

Garrison Keillor comes to town

Well-known personality donates performance for Free Clinic

By **DEB ANDERSON**
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Just a few years ago, Garrison Keillor sat in relative obscurity watching a Ludington Guard Band concert in Wilson Park. When he returned to Menomonie on Saturday, he was in the spotlight as he entertained at the Mabel Tainter Theater, opting for a turn on stage, instead of in front of one — all for a good cause.

Clad in semi-formal attire, Keillor brought "A Prairie Home Companion" to life. Red socks and sneakers with matching bow tie added to his "tux" and hinted at the refreshing commentary to come.

The distinguished soothing, resonating voice of the popular radio show proved to be as warm as his handshake. Keillor's special brand of homespun humor put guest entertainers at ease and inspired hearty audience laughter during

the fund-raiser for the Free Clinic of the Greater Menomonie Area.

Backed by the house band for the night, aptly named "Lightning," since "It only strikes once," the author with the familiar caricature face emceed the event with grace, deferring to the entertainers as much as possible, allowing their performances to be the focus. Local musicians, Larry Jess (clarinet), Patrick Pesek-Herriges (piano), Jerry Young (tuba) and Ron Gard (percussion) flowed with the banter as they accompanied Keillor and his guests.

Lending his baritone pipes to solos, as well as duets, Keillor occasionally joined the featured performers.

In a low-cut vintage gown befitting her operatic voice, local soprano Juliana Schmidt, accompanied by Anne Vogelwede on piano, sang

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Martha Wallen, professor at UW-Stout, enjoyed speaking with Garrison Keillor after his performance at the Mabel Tainter Theater on Saturday evening. Like many others eager to have their copies of his books signed, she was pleased to have his autograph.

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several numbers including a duet, "Just a Song at Twilight," with Keillor. She played a good sport to his "off the shoulder" jokes and quips about her Unitarian affiliation.

Undeterred by the tolling bell tower outside, harpist Paula Smith performed "The Brook," mesmerizing and spellbinding the audience with her undulating rendition of the rippling, flowing sounds of water. With her accompaniment, Keillor sang a melancholy version of "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose."

Artesian Dreams (Yata, Dave Peterson and Jim Price) had a reunion with the host. In the late 70s, the group performed on "A Prairie Home Companion," representative of musicians from "small towns under 2,000." In addition to "Cocoa Butter" and several other numbers, the group played "Isle of Inis-free," a poem by William Butler Yeats that Yata set to music, as he and the master of ceremonies harmonized. Keillor then segued into "There once was an old woman from Sheba..."

Representing the Red Cedar Medical Center (RCMC), Dan Johnson, M.D., spoke to the crowd addressing the need for a free clinic. With a droll sense of humor, he admitted no affiliation with the free clinic, then hunkered down and got serious. He cited statistics for Medicare and Medicaid recipients as well as those uninsured (nearly a third of all Americans) to drive home the need for the free clinic. He thanked the audience for continued support.

Keillor continued to weave the health/medical theme throughout the show. He even used his own heart surgery (July 25, 2000) as material, emphasizing the importance of "saving lives." Later in the show, he mentioned that Dr. Johnson is his cousin.

The night progressed, offering something for everyone. Accompanied by Adam Stemple, an adept guitarist from Minneapolis, Lorraine a'Malena, a recently-formed duo (Lorraine Garland and Malena Teves), that Keillor "found on the Internet," performed a set of "gothic folk" and "Celtic traditional music." Their catchy tune, "Marilyn Monroe Didn't Marry Henry Miller," was a crowd pleaser.

With such an eclectic array of performers, the Garrison Keillor event may have brought TV's "American Idol" to mind. Show biz after all, is about entertainment and gauging from the audience, that's what it got in this revue.

Radio, known for its auditory not visual appeal, is a medium that transcended itself on the Mabel Tainter stage. Spanning a three-hour period (including an intermission), the variety production in the radio-show format had a dual purpose, and offered up something for the eyes and ears. It gave audience members their money's worth. And, at the rate of \$100 donations, their tickets will support the free clinic.

Keillor and the performers donated their performances to benefit the free clinic. Con Agra was the sponsor, and aside from Mabel Tainter, other contributors included Book Ends, Lammer's Food Fest, West Wind Graphics and numerous volunteers. Attired in blue scrubs bearing the Free Clinic of the Greater Menomonie Area logo, RCMC staff ushered and served at intermission and at the show's conclusion.

After the show, the famous guy from "Lake Wobegon" signed copies of his books at a reception for Free Clinic Founders Club and Century Club members in the Bertha Tainter room, lower level of Mabel Tainter. Though the line grew long, he remained standing to greet his fans as he autographed covers and paused for a picture or two. His books were for sale before and after the program and at intermission.

Seemingly unscripted, the "Evening with Garrison Keillor," held well-crafted dialogue and seamless styling not soon to be forgotten. So casually delivered, even as Keillor invited anyone on stage who could demonstrate "the Shottish" (no takers), one never knew what to expect.

But the host with the most kept the program on an "even Keillor." And he made this writer hearken back to the 40s, wishing for a fedora replete with a press pass in its band.

Keillor, a tall, rather shy and humble celebrity, didn't quite know what to make of my parting comment in the reception line when I joked: "I'm going to put your picture in the newspaper and make you famous." Maybe the joke was on me: It's just been announced that Hollywood is going to make a movie in Minnesota about Keillor and his radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion."