



Staff Photos by Rob Levine

"A Prairie Home Companion" was broadcast Saturday from the World Theater in St. Paul for the first time since January 1984.

Lake Wobegon's folks put out welcome mat

*Look who's coming ... through that door,
I think we've met somewhere before.
Hello love ... ah, hello, love.*
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By Colin Covert
Staff Writer

A large man in talls and running shoes approached the microphone and in a soft, slow voice, welcomed the audience to "A Prairie Home Companion," "coming to you live for the first time in a long time from our old home in the World Theater ... at the crossroads of downtown St. Paul."

If the audience chuckled a bit louder than usual at Garrison Keillor's introduction Saturday night, it was easy to see why. They were welcome words. After an absence of two years, America's parlor musicale was once again in its own parlor, the auditorium of the World Theater.

Last night's broadcast could have been billed as a homecoming, but the people at Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) want to reserve that distinction for the World's official re-opening scheduled for late April.

Besides, the Keillor who returned is in many ways a different man from the one who left. The Keillor who left the World in January 1984 was a



Garrison Keillor welcomed the audience to the show's "old home in the World Theater."

local folk hero and a radio personality and author with a small national following. The Keillor who returned is a major voice in American culture, with the country's most-popular public radio program, a Time maga-

zine cover and a No. 1 best seller to his credit.

The mood of the World last night was festive. Keillor and Prairie Home regulars Robin and Linda Wil-

liams, Vern Sutton, Jean Redpath and Stevie Beck hailed the show's return throughout the performance. Keillor opened with a song about the

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refurbished theater's early days as a vaudeville house, punctuating the melody with shoulder-high kicks worthy of a Rockette. The lyrics seemed calculated to reassure listeners that while football coaches may come and go, this local institution is here to stay.

Harmonizing with Sutton, Keillor declared: "Here in Minnesota there's one thing we know, if we were any good we'd have left long ago."

But he also made it clear that more money and labor are needed to restore the theater completely. Noting the auditorium's still-incomplete renovation, he apologized to the studio audience for the "minimal" lavatory facilities, and pointedly described his mythical hometown Lake Wobegon as "the town that time forgot — and that therefore needs no renovation at all."

Keillor and the Prairie Home crew hastily relocated to the nearby Orpheum Theater two years ago when a hail of ceiling plaster made it clear the World was coming to an end. The show has been broadcast from a variety of temporary accommodations ever since, while its original home was renovated.

The program's return to the World initially had been planned for November, but construction delays kept the cast and crew on the road until yesterday.

The show took up an unanticipated residency in Red Wing, Minn., this summer when the Orpheum's air conditioning failed. And nagging construction problems at the World forced the program on an extended road tour in October.

"Whenever you do restoration on an old theater, there are hidden sur-

prises," said MPR spokeswoman Allison Circle. "At one point there was an unexpected two-week delay because we had to test the balcony to make sure it was safe. That kind of thing just kept cropping up."

"We went on tour thinking it was only going to be for a month and it ended up being three months," said MPR publicity director Cathy de Moll. Fund-raising difficulties compounded the problem. Appeals by the World Theater Corp., which owns the auditorium, have tended to compete with separate fund-raising drives by MPR, de Moll said. About half of the \$3.5 million renovation cost remains to be raised.

As delays continued, finding additional stops for the tour became an increasingly hectic routine, she said. "During rehearsal, our road manager would be backstage on the phone trying to lock in the theater and ticket arrangements for the show two weeks ahead. Each week it got a little less planned."

Said Circle: "It has been very emotionally and physically draining for us to not have a home. It's been a terrible strain on the performers not knowing where they're going to be and having to travel and having to expend a lot of energy finding a place to (perform)."

Prairie Home's local fans were pleased to have the show home as well. Ticket sales for last night's show were brisk, and many were turned away from a crowd that gathered outside the World yesterday morning for 100 tickets that became available at the last minute. Performances for the rest of this month and for February are sold out, and MPR already has received hundreds of letters requesting tickets for March broadcasts.