

Sunday, June 5, 2011 azdailysun.com \$1.50

A Mountain Town classic

Saturday's 'Prairie Home Companion' broadcast captures Flagstaff at its best.

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Arts & Culture Editor

Two hours can go really fast when you're having a fantastic time. Actually, the sold-out audience at Fort Tuthill that took in Saturday's live broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion" had fun at both ends of the show: warm-up music and jokes at the front, and rousing encores at the end. Throw in picnics on the lawn and socializing with friends under blue skies, and it was over all too soon. The exuberant spirit of popular host Gar-

rison Keillor was felt even when he wasn't onstage, and most everyone had come to take in possibly one of the last shows of his 37-year PHC career.

The love shared back and forth from stage to audience was palpable, with many hugs, kisses, hands held, clapping and endless cheering.

"It was a wild crowd," said Keillor, outside his dressing room after the show's conclusion. "I've never heard a crowd so loud, and they were outside. I think if we'd been in an enclosed space, we'd all be deaf. We had a



See **KEILLOR**, A10

GARRISON KEILLOR PERFORMS at a live broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion" at the Amphitheater at Fort Tuthill on Saturday. (Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun)

KEILLOR

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great time — perfect. Now everything will pale in comparison.”

He joked it would be a season of disappointment throughout the remainder of his tour, which will conclude at Tanglewood in Lenox, Mass., on July 2.

SHE CAME TO DANCE

As the date neared for the show, which is a benefit for KNAU Arizona Public Radio, immense excitement had been building in town and farther afield, and available tickets had dribbled down by Saturday to a few on the lawn.

Dennis and Joan Blake had driven up from Phoenix for the day.

“It’s Garrison’s last year, and we’ve never been to one of these,” Dennis Blake said.

“I listened to it probably 20 years ago, and then I got back into it 10 years ago,” Joan Blake said.

Young people were excited, too. CoCo Gre-nough, age 3 1/2, swirled in her rainbow-rimmed sunglasses behind the sound crew.

She said she had come to dance, and her grandmother, Nanci Burnett of Clarkdale, agreed.

“Jumping is her specialty!” she said. “We’ve been listening to Prairie Home Companion since 1980.”

Linda Fleischer of Flagstaff, well known for her backing of ski sports here, said she was really looking forward to the show.

“Well, I’m a Lutheran, so I’m excited to hear what he’s going to say,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll make me laugh, because he always has.”

AN AMERICAN PATRIOT

Although Keillor and his roadshow had played a concert here last August, that had not been a live radio broadcast.

This time would be different, coming live at 3 p.m., and replayed at 6 p.m. here.

Greg and Jean Brown of Flagstaff had great seats near the front for this show.

“We came last time, and it was so uplifting,” Greg Brown said before the broadcast. “The music was fun, the humor was fun, but one of the things we liked the most was the way he walked through the audience, leading us all in patriotic songs. He’s one of the few people who is still a public American patriot, and proud of it!”

By 2:45 p.m., Keillor was walking through the audience this time, too, holding hands with singer Andra Suchy.

Their renditions of golden hits like “Unchained Melody” and “Can’t Help Falling in Love,” by Elvis Presley, brought tears to many eyes, including the countless seniors in the audience.

“Sing along with us if you’re with someone you care about,” Keillor shouted out. “If not, never mind!”

HOLD ON TO PERFECT DAY

In his opening monologue during the broadcast, Keillor was colorful and spot-on in his descriptions of Flagstaff and its inhabitants.

He took it all in, with ponderosa pine forests, cowboys, men in ponytails and Birkenstocks, handmade feather earrings, Santa Fe trains every 18 minutes, Route 66 through town, the Hopi sacred peaks, women in billowing skirts and bicycles parked on sidewalks.

He called us “a town full of laid-back people writing in their journals, serenely, where people



CROWDS GATHER to watch the live broadcast of “Prairie Home Companion” on Saturday at Fort Tuthill. (Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun)

without shirts and shoes are served routinely.” Keillor also noted the weather, which cooperated in the best Flagstaff tradition.

“Summer is so brief where I come from, about two weeks,” Keillor said. “You’ve got to hold on to a perfect day — this is it!”

The program also featured the regulars: The Guy’s All-Star Shoe Band, led by PHC music director Richard Dworsky, and the wonderful sound effects man, Fred Newman, performing with Tim Russell and Sue Scott, who did their hilarious Guy Noir, Private Eye, and other skits.

The intermission was only a few minutes long, not enough time to go to the bathroom really, but local musician and storyteller Tony Norris stretched his legs with his wife, Sue.

“I’ve been listening to him for 30 years,” he said about Keillor. “He always surrounds himself with an incredible group of musicians.”

NOTHING BUT WONDERFUL

As a gesture to Arizona’s wide-open spaces, Ian Frazier, a best-selling author and staff writer at *The New Yorker*, read the audience notes on his observations during an early morning trip Friday to the Grand Canyon.

“I come from New Jersey,” Frazier said. “I live in one of the most densely populated places in the United States. I was overcome to be in such a immensely quiet place.”

Another special treat was the appearance of Texas musician Jimmie Dale Gilmore, who teamed up with the Wranglers, a Bay Area old-time band.

The crowd loved Gilmore and the Wranglers, and the musicians, including fantastic banjo player Warren Hellman, seemed to reciprocate the enthusiasm.

“It’s quite wonderful; I wish everyone could be here,” Gilmore told the audience.

Later, backstage after the show, he continued his praise.

“I loved everything about it,” Gilmore said. “The Prairie Home Companion people are so great. The place is wonderful. The crowd is good, and the weather unbeatable. It’s been nothing but wonderful to be here.”

Sunburned, but happy, the crowds were grinning right up to the last notes and beyond.

“A great time was had by all,” said John Stark, general manager of KNAU, at a special reception with appetizers in a tent area. “Everyone can hear the program again today at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., on 91.7 (FM).”

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