



Television

Nick Coleman

'Prairie Home', Keillor excel as TV companions

An electronic curtain was drawn back in St. Paul Saturday night, revealing public radio's Wizard of Wobegon to millions of TV viewers around the country. For the first time, Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" was on TV.

Some of the radio magic disappeared, of course, because a program that existed mostly in the minds of its devoted listeners suddenly materialized in front of their eyes, popping up on the small screen in a public-television broadcast of a show taped three hours earlier at the World Theater. Minnesota Public Radio's glistening new temple of the air, celebrating its grand re-opening after a \$3.5 million facelift, never looked better.



Staff Photo by Donna Terek

Host Garrison Keillor showed up on a TV camera's monitor, center, during the "Prairie Home Companion" show Saturday night in St. Paul.

Keillor's radio show never looked . . . well, it never looked at *all* before except to the people who've seen it in person. But it looked better than Keillor, who used to say his show wouldn't translate to TV, was afraid it might.

For one thing, despite Keillor's

public worries about taking a radio show and putting it on TV, "A Prairie Home Companion" has always had a strong visual element. The lanky Keillor, his owlish face peering out from under a mop of unkempt hair, his cream-colored suit set off by red tie, red suspenders and