

GARRISON KEILLOR REHEARSES on Friday evening for today's performance at the Amphitheater at Fort Tuthill. "Prairie Home Companion" will be broadcast live from the Flagstaff venue at 2:45 p.m. (Photos by Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun)

## 'Oh, hear that old piano ...'

Garrison Keillor and his cast and crew rev up for today's live broadcast at Fort Tuthill.

By BETSEY BRUNER  
Arts & Culture Editor

A well-oiled machine was in gear Friday afternoon at the Amphitheater at Fort Tuthill County Park, as a young man at the top of a 12-foot ladder wrapped electrical tape around black sound cables near the ceiling.

"It's a lot of work, and a little exciting," said Austin Bowman, 16, who was helping out his father, Robert Rogers, the production manager at the amphitheater.

**INSIDE • A5** Welcome to the world of Garrison Keillor and his "Prairie Home Companion" show during its set-up day before this afternoon's performance.

As a local, Bowman was joined by members of the PHC crew from the Twin Cities area, like Ken Evans, program lighting designer, who was bringing down a blue scissors lift.

"Just fixing the focus is all we're doing," Evans said. "It's going great."

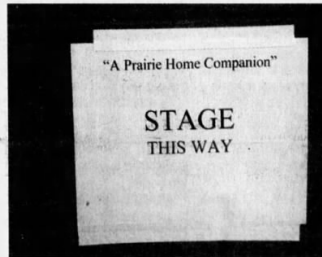
A gentle breeze moved several signs suspended from the rafters: "American Duct Tape Council," "Guy's Shoes," "For the good times, Catchup Advisory Board."

### DREAM COME TRUE

Prairie Home Companion has been a big hit since it first aired in 1974, always with Keillor as host of the popular and quirky variety program.

Some 4 million people listen each week to the long-running show on nearly 600 public radio stations in the U.S.

See **PRAIRIE, A5**



A SIGN SHOWS the way to the "Prairie Home Companion" stage on Friday night during a rehearsal for the show.

## Backstage at Fort Tuthill

In an e-mail Q&A, stage manager Albert Webster answered some questions posed by reporter Betsy Bruner about the inner workings of the "Prairie Home Companion" production:

**Q:** First, about how many people are coming here for the Flagstaff show and what categories do they fit in, like sound, lighting, etc?

**A:** Three audio, broadcast, transmission, audience; 2 stage managers; 1 lighting; 1 truck driver; 1 company manager; 1 website/video; 1 music librarian; 1 scripts person/GK assistant; 1 researcher; 10 regular performers; 10 guest performers.

**Q:** Is this a streamlined version of the full production crew? I noticed they are arriving at different times and in different ways (car, plane, etc.). Are they all coming in more or less from Phoenix, and where did they originate?

**A:** This is the full crew. Most live in the Twin Cities and most are from there. I live in St. Louis. I moved there from St. Paul three years ago. Our other lighting designer, not coming here, comes from Connecticut. Regular performers come in from the Twin Cities, Spokane, New York and elsewhere. Our guests are from all over as well.

See **Q&A, A5**

**PRAIRIE**

from Page A1

Today's show will be broadcast live by KNAU, Arizona Public Radio, to a nationwide audience, as well as a nearly sold-out audience seated in every available space at the amphitheater and the lawn above. "KNAU is thrilled to bring Garrison and 'Prairie Home Companion' to Flagstaff," said John Stark, general manager at KNAU. "We've dreamed of hosting the program for years, and today it's happening."

Listeners here will be able to listen to the show live at 3 p.m., Stark said, as well as the regular delayed broadcasts at 6 p.m. and Sunday at 10 a.m.

Keillor was here last summer as part of the 25-city "Summer Love Tour," which was not a radio broadcast production.

**DON'T FIX ANYTHING**

The return to Flagstaff was probably because of the strong relationship the program has with the local radio station, and also because of the wonderful treatment the cast and crew received at the venue when they first visited here, speculated Albert Webster, stage and touring show manager with Keillor for 10 years.

"We're pretty much the only show on radio that goes out truly live," said Webster, who was supervising production and timing everything on a stop-watch around his neck.

"It's really conceived of as a kind of dinnertime show — you listen to it on the kitchen radio. We don't do any edits. We don't cut anything out. We don't fix anything."

**IF YOU GO ...**

**WHAT:** "A Prairie Home Companion" live national broadcast with The Wranglers with Jimmie Dale Gilmore

**WHEN:** Saturday, 2:45 p.m.

Parking lot opens at 11 a.m.

Gates open at 1 p.m.

