

Concert Review

Keillor mixes Iowa treats with old favorites

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Garrison Keillor and crew served up comfort food for the ears Sunday night.

His 2008 Rhubarb Tour, a scaled-down version of the weekly radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," gave the crowd of 5,200 at the Iowa State Fair Grandstand a blend of bittersweet songs, bad jokes, good sound effects, stories of romance won and lost, and even a 6-year-old talent contest winner in a bow tie.

Keillor, in his trademark red socks and shoes, set the tone for the balmy summer evening with Iowa singer/songwriter Greg Brown's tune "Early."

He chatted about his tour around the fair before the show, stopping to watch chin-ups at the Marines' exhibit and to look at the llamas "being raised by gentle teenagers."

Llamas turned out to be something of a theme throughout the evening, as Keillor repeatedly challenged sound effects man Fred Newman to sound like them. Newman's grimaces — a perk of stage show over radio — made it clear he had no idea what llamas sound like, but then, neither did most of us in the audience.

Newman provided sound for a



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Garrison Keillor leads the Rhubarb Tour show Sunday at the Grandstand on the Iowa State Fairgrounds.

story Keillor seemed to make up on the spot, evoking a semi truck, sheep, a nor'easter, glass breaking, and more, competing at one time with a real helicopter rising in back of the Grandstand.

County singer Suzy Bogguss, accompanied by the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, was a highlight of the show on tunes such as "If You Leave Me Now" and "Somebody Soon." Her strong, rich, warm voice is a strong contrast to Keillor's soft tones.

He did acknowledge the disparity, saying when singing duets, it's always best to sing with someone who is better than you, and that

Bogguss had made a mistake, picking Keillor, an amateur.

Then again, the Rhubarb Tour is in the style of an old radio show, evoking an era when what the songs were about and the spirit with which they were sung mattered more than perfect pitch.

One pitch-perfect performance of the evening, though, was that of Andrew Burgess, 6, of Iowa City, winner of the Bill Riley Talent Search. Keillor brought out the dapper and poised young man to perform Beethoven's Sonata in G major.

And Andrew's piano-playing brought the crowd to its feet.

"How do you follow that?" Keillor mused.

Well, by singing a string of bad jokes that were funny, but not something a family newspaper can print.

Keillor sprinkled his stories, often in the form of poetry, throughout the night.

"We need language that makes more of life than what we see," he said, "and that it is poetry."

Adding to the summer-evening-in-the-park feel of the show, Keillor led the audience in a singalong capped by another fitting Greg Brown song, the lovely, poetic "Iowa Waltz."