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LOCAL

# A Prairie Home Companion wows Goshen

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## Host Garrison Keillor and friends entertain with live program

REVIEW

GOSHEN — For a minute there, before the red "On Air" sign even lit up, I felt like I was in Lake Wobegon.

For those unfamiliar with Garrison Keillor's 40-year-old radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* — a shame, if not — Lake Wobegon is the fictional hometown that Keillor delivers the news from each week. It's the kind of town where everyone knows everyone. Secrets aren't secrets long, you give directions by landmarks like "the big red barn" and you can count on the townsfolk for anything.

In the audience in Sauder Concert Hall on the campus of Goshen College on Saturday night, I was in Lake Wobegon. I was surrounded by laughter, handshakes and "How are you?"s. That hospitality and warmth was the perfect "opening act," if you will, for Keillor's two-hour live broadcast, which featured the Goshen College Chamber Choir, award-winning mandolinists Ethan Setiawan and Richard Kriehn and sister musical duo Lily and Madeleine Jurkiewicz, along with the audience for several wonderful hymns.

Keillor focused much of the show on the Mennonite population of Goshen.

"I guess if you dress plainly you're allowed to sing ostentatiously," Keillor said to the audience, after they sang a harmonized version of "My Country 'Tis Of Thee" during the show's warm-up session.

"We came to the right place, and we found the right kind of

college for the show we want to do," Keillor said. "Wow. We have come across something extraordinary."

Truly, the audience did have some fantastic singing ability, the author of this review graciously excluded.

The Goshen College Chamber Choir was a bouncy group of effervescent young folks, led by equally peppy director Scott Hochstetler. Numerous choir

members sang solos, made-up songs and advertisements throughout the show. Their version of hymn "My Soul Cries Out" was powerful and a standout performance.

Keillor and his show staff took their time to get to know the area. He went into a brief history of the region and Mennonites on air for the benefit of his listeners around the world, describing the Mennonites — in song, of course

— as "like the Amish, but with motor vehicles," to the laughter of the audience.

Kriehn and Setiawan performed a foot-tappingly good version of "St. Anne's Reel" for two mandolins. Setiawan is a local musician from Middlebury, just 17 years old and recently back from winning the National Mandolin Championship.

But apart from the stunning music was radio "story" seg-

ment, for lack of a better term. When actors Tim Russell and Sue Scott and sound effects man Fred Newman took the stage with Keillor to perform a few skits, it turned my perception of the program on its ear.

As a semi-frequent listener to *A Prairie Home Companion*, I've always been impressed by the actors. I've been able to imagine what they do, knowing that they make all of the sounds we hear. But actually seeing them in person showed me just how much they do during each show.

Russell and Scott are constantly changing voices while acting not just for the microphone in their faces, but also for the audience in front of them. Keillor plays right along with them, too. But the king of the stage at that moment is Newman, a man who I'm certain can make absolutely any noise come out of his mouth.

We heard him drip water by flicking the side of his cheek. He made a lawn mower, weed wacker and chainsaw all by buzzing his lips in different ways.

And, in the middle of it all, Keillor stood on the stage, bathed in a single light, telling us the News from Lake Wobegon. It's one thing to listen to Keillor tell his Wobegon stories. It's another to see him pace around the stage, telling the stories like he's talking to a friend or two, not like he's talking to an auditorium. It's incredibly intimate, and made for a wonderful experience.



Garrison Keillor speaks to the audience Saturday during the live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Goshen College Sauder Concert Hall. SBT Photo/GREG SWIERCZ