Pavilion seating begins at 2 p.m.

**WHERE:** Amphitheater at Fort Tuthill County Park, Exit 337 off I-17, 5 miles south of Flagstaff.

**TICKETS:** About 100 lawn-seating-only tickets remain.

**INFO:** Visit [www.knau.org](http://www.knau.org) for ticket information

Webster said cast and crew will put in 11- to 12-hour days when they are in a tour town.

Performances are always on Saturdays.

Does he like his job?

"It's the best job in show business," Webster said. "I've got a family at home. I could never do a bus and truck tour, going to a different city every night."

**POPULAR TEXAN HERE**

Jimmie Dale Gilmore and The Wranglers are guest performers for the show here.

Gilmore, an icon of the Austin music scene, is a native of the Texas Panhandle.

His music is a rich blend of traditional country, folk, blues and rock styles.

His warbling tenor voice is warm and folksy.

"I need a touch more, if you don't mind, Tony," Gilmore shouts out to sound engineer Tony Axtell during rehearsals.

"One, 2, 1, 2 — ya, ya ya!"

**Q&A**

from Page A1

Since we fly out to just one show a week, it is easy for us to have crew from all over — in comparison to a show that travels each night by bus and truck.

**Q:** *Is everyone staying in the same place to make things easier?*

**A:** Yup, we are all at one hotel. We like it that way and need to be available to Garrison. But we don't share rooms.

**Q:** *Are there any special considerations because this is Flagstaff, with higher elevation, a smaller town atmosphere, etc.*

**A:** We haven't taken the altitude into consideration, other than being sure there is plenty of water around. Garrison and his assistants are doing a lot of research for the show, and he has had some people out on special assignment. It will be fun to see what makes it onto the show!

**Q:** *Are there any people who have been with Garrison for a very long time who might be coming here with him?*

**A:** Our truck driver Russ Ringsak has been with him for almost 35 years.

Many of us are in the 10-15-year range with the show. Garrison does an excellent job keeping people on who work well with his way of working.

**Q:** *What might be the most difficult part of setting up a production like this?*

**A:** There is always one element that is less prepared and takes more effort than others. It seems to never fail. But we are a pretty well-oiled machine and are lucky to work in the best venues in the country. Whatever the challenge of the week is, it's usually easy to deal with because everything else is going well.

**Q:** *Will any of you have time to take in some of the fun things to do here and lovely places to visit, like Native American sites and Grand Canyon?*

**A:** For the most part the production crew feels lucky to find a good place open for dinner. The two days are pretty long. But some of the actors and other company members take full advantage of their travels, and most of us at some point in the season bring out family or connect with friends.

Axtell has a daunting job.

"Sometimes we have shows that require quite a few channels," Axtell said, looking over at his huge sound board. "I have 96 channels, but we're not using all of those today!"

**KEILLOR AT THE HELM**

Weaving in and out of musicians, technical crew and observers, Keillor walked around in his trademark red sneakers, partially unlaced.

David O'Neill from the PHC headquarters had e-mailed that there would be no chance to interview Keillor.

"Unfortunately, once we arrive in town for a broadcast, Garrison is pretty much focused entirely on writing and rehearsing the show and isn't available for interviews ..."

O'Neill wrote. Despite no formal interview, this reporter did chat off-the-

record with Keillor, who was charming, soft-spoken — and taller than she thought he'd be.

O'Neill said Keillor writes most of the show — "monologue, scripts, the rewriting of songs, and notes about the town that he shares with the radio audience all on the day before the broadcast. Keillor then rehearses on Friday via a read-through, with more writing and revisions, O'Neill said.

Webster concurred that Keillor is very fluid in his writing and editing style.

"We give him a Chinese menu: Column A is the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band; Column B is The Wranglers. He changes it all the way through the show."

**VALLEY FOLKS COMING**

Two men were throwing a Frisbee on the lawn above the

amphitheater as the setting sun cast longer shadows.

They turned out to be two musicians with the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band — Gary Raynor, bass, and Peter Johnson, drums.

They both like Flagstaff, especially the cool, dry air.

"I absolutely love it," Raynor said. "If I could live here year-round, I would."

Kerry Dunne, who helps manage R Entertainment, the booking company out of Scottsdale that has a five-year contract to run the amphitheater, chatted with Stark near the vendors' booths at the entrance.

"There have been tons of people who have come from the Valley for the show," he told Stark. "They can't believe how beautiful it is here."

Betsy Bruner can be reached at [bbruner@azdailysun.com](mailto:bbruner@azdailysun.com) or 556-2255.