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"Nothing gets the taste of shame and humiliation out of your mouth like Bee-bop-aree-bop Rhubarb Pie."
GARRISON KEILLOR, "A Prairie Home Companion"

BEE-BOP-AREE-BOP




THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show will be taped Friday from the Rhubarb Festival in Lanesboro, Minn.

Garrison Keillor brings 'Prairie Home Companion' to Lanesboro's annual homage to rhubarb

By TERRY RINDFLEISCH
La Crosse Tribune

LANESBORO, Minn. — Lanesboro's Rhubarb Festival and "A Prairie Home Companion" are a match made in rhubarb heaven.

Garrison Keillor, host of the popular National Public Radio show, launches into a woeeful tale in the middle of his program — and rhubarb is offered as a stress reliever or an antidote for just about any problem or ailment.

"Wouldn't this be a good time for a slice of rhubarb pie?" Keillor says. "Nothing gets the taste of shame and humiliation out of your mouth like Bee-bop-aree-bop Rhubarb Pie."

Then the actors and the band serve up a musical tribute to the vegetable.

"But one little thing can revive a guy, and that is homemade rhubarb pie. Serve it up, nice and hot. Maybe things aren't as bad as you thought. Mama's little baby loves rhubarb, rhubarb. Bee-bop-aree-bop Rhubarb Pie."

Keillor is bringing the "Prairie Home Companion" Rhubarb Show to Lanesboro this year for the small town's Rhubarb Festival. The radio show will be taped in a performance Friday, June 1, at the Lanesboro Softball Field, nestled between the bluffs and the Root River.

Nearly 1,300 tickets sold out within two hours of going on sale, so a second show was added for 4:45 p.m. Saturday, June 2. The second show, a non-broadcast performance, will be staged shortly after the conclusion of the festival.

The shows will feature sound effects wizard Tom Keith and the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band led by Richard Dworsky.

Lanesboro festival folks have been after Keillor to bring his show to the Rhubarb Festival because they knew their festival was a perfect setting for the show and would be a boost to their event.

Last year, Nancy Martinson and some Lanesboro residents wore shirts, spelling rhubarb on the front and back, at "A Prairie Home Companion" show in Rochester. They even sang the rhubarb pie song from the show, and Keillor mentioned the festival, Martinson said.

"We couldn't ask for anything better with the show coming to our festival," Martinson said. "I hope we're ready for all the people. We never imagined something like this."

See RHUBARB, E-2

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" shows

WHEN: 7:45 p.m. Friday, June 1; 4:45 p.m. Saturday, June 2

WHERE: Part of Lanesboro Rhubarb Festival, Lanesboro Softball Field. Bring your own lawn chair.

TICKETS: The Friday night show is sold out, but some tickets may be available for the second show. Call (651) 290-1221 or go to www.ticketmaster.com

LANESBORO RHUBARB FESTIVAL: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday in Sylvan Park

INSIDE



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Backstage

Experience the frenzy as Keillor and the cast and crew of "A Prairie Home Companion" write, rewrite and make last-minute changes to the script of a recent show at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater, E-2.

FESTIVAL EVENTS

The festival opens Saturday with the singing of the rhubarb national anthem and the throwing of the first stalk, followed by the Rhubarb Olympics:

Rhubarb stalk throw: See who throws the stalk the longest distance.

Rhubarb golf: Use a stalk to drive a pingpong ball closest to a flag.

Rhubarb hoops: Make a free throw with a stalk.

"Green Eggs and Rhubarb": Balance an organic green egg on a stalk and walk around an obstacle course without dropping the egg.

Rhubarb toss: Throw stalks into the holes of a wooden beanbag catcher.

Other events:

Free tasting of rhubarb delights, such as pies, crisps, cakes, jams, soups, drinks, chili, pickles and pancakes with rhubarb syrup. Registration 9:30 a.m.; tasting 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Contests for the largest leaf and the heaviest stalk.

