

REVIEWSMUSIC

Radio's 'Prairie' a hit in Hub

A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION - Starring Garrison Keillor, the Butch Thompson Trio, Stoney Lonesome and Peter Ostroushko, at the Berklee Performance Center through Tuesday night.

By Steve Morse
Globe Staff

Inspired by a magazine piece he wrote on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, Garrison Keillor created "A Prairie Home Companion" nine years ago. Like the Opry, it is a radio show featuring music, rural comedy and a cast of stylized regulars.

But the difference is that "A Prairie Home" is a hip, cerebral version of the Opry, appealing more to Ivy Leaguers than to truckers. And while the Opry emcees are often deadly serious about preserving country traditions, Keillor is more detached and subtle, viewing them as quaint notions of yesteryear. He's like a Phi Beta Kappa philosophy major trying to analyze "The Waltons."

But this is not to demean Keillor, whose tales about fictitious Lake Wobegon, Minn., enthralled a sellout crowd last night at Berklee. (The remaining performances also are sold out.) His pussywillow humor ran thin at times, but

he scored direct hits with references to Lake Wobegon's "Fearmonger Shop" (where they serve "phobia needs") and to a product called Clouds of Joy Bubble Bath for Men, specifically "essence of peach" and "eau de prune."

Like most dry-witted humorists, Keillor, strapping and awkward in a white suit, red socks and horn-rimmed glasses, also laughed at himself: "When I'm around, people have quiet serious talk about the fate of the earth or National Public Radio; after I leave, they have a good time." And he localized his humor, praising Boston as "The City of Yaz," a nod to Carl Yastrzemski and the Red Sox.

Under a large banner proclaiming "A Prairie Home Companion" (there were even emblazoned T-shirts, postcards and softball caps in the lobby), the spotlight was delightfully shared by regulars like the Butch Thompson Trio, featuring Fats Waller songs; fluid mandolinist Peter Ostroushko; and Stoney Lonesome, a fine traditional bluegrass group.

They were ably joined by Boston's Klezmer Conservatory Band, a Yiddish dance group that will be on tonight's show, broadcast live at 6 p.m. over National Public Radio, including Boston's WGBH.