks his head "when he's lying." This year, classical music notables from

the Tanglewood orbit were missing in action, but the "Existential Bass Quartet" (made up of BSO veteran Larry Wolfe and three of his Tanglewood Music Center students) filled the gap admirably, particularly in their arrangement of "Stars and Stripes Forever." Sam Bush, playing the mandolin and country fiddle, offered some typical "Prairie" musical fare.

But the discovery of the evening was a dusky-voiced pop-jazz singer, Inga Swearingen, who merits a major career based on her versions of "Heart and Soul," "A Time for Love" and "The Saddest Noise" — heartfelt interpretations that brought her well-deserved ovations.

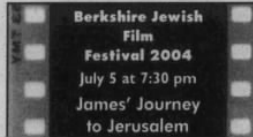
There were some misfires, including a prolonged episode of "Guy Noir, Private Eye" that became impossibly muddled (perhaps Mr. Noir needs a sabbatical).

Sound-effects master Fred Newman created an entire audio world

of the imagination, using his voice and some basic props, and actors Tim Scott, Sue Russell and Erica Rhodes delivered their lines with typical panache.

Keillor's sermonlike monologues, "News from Lake Wobegon," delivered unscripted and without notes, remain the heart and soul of the show. Saturday night's 20-minute stream of consciousness included a tribute to the joys of freshly cooked corn, of ripe strawberries and rhubarb, the miracle of a successful marriage (Keillor's parents) and the triumph of American individualism over tribalistic, group-oriented ritual.

Wrapping up with an audience sing-along ("America the Beautiful" and "My Country 'Tis of Thee), Keillor struck just the right notes of understated patriotism, reclaiming the music, indeed the flag, as belonging to all, left, right and center.



An advertisement for the Women of Achievement Lecture Series. It features a dark background with white text: "Women of Achievement Lecture Series Today at 4 pm July 5". There is a small image of a woman's face partially visible at the bottom.