Crafts: Bring your rhubarb jewelry, baskets, trays and vases to win prizes.

Rhubarb Rant Speakers Corner, where people can pontificate on rhubarb.

Rhubarb juggling, including juggling with flaming rhubarb.

Rhubarb poetry contest.

Rhubarb Sisters, singing parodies such as "What Shall We Do With the Extra Rhubarb," "Talkin' 'bout Rhubarb" and "Red Rhubarb for a Blue Lady."

LEE NEWSPAPERS FILE PHOTO
Compete in the Rhubarb Olympics, including the rhubarb stalk throw (above), and rhubarb toss.

Level

A VIEW FROM STAGE RIGHT: THE MAKING OF "A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION"

Cast, crew accustomed to rolling with Keillor's last-minute revisions

By BERNARD HASTINGS
The Associated Press



ST. PAUL, Minn. — During rehearsal, the boss meanders backstage, singing to himself. He doesn't so much wander as he circles like an approaching jet.

When he descends from on high is anybody's guess. He's also the air traffic controller. And it's his airport.

The boss is Garrison Keillor, the omnipresent and omniscient children's creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," the public radio show heard by a million ears, broadcast live from Minnesota's mythical Lake Wobegon — home to Norwegian backwoods farmers, strong women, good-looking men and above-average children.

This is not the gentle manner you hear on the radio that sits serenely, an observer of triviality and tribulations. This is a complicated and detached ringmaster leaning against a chair, faster than a speeding bullet. It is impossible to sing every word. He plays every musical instrument and reads each actor's lines — simultaneously, anyone if he could be right.

He started hitting writers not too long ago, but virtually the entire two-hour program still comes out of his head. Which is his beauty, or his conceit, depending on one's viewpoint.

But for now, take a moment to enjoy this view: stage right at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. Dimmed house lights bank the old, refurbished auditorium in burnished gold. The 996 red-upholstered seats are empty. Outrageous, the cast and crew are rehearsing.

Linger over images not seen in the mad-eye of radio. This is the well-oiled and often magical machine that produces "A Prairie Home Companion."

Rehearsal: Round one

There are two shows this weekend. Friday's performance won't be broadcast — it's staged only for the program's workaholic hometown audience, and serves as a kind of dress rehearsal for Saturday's regular show, which will be broadcast coast to coast on more than 500 stations and later in Europe.

At 2 p.m. Friday, tonight's musical troupe is later with love. "Drowsy at Noon," the Everly Brothers' classic, "Living on a Prayer" by Elvis Presley, "I Can't Stop Loving You," made memorable by Ray Charles, and Freddy Fender's country promise "Before the Next Shoutout Fair."

Keillor and band leader Rich Dworsky — a short, bubbling, balding man who can be heard play most any song off the top of his head — are working out chord changes with the Guy's All-Star Show Band.

"I think I need an A, B, A," says Keillor, who arrives in jeans, a black T-shirt and his ever-present red sneakers. He has not shaved. His hair stands on end. His body language says "I Am Thinking Approach to Meet Own Fate."

Keillor, who is about to turn 65, has never cared much about his appearance.

His forehead is a cliff dropping into overgrown, eyesores that hang like swollen rain gutters. His 6-foot-4, gangly frame hangs at odd angles. His top goes on for miles.

"I have a face for radio," he says quite often.

Words are most important to him. Writing, he believes, is rewriting.

He does the latter during rehearsals, after rehearsals and during the broadcast. A song is in. It's out. Likewise for

Sound engineer Lane Hudson controls the audio rig on stage during the live April 14 broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul.

Keillor and Dworsky perform a duet during the April 13 dress rehearsal.

Actors Tim Hannon and Ben Ross just hours before the April 14 performance.

the comedy skills.

The performers learned long ago to roll with it. "This is his show," smiles banister Gary Raynor, who has rehearsed with Janet Jackson and played with the Count Basie Band. "We put this together every fast. There's not a moment to waste. Everyone just kind of gives him space. He always has a vision, and he knows what it is."

Stage manager Albert Webster may be the hardest-working man in Lake Wobegon. He handles the mid-show gigs — anywhere from one-third to one-half of the one-month 36 performance. He handles all arrangements for the troupe's tiny cruise, when the actors and musicians entertain a sold-out bar scene for a week.

Then there's his real job: keeping the show on schedule, despite morphing dialogue and disappearing songs.

At 3 p.m., Webster still doesn't have a script for tonight's performance. He never really gets a final one, just a succession of marked-up pages as the day wears on. Webster gets each version to actors Sue Scott and Tim Hannon and sound-effects guy Tom Keith.

A lot of it's off the top of their heads," Webster says, "and other body orifices."

Like most of the cast, he lives nearby. Dworsky, Arnie Knodel, a wiry and tiny man barely visible behind his high hat, cyrcle, comes from New York's Staten Island. "We all come here every weekend to do a really fun job," Webster says.

At 3:30 p.m., Keillor is having second thoughts. "I'm going to scratch 'Drowsy,'" he says. "No goes."

He debates bandleader Dworsky about whether he's staging the right notes. "How do I know that you're right and I'm wrong?" asks Keillor. Dworsky hands him the score. "Oh, the sheet music," Keillor drags. That little of thing.

The actor call is for 4:30 p.m., but Scott is stuck in a traffic jam. Hannon and Keith wait downstairs in the green room.

The band obliges. "If he brings you happiness, then I wish you both the best," says frequent musical guest Prudence Johnson.

No, Keillor decides after a few bars. "That's it," he says. "It's gone."

Oh, "Living on a Prayer," whose lyrics Keillor has rewritten. Now it's an ode to erupting children. He thymes darts with bad tequila. Next scene: "Drowsy of yours in my lap. Great big dumb. Oh, you're hard."

There's plenty of potty talk on "Prairie Home Companion." Much advice about poop and burgers and the virtues of advanced age — racers, for instance, for example, and its slippery slide into Drowsy. There is constant work for the sound-effects guy (Keith and Fred Newman) in simulating such his bandmates.

Such pranks never fail to delight

audience members, many of whom have gray hair.

At 6:30 p.m., the actors are rehearsing. Show time is 90 minutes.

At his sound-effects table, Keith has added show the boys very old paths at thrift shops because they have harder sales and make more noise) and three pieces of black fabric.

There also are miniature doors with metal knobs, a door bell, a rotary dial telephone (to get that old-fashioned, maniacal herding) and a box of small stones (in which he will walk his palms to simulate footprints on a gravel road).

For a dull about originating, inventive Canada goose, Keith distributes the fabric swatches. The idea is for the actors to snap them like accordions, thereby creating the sound of flapping wings.

They look silly doing it. That's Keillor's point. It's a sight gag for the theater audience. The folks listening at home won't know.

For the next 30 minutes or so, they run through other bits while Keillor lectures with a faraway look. His mouth hardens into a perfectly shaped, upside-down U. This happens when he's not so busy about the way his lines are being read.

Keillor has written his monologue, but he rarely lets anyone see it. It's all in his head.

Ten minutes to show time; the house is full.

In his tiny dressing room, Keillor changes into a white shirt and black pants. Then he practices, fiddling with the knot of his tie (which matches his red necktie and his red shoes — the uniform of every show).

He slips on a black jacket, brushes the lapels and takes a sip of water. He strides across the hardwood floor to center stage and turns to face the band.

"Tons, white spot please," he says to an unseen light technician. He lifts his arms and nods to Dworsky at the piano, who plinks out the well-known notes that begin the show's theme song.

"Oh, that that old piano," says Keillor, "from down the piano."

The audience claps and whistles. The noise grows thunderous.

Ever-changing (non)script

The show goes off with nary a hitch, but there were last minute changes Friday's audience couldn't see.

After dying twice, "Drowsy" resurges. Keillor's monologue — which included the passing of Holy Week, the colors of wine, terraced steers, pie baking and a bird — ended abruptly, for reasons only he knew.

"That's fun," Webster whispers into his headset. "He's cut it short by five minutes."

And so Saturday, as rehearsals begin anew for tonight's broadcast, here's the question: How much of the show has Keillor changed overnight?

A lot, it turns out. And he's still at it.

It's revisited the show. And then there's the matter of the music therapist. No one has seen him, and Keillor has tested him to perform during the broadcast.

By 6 p.m., Scott and Russell are reading through revisions. Keillor scrolls them for the bidding.

"Writers don't like to see actors' names changed," he says.

"Well, slightly then," says a grinning Scott, the only female actor like in the vision of gun mauls and snaky leeches in his head. "Play 'Drowsy'."

Keillor has responded. Webster presents Todd Schwartzberg of the McPhill Center for Music in Minneapolis.

Like a lamb to slaughter, Schwartzberg trails Keillor across the stage to meet Dworsky. By way of introduction, the boss says: "Todd is going to do a couple of songs with the band, and you're going to play."

Dworsky nods. Schwartzberg looks terrified. He has to borrow a guitar from the band.

In the key of G, Schwartzberg begins. "I play this song a lot with kids. It goes 'In the mood to play my hands, how low about you?'"

The therapist explains that during this number, the audience will clap their shaker their hands above their heads and then turn in a circle. A therapeutic hobby policy, it is.

He's got another number he wants to play.

Keillor doesn't answer. He's waiting that loves he gets when he doesn't like something.

"Drowsy" dies a slow death. Twenty minutes to show time. Keillor stands in the wings, his monologue its usual mystery. But it never ceases to produce the same reverent response. Silence descends when he plays on a stool, bends into the microphone and wears another intimate dispatch from the placid shores of a community so small you never need to use your train signal, because everyone knows when you're going.

On the counter of his dressing room sits a ragged, ball-shaped paper. He has scribbled "Dear Mr. G. G. G." — the hymn reportedly sung by jobs going down with the Titanic.

Meagher or musical selection?

The music therapist is starting straight ahead like a man about to be hung.

The house lights dim.

In the dark, Dworsky begins to play. Keillor takes a long breath. "Oh, hear that old piano..."

The show begins.

Day is done

Three hours later, Keillor says with exhaustion. He has shaken the hand of every fan who stayed after the show. He signs autographs.

He does this every week.

He thinks the monologue fell flat, but doesn't say why. After three decades of doing this, he still can't say what constitutes a good show. He's better at saying what doesn't.

"I don't want to get into self-righteousness or proclamations. I don't want to deal in nostalgia in the slightest danger." He directs these comments to a bottle of red tea he swigs in his hand like a brandy snifter. His red-tinted eyes stare at the brown liquid. "I expect only to alliterate."

Yet he built Lake Wobegon, a place steeped in sentimentality. A place where, week after week, millions of whimsical strangers slide into the corner booths of a make-believe cafe, feeling that they belong to a place that exists only in Keillor's head.

And next week, he'll invite them back.

RHUBARB

The roots of the festival began when Martinson and two friends, Mary Bell and Heidi Dyling, started looking for a way to give the farmers market hours to 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. for the festival.

"That first year, we were surprised at how many people there were, and not a lot had tasted rhubarb," she said. "I never expected this festival to take off so quickly. It's really a great event for the whole community to get involved in."

The first festival in 2005 drew 100 people for the first and 350 for the second.

The festival has everything from Blueberry (Olympians and rhubarb every corner to free tasting of rhubarb delights and a contest for largest rhubarb leaf and harvest walk.

For the tasting of the did-yeo," she said.

With a taped national broadcast, Laneberry and the festival will receive the kind of attention reserved for Lake Wobegon, the imaginary small town in the show.

Not bad for a small festival in only its third year.

With the national exposure, organizers probably will try to expand the festival to an entire day next year.

"But not a whole weekend yet," she said.