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# Entertainment

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**Garrison Kellor autographs his book for admirers after a broadcast.**

## ‘A Prairie Home Companion’ brings its ‘culture’ to the East

By Lauren R. Stevens

**G** WILLIAMSTOWNarrison Kellor's "A Prairie Home Companion" had been on the road three weeks when it finished up in Boston recently. In Middlebury, Vt., New York City and the Berklee Performance Center, respectively, the faithful turned out. Each Saturday night it sent out its radio broadcast live; at each step it also taped a handful of shows for some presumed vacation for the company at some undetermined future time.

So it was strange to hear Kellor singling, "Who's that coming through the door?" on a Tuesday night. It was even stranger to see what was happening, as I am usually listening while looking at dirty dishes from 6 to 8 p.m., when the show comes to Williamstown over WAMC-FM Albany, N.Y.

**Tall and lanky**  
Kellor, who demonstrates his legendary shyness by not using his own name in the program notes, is tall and lanky, with horn-rimmed glasses. By looks, he could be either a teacher or a minister. He wore a light tan suit with red tie and socks.

Red Maddox, drummer with the

Lauren R. Stevens is publisher of the Williamstown Advocate.

Butch Thompson Trio, is much older than I would have guessed, probably in his 70s, and he enjoys his work. He was featured this night, not only on the drum, but singing the jingle for a new "sponsor," Clouds of Joy bubble bath, in a husky Louis Armstrong voice. He stopped the show.

Biggest surprise was pianist and trio leader Butch Thompson, who with gray styled hair and mustache, looks like a slim, elegant Captain Kangaroo. The audience gasped when he spoke, for it just didn't seem right for that familiar down home voice to come from such a sophisticated demeanor.

**Real concert**  
Although the show was being taped, it really was, as the tickets said, a concert — smooth, polished. They ran through two hours almost flawlessly and certainly without stopping to do another take. Kellor never looked at a script and probably improvised some of his lines. At least once or twice he seemed to catch another performer off guard, such as when he started talking to Peter Ostrowski, the only performer in jeans, about his cat. Peter stepped up to the microphone as though he might be called upon to say something, but he wasn't.

Performers entered and exited from the stage in a carefully rehearsed fashion. The technical crew stepped through them to move and adjust the eight microphones as though they had been choreographed.

Without appearing to be autocratic, Kellor dominated every aspect of the show. I had no idea he sang with the groups as much as he does. The slow, meandering way he approaches and then latches on to the microphone and his quiet, understated delivery are the tone for every group.

**Audience glee**  
The audience, on the other hand, responded with glee and jubilation, singing or clapping along whenever given the opportunity. It's a nice contrast.

Because this was a traveling company, there was no string of guest performances — in fact, just two groups: the Butch Thompson Trio and the Stony Lonsome Bluegrass Band. But if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes, I would have assumed there were at least six, as the two played and sang along, together, or in fragments; and each member picked up several different instruments as the occasion demanded: bass, piano, drums, violins, mandolins, guitars. Thompson played a clarinet at one point, accompanied

out performance of Berklee, which seats 1,500. Some brought their babies, but few their teen-age children, who may not cotton to the music. The ages, with that gap, went up.

Started in 1974

"A Prairie Home Companion" started in St. Paul, Minn., in 1974, setting into the old vaudeville theater there after four years. In 1981, Minnesota Public Radio made the show available live, via satellite. Today it reaches 205 American Public Radio affiliates in 44 states and the District of Columbia.

During this time the show changed — maybe grew up — from being an imitation of old-time radio. As Kellor said in an interview with Paul Desruisseaux in "The Chronicle of Higher Education":

"Two hours is too long for a bunch of casual performers to lounge around on the air, the way we used to." What he — who originally created it — has guided it to is a kind of dynamic "Our Town," music with an underlying philosophy. Usually the message is implied, but sometimes it bubbles to the surface of the nostalgia.

Powdermilk Biscuits, the show's main (pretend) sponsor, is as every one must know by now, "made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottom lands of the Lake Wobegone Valley, so you know they're not only good, but pure, mostly. The biscuit with that whole wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done. Wholesome and expeditious.

Has your family tried 'em? Heavens! They're tasty.

"We bear the shyness and smile. "What needs to be done" is also important. First of all, we need to be entertained. It's a serious old world. Bring on the music and humor: Lake Woe be gone.

Secondly, we need to empathize. That is, after all, a major role of literature. Kellor considers himself primarily a writer, mostly in The New Yorker, who re-creates on the radio. "You get tired of the empty room; you look forward to going on stage and larking around with musicians. Then you're good and glad to get back to the empty rooms," he said in the interview. We enjoy his stories and humor so much because we learn that our own secret shortcomings are also those of others. At the same time, we get a warm, human glow in recognizing those flaws elsewhere. His is a totally painless, uplifting sort of humor. He doesn't even let the pathos get painful for long.

Shall I confess? Without being able to read music or carry a tune, I was one of five tenors in the high school choir. And I remember well the day the frustrated equivalent of Miss Falconer asked each of us to sing our part in a tricky classical piece solo.

Kellor told us that singing was joyful and soulful and not to be judged ultimately on ability. So, for an encore, the ensemble invited the audience to join in singing "Red River Valley," the very cowboy song Miss Falconer had believed was beneath her choir.

Tune in sometime.



**Kellor sings to the backing of guitarists Linda and Robin Williams.**