

Sunday, January 24, 2010 / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Two little wires at Tucson Arena will decide how companionable 'Prairie Home' will be

By Cathalena E. Burch
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The success or failure of "A Prairie Home Companion" broadcasting live from the Tucson Arena Saturday won't come down to a botched monologue, coughs from the audience, flubbed lines or skits that fall flat.

It rests on two little phone wires — high-quality ISD lines essential for transmitting the show to 4 million listeners worldwide.

"For some reason the telephone company does not always understand the existence of radio. They're sort of in tune with cell phones, so this is as much audio fidelity that the phone company is prepared to offer us," says "Prairie" host, creator and creative force Garrison Keillor, explaining the process more than complaining about it. "So we have to somehow extort high-quality lines so one can actually broadcast music and sopranos and guitars and that sort of thing."

If the phone lines are good to go, expect magic to occur as Keillor and his fellow Lake Wobegon characters take up temporary residence in the Old Pueblo. It is the first time the show — which will go out live to audiences along the East Coast and in the Midwest, with delayed broadcasts abroad — will have broadcast from Tucson in several years.

During a phone interview from his snowy home in St. Paul, Minn., earlier this month, Keillor described what it will be like to broadcast from Tucson and what we can expect.

Will people know you're in Tucson?

People will know. We will mention it repeatedly and Guy Noir, whatever adventure he is involved in, will be set in Tucson. I don't know what he'll do. Maybe somebody has imported some new species of cactus and it's a carnivorous cactus. And Dusty and Lefty will be out there



JANET HOSSETTER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS 2009

Garrison Keillor's radio show will broadcast from Tucson Saturday.

DID YOU KNOW

"A Prairie Home Companion," which blends comedy, music and tales from the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., is broadcast on 590 public-radio stations to more than 4 million listeners each week. You can also hear it on America One and the Armed Forces Networks in Europe and the Far East. Garrison Keillor is founder and host of the show, which he has been doing for 35 years.

on the range, herding their cattle to the outskirts of Tucson. And maybe people will object to them on zoning grounds and they will have to go to a hearing. Maybe Tucson wants to get rid of a couple of old saddle bums.

And for sure we'll have some Sons of the Pioneers tunes because that is the West: "Riding Down the Canyon," "Cool Water." And I'll write a song or two. I may tell a story about my wild cousin whose name is Cathy who moved to Tucson. She actually did, and so she lives a free and eccentric life there.

So you write this on the cuff?

I'll probably start on the Wednesday before the show and we'll have a little rehearsal on Friday and I'll rewrite it all. And then we'll do it on Saturday. Some of it is off the cuff and other parts are written.

Sounds like a lot of stress.

It would be stressful if I stopped to think about it. If you don't, then it's not. It just does-

n't bother you, you've done it so many times. You just drift towards it. This sort of passivity is really important.

How are you feeling after last year's stroke? I heard you describe it as more like a hiccup.

Yeah, it was just a little blip, thank goodness, knock on wood. It was fine. You had a slight brush with disaster, but we all know what that's like.

Did you have an epiphany from it, a revelation perhaps that it was time to slow down?

No, I'm Protestant. We don't have epiphanies. Those are for Catholics. We just move ahead. We just slog forward.

But are you contemplating retirement?

Oh no. If I retired, then I would have to find a hobby. I'd have to do woodworking. I would have to become a bird-watcher. I would have to collect seashells. The world just doesn't need any more seashell collections, and it doesn't need any more bad handicrafts. It doesn't need me to sit at a potter's wheel and make heavy earthenware. Birds would not be any happier if I could identify them. And so I try to be useful as long as possible, and this radio show seems to be a useful thing.

It's calming to small children. Many people use it to put their small children to sleep. It's on in nursing homes. It's on in penal institutions. I'm taking the place of Xanax, so it's a useful thing.

What will you do when you

IF YOU GO

• **What:** Live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" with Garrison Keillor.

• **Featuring:** The Guys All-Star Shoe Band, the Royal Academy of Radio Actors, Tim Russell, Sue Scott (a former Tucsonan), sound effects man Fred Newman, and special guests iMas, Joel Guzman and Andra Suchy. Arizona Daily Star cartoonist and comedian David Fitzsimmons has been recruited to help Keillor write his opening monologue.

• **When:** 3:45 p.m. Saturday, doors open at 2:45.

• **Where:** Tucson Arena, 260 S. Church Ave.

• **Tickets:** \$25, \$35 and \$50 through Ticketmaster.com.

• **Et cetera:** "A Prairie Home Companion" from the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn., will be broadcast live in high-definition to about 500 U.S. movie theaters on Feb. 4 including the Century Theaters at the Oro Valley Marketplace, El Con 20, Park Place 20 and Cinemark in Sierra Vista. For tickets and details, visit prairiehome.publicradio.org or www.ncm.com/Fathom. Keillor's syndicated column appears on the Star's op-ed page.

get here on Thursday?

Thanks to radio, we will be anonymous. We'll wander around and we'll walk into people's homes. Just open their doors and walk in. Look around. See what people wear, look through their closets. And we'll come up with material and we'll talk about Tucson.

I don't think you can slip by anonymously. You have a distinct look.

I go in disguise as an older woman. I have a ... wig and big, big, enormous dark glasses that make me look like an insect. And I'm brazen. I just walk right up to people. I go places I'm not supposed to go.

And I bet you get away with it.

Yeah, of course. A person can get away with a whole lot more than you can imagine they can.

Why Tucson?

We hadn't been there for a while and I really like that part of the country. It's mystifying for me.

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