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Mortality on mind of everyman Keillor

By Dan Craft
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The last time Garrison Keillor visited the "other Twin Cities," he was a hail-and-hearty 62.

For his second B-N visit in five years, the gentleman from Minneapolis-St. Paul, now 67, will be doing so on the heels of a much-publicized health scare.

In September 2004, Keillor was the star of the annual visiting author program sponsored by Illinois Wesleyan University's Ames Library and Illinois State University's Milner Library.

He was rewarded with around 300 fans in IWU's Westbrook Auditorium, followed that night by 3,500 more in ISU's Braden Auditorium.

Five years later, almost to the very day, the "Prairie Home Companion" overlord checked himself in to St. Paul's United Hospital with slurred speech and dizziness.

A "mild" stroke was the diagnosis.

Momentary panic among "Prairie Home" devotees ensued, alarmed that the man whose mel-



Despite his stroke scare this past fall, it's been back to business as usual for veteran "A Prairie Home Companion" overlord Garrison Keillor, coming to the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts at 7:30 p.m. Monday.

lifuous voice was his calling card would be forever compromised.

On the local front, fans feared for his upcoming Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts appearance.

As it turned out, the

show was far enough down the road (Jan. 25) that it never had to be postponed. (A more pressing Springfield engagement, however, was scrapped and re-programmed to Feb. 15.)

More importantly, Keillor's stroke couldn't keep a

At a glance

What: "An Evening with Garrison Keillor"

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

Where: Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts, 600 N. East St.

Tickets: \$53 to \$59

Box office: 866-686-9541

good man, or his mellifluous voice, down.

And his career continued apace, with barely enough time for a pause for one of his sponsors, from Powdermilk Biscuits to Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery.

In a column penned in the wake of the scare a week later, Keillor remembered a nurse telling him, "I hope you know how lucky you are."

He added, "I was essentially unscathed, though touched by mortality — which I have been on the run from for a long time. I never wanted to be a 67 y.o. man. I still have some edgy 27 y.o. man inside me."

Even so, Keillor isn't doing press for his shows

these days, according to the spokeswoman for his live appearances, Rachel Keeling.

"He typically doesn't do advance or on-site interviews — they're just not 'his thing,'" she adds.

The fact that he's a former Pantagraph Sunday columnist brooked us no favor (or maybe because of that "former" part we made no headway ...).

Per recent press accounts of the current show, fans can expect "An Evening with Garrison Keillor" to resemble his Ames/Milner talks in terms of presentation, with topical updates and, of course, references to his recent scrape with mortality.

His trademark garb of tux, red tie and sneakers will likely be in place.

At his Braden presentation, Keillor said, "We're all born with a story we have an obligation to tell," adding, "I really believe everyone has at least one good story in them."

The Anoka, Minn., native began his broadcast career in 1969 hosting a drive-time morning program at Minnesota Public Radio, a stint that led five

years later to a Saturday night offshoot, "A Prairie Home Companion."

The live riff on old-time variety shows, with a gently nudging tone, continued for 13 years, until 1987, when voluntarily Keillor pulled the plug, presumably to try something different. But the result, "The American Radio Company of the Air," struck few as terribly different.

Eventually, the host must have agreed: He resurrected "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1993, and has remained on board ever since.

In a strange foreboding of things to come, Robert Altman's 2006 film version of the show was shrouded in death and/or premonitions of same as the series prepared for its final show in the wake of its historic theater being torn down to make way for a shopping center.

Altman himself was mortally ill during its making, and died later that year.

In his post-stroke column, Keillor noted, "You had intended to be a natural wonder, an old guy who still runs high hurdles — but morality has bitten you in the butt."