

Tanglewood Adds Elegance To Broadcast Experience

By AL HUTCHISON
Tribune correspondent
LENOX, Mass. — Before football games, stadium parking lots attract a particular breed of fans known as tailgaters. Typically, they grill their hot dogs and hamburgers, swig their beers and flaunt their favorite team's colors.

Here in the gentle hills of western Massachusetts, where the Boston Symphony Orchestra maintains its summer home at a former family estate called Tanglewood, there's a similar but more elegant practice: The early birds sip champagne or wine, nibble on exotic salads and cold cuts, and generally behave as if they're at a 19th-century picnic.

The graceful grounds of Tanglewood are beautifully maintained and boast a number of large shade trees that make the outdoor dining experience delightful, even under a warm summer sun. For those who don't bring their own hampers, there are snacks and soft drinks available, but to choose that option is to miss the point, for a trip to Tanglewood is meant to mean much more than merely being entertained.

It is a capital-E Experience, an event, and done properly it is accompanied by a picnic hamper, folding chairs and perhaps — for the sheer fun of it — a candelabra or two.

Although for the performance most may prefer to buy seats in what is called "The Shed," many are satisfied to



Photo by DANAYE

Garrison Keillor, right, and the rest of the cast of "A Prairie Home Companion" put on the show in Lenox, Mass., recently.

spend their Tanglewood stay outside, often on blankets or standing. That's the less expensive choice and a fine one unless it rains. That's when you see the outsiders scrambling to find a place under The Shed's generous overhang.

On July 3, under partly cloudy skies, Tanglewood presented this season's last live performance of Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," the weekly National Public Radio program that draws 8 million listeners on 558 stations each Saturday at 6 p.m. By 4 p.m., there was a large crowd on hand.

Lacking flamboyance and relying on sheer talent and wit rather than rapid movement and noise, "A Prairie Home

Companion" generally appeals to a more mature audience.

As the time drew near for Keillor's appearance onstage (at exactly 5:45), the perimeter paths were filled with people headed in opposite directions: Those returning their folding chairs and picnic hampers to their cars had to dodge those arriving from the nearby parking areas.

In the 15-minute warm-up before the radio broadcast began, Keillor led the audience in singing "The Star Spangled Banner."

In the seconds before the show went on the air, Keillor — a tall, lean man dressed in a dark suit but clad in bright red sneakers — turned to the mu-

sicians behind him and appeared to give them some impromptu instructions. The first broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" was on July 6, 1974, so there has been plenty of time to work out wrinkles.

Actually, as serenely beautiful as Tanglewood may be, The Shed is not the ideal venue for a program such as "A Prairie Home Companion" because two roof-supporting pillars prevent some in the audience from seeing the entire stage. On the other hand, because there are no walls, birds sometimes contribute unscheduled choruses to the proceedings.

On this Saturday night, one such outbreak of bird song accompanied a singer, Florida State University graduate student Inga Swearingen.

As often as possible, I've listened to Keillor's broadcasts for years, and long wanted to see it in person. Fortunately, the program's Tanglewood performance came as I was visiting the area. My companions were two professional musicians, Chris Shaw and Bridget Ball, close friends of the program's guitarist, Pat Donohue.

I was interested to see how observing the program in person differed from listening to it on the radio. Now I know of the 15-minute audience warm-up

period, that Keillor gestures and strolls about the stage as he talks, that the regular musicians — collectively, they're called "Guy's Shoe Band" — obviously love what they're doing and that sometimes it is difficult to hear what's being said because the audience's applause is so loud.

Perhaps the most interesting difference is that once the show has ended its radio broadcast, there's more to come. Although a substantial portion of the audience had begun to stream out during the final stages of the program, others pushed their way closer to the stage, hoping for autographs or close-up glimpses of the stars.

In those first moments after the show, the band played a spirited rendition of the theme for "Powdermilk Biscuits," one of the show's other mock sponsors.

Although our purpose in going forward was to keep our prearranged appointment with Pat Donohue, just as we reached the front Garrison Keillor strode back on stage.

"There aren't supposed to be encores in radio," he quipped, but then he began singing "I Bid You Goodnight" as the audience, now standing, sang along. Then he sang

"Amazing Grace" and then, finally, he left the stage for good.

As the musicians and the technical crew began taking apart all the equipment, music director and pianist Rich Dworski knelt on the edge of the stage, signing autographs and chatting with fans for at least half an hour. Dworski told me he enjoyed meeting the fans and found signing autographs pleasant. He said Keillor would also have struck around, but that he had family matters to tend to that night.

Swearingen, a jazz singer of growing repute, and other guest musicians also signed autographs.

Almost an hour after the radio broadcast ended, getting away from Tanglewood meant enduring a slow-moving parade of cars threading its way through Lenox. Lee, Stockbridge and other picturesque communities in the Berkshire foothills.

I was pleased that, resisting any temptation to expedite traffic, the local authorities haven't chosen to introduce wider highways such as those so often found in the vicinity of football stadiums. Dale Mabry Highway and the interstates may be necessary in Tampa, but they would destroy the New England landscape.

St. Petersburg/Clearwater
Non-Stop to: Spend Less!
Fares Start From