

REVIEW

With a 'Prairie' spirit to the end

Garrison Keillor bids farewell as the radio show's host, amid evocative music.

By CHRIS BARTON

In the end, of course, it was all about the show. Another weekend, another installment of "A Prairie Home Companion" recorded and in the books.

Except that on this weekend, Garrison Keillor ended his long run as host of the public radio staple, which began in 1974 and continued with his voice at the center, with a few interruptions, for more than 40 years.

Keillor announced his retirement last year, and his final episode as host was recorded Friday night — at a packed Hollywood Bowl, of all places. (The touring schedule was booked before his decision, hence the somewhat random location for his last broadcast, but another farewell show is scheduled for Minnesota in

[See Keillor, E2]

A farewell at the Bowl

[Keillor, from E1] September.)

Though a sense of an ending was inescapable from the start — “This is my big show,” Keillor allowed after the traditional opening number, “Tishomingo Blues” — there would be no all-encompassing parting statement, no surprise tributes from “Prairie Home’s” long roster of regulars and guest stars. However, Keillor told the audience that a recording of President Obama offering his best wishes would be played during the broadcast, which has aired locally on Pasadena public radio outlet KPCC.

That sort of victory-lap showboating simply wouldn’t do for Keillor or “Prairie Home,” two institutions that wear their stoic Midwestern roots proudly, if more than a little self-effacingly. After a local-tilted monologue that hit all the usual Los Angeles notes (our fitness, our cars, our overt friendliness) backed by the sound effects of Fred Newman — whose array of mouth whooshes, gargles and splatters are far more fun to watch than hear on the radio — Keillor explained his position as an outsider, that his home was more prone to observation than interaction. “You came here to see the show. I came here to see you,” he explained.

Yet “Prairie Home’s” standing as a Midwestern outlier is misleading. Though Keillor’s raspy voice, with its sibilant “S” sounds, can be grating for some, his shows can, for a couple of hours, transform an audience of even so-called coastal elites into a small-town community with an intimacy only radio and its podcast decedents can achieve. And for all the show’s old-timey touchstones that evoke an imagined white-bread Americana that in an election year is typically associated with conservative values, Keillor has through the years reclaimed such ideals as a home for pragmatic, progressive thought.

Speaking of Obama on Friday, Keillor said, “I’m go-



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GARRISON KEILLOR joins Heather Masse in a duet. He sang with other folk and pop singers too.

ing to miss him more than I miss myself.” and his few nods toward Hillary Clinton’s campaign garnered applause.

Though the show’s structure was business-as-usual, with its wryly worded ad breaks and musical cues, notes of farewell were everywhere. A “Lives of the Cowboys” sketch found its main characters, Dusty and Lefty, reminiscing about Dusty’s radio program (“You never smiled,” cracked longtime “Prairie Home” actor Tim Russell, a nod to Keillor’s rumpled, dryly serious appearance. “But it’s radio,” he countered.)

The cast also teased at the attention Keillor’s final show has received, repeatedly asking the host how it feels (building, of course, to a Bob Dylan impression from Russell). “It feels like something ends and something else is going to happen,” Keillor replied with mock impatience.

But the clearest consideration of an ending could be heard in the music. Structured primarily around duets between Keillor and folk and pop vocalists including Aoife O’Donovan, Sarah Jarosz and Nickel Creek’s Sara Watkins (whose bandmate Chris Thile takes over for Keillor as host of “Prairie Home” in October), the song choices constituted something of a farewell address.

You could hear the march of time as Keillor bent to match his airy voice with

that of Jarosz on the yearning “It Gets Lonely in a Small Town” by Greg Brown, and there was a whiff of finality to Keillor’s opening of Iris DeMent’s “My Life” — with its lines, “My life, it’s only a season, a passing September no one will recall” — that built to revealing the comfort in joy that was shared. (Keillor has had health problems of late, including a seizure last month.)

A later pairing of Keillor with O’Donovan on Van Morrison’s “The Beauty of the Days Gone By” was similarly pointed but allowed for a note of nostalgia, a feeling Keillor told *The Times* he resisted going into Friday’s show. A beautifully sepia-toned duet between O’Donovan and Watkins on Nick Drake’s wistful “Which Will” marked another highlight.

“Radio has the permanency of a sandcastle,” Keillor said in his final “News From Lake Wobegon” dispatch, which, after some ruminations on the march of time, dissolved into a run of favorite limericks. “Long live the jokes,” he said. “And who cares who thought them up?”

Keillor may admire that kind of timeless anonymity, but his point of view and presence will cast a long shadow over “A Prairie Home Companion” as it continues. Perhaps even longer as time goes on.

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