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The Star's TV-radio critic

### 'Prairie' is better on radio

**O**n the surface, the TV broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion" (8 tonight on Channel 19) would seem like program manna from PBS heaven. A sizable audience is all but guaranteed.

"Prairie Home Companion," first broadcast in 1974, has become the most popular show on public radio. Every week, its Saturday evening broadcast is carried by more than 260 stations (including KANU-FM locally), attracting a nationwide following that is variously estimated to be 2 million to 4 million listeners.

Host Garrison Keillor, who got the inspiration for the show after a visit to the Grand Ole Opry, has become increasingly well known through his book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, now in its 34th week on the best-seller list of *The New York Times*.

Still, putting the show on television wasn't a good idea. In fact, it was an out and out mistake.

First, a bit of recent journalistic history. Not long ago, Mr. Keillor decided he would refuse all calls from Nick Coleman, the media critic of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*.

The reason, Mr. Coleman last year pointed out that Mr. Keillor dumped Margaret Moon, the show's executive producer and his housemate, in favor of an old high school classmate he had not seen in 21 years. Reportedly, he not only ended the romance but also had Ms. Moon fired from the show.

Mr. Coleman also pointed out that Mr. Keillor's annual salary of \$773,000 somewhat belied his image as a salt-of-the-earth type given to modest living.

Unable to deny it, Mr. Keillor refused to talk to Mr. Coleman. Not satisfied that the critic had been sufficiently punished, Mr. Keillor created two new characters on his show: Coleman, a drunken Irish surveyor, and Rick, a mangy Irish dog.

Someone that sensitive about media coverage probably has no business on national television. But that's not why "Prairie Home Companion" should have stayed on radio.

"Prairie Home Companion" belongs on radio because no TV set could conjure up the visions the show evokes among its loyal following.

Whether or not the character is true to Mr. Keillor's off-microphone persona, the host has convincingly portrayed himself as a down-home fellow concerned about life and love and the little things in nature. His smooth baritone voice, from the moment he opens the show crooning "Hello, Love," evokes a vision of simple and gentle times.

Television combines that voice with a tall man in a well-tailored suit. On radio, Mr. Keillor looks any way you would like to picture him. On television, he looks at you from deep-set eyes crowned by bushy eyebrows.

Even worse are the sound effects. On radio, the moans in the background of the commercial for Bertha's Kitty Boutique or the clicks you hear that accompany the spot for the Chicken Feather Siding Co. are, well, part of the overall atmosphere. It's theater of the mind.

On TV, the cameras focus on the two sound effects men who make the noises just behind Mr. Keillor, and it's simply not the same. The camera transforms a glorious image into banal reality. If, as Mr. Keillor says, the decades can't improve Lake Wobegon, neither can television.

Guest stars on tonight's show are guitarist Chet Atkins, fiddler Johnny Gimble and Scottish singer Joan Redpath.

"Prairie Home Companion" returned to the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., in January, two years after the building was vacated for renovation. The grand opening, however, was delayed until Saturday when the show was broadcast over many PBS stations.

Channel 19, holding an auction at the time, taped the show for broadcast tonight. That allowed the station to delete two short but lucky segments in which viewers were urged to call an 800 phone number for a catalog of "Prairie Home Companion" merchandise.