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Keillor prepares to 'Save the World'

Prairie Home Companion show marks 10th anniversary

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AP photo.

Garrison Keillor runs through a number Thursday during a rehearsal for the 10th anniversary show of "Prairie Home Companion" radio program.

ST. PAUL—The Prairie Home Companion radio show celebrates its 10th anniversary tonight with a benefit performance, part of a \$1.5 million dollar effort to "Save the World."

The World Theater, that is, Prairie Home Companion shows were produced there until large chunks of plaster began falling from the ceiling last January, forcing a move to the larger Orpheum Theater.

Tickets for tonight's show sold for \$50 and \$100.

Garrison Keillor, the show's creator and star, told of the event Thursday at a dress rehearsal. At the same time, he demonstrated the individualism of the shy persons in his mythical Lake Wobegon, Minn. — where all the men are strong, all the women are good-looking, and all the children are above average.

The electronic chronicler of Lake Wobegon stood on a theater stage filled with singers and musicians in tuxedos and tails and formal gowns. Keillor, 42, wore beige slacks, a tan jacket, blue shirt, gawdy red baseball-type cap, and sandals. He had no tie, belt or socks, but said he felt "respectable."

"Gee, you look terrific," Keillor told the others.

The press was invited to the rehearsal for tonight's performance which will help renovate the 960-seat World The-

ater.

"There's an utterly different feeling about the World," he said. "There are two balconies and the people are closer. True, you can't see them well in either place but you hear them much better at the World. You can hear the laughs, and that really helps."

"The Orpheum is too large to whisper secrets in," he said.

Mostly, Keillor talked about Lake Wobegon and the success of his weekly two-hour show, broadcast Saturday afternoons and distributed by American Public Radio. The show is carried by 218 stations in this country and taped versions are broadcast abroad.

The Prairie Home Companion is the only nationally broadcast live radio show and has won the prestigious Peabody Award. Seats sell out eight weeks in advance.

Keillor denied that his show treated rural America rather harshly. He said Lake Wobegon was very special and not like Willmar or Wabasso or any other place in Minnesota.

"The last thing I want to do is recommend that people move to Lake Wobegon," its creator said. "I left it 20 years ago, and I liked it, but I don't want to live there." Lake Wobegon has "shy persons," Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Powdermilk Biscuits and the Fearmonger's Shoppe, but, Keillor admitted, "it's not a friendly town."

Keillor said the people who settled

"the little town that time forgot and the decades can't improve" arrived by mistake. Lake Wobegon had a peak population of 1,000, he said, "before motorized traffic enabled people to get away faster."

He doubted that Lake Wobegonites were excited about the show's anniversary. Two complimentary tickets have been tacked up for 1½ months in the Chatterbox Cafe, he said, and nobody took them.

Would he like his show to become a television feature? "You can't aspire to do something that no one has asked you to do," he answered.

Keillor started doing the show for fun while he was doing a lot of writing and had Saturdays free. It still is fun, he said.

The show has changed since its early days when there were a lot of ethnic and "hick" jokes. Nowadays, Keillor will tell in his monologues about someone in Lake Wobegon dying, with dignity. "That's something you don't do in comedy," he said.

About 1,000 letters come weekly from listeners and Keillor tries to think during his shows about what the people wrote of their lives. He is also motivated by the audience in the first three rows — "about as far as a near-sighted person can see."

In addition, Keillor said he draws heavily from the recollections of childhood and adolescence: bewilderment, terror and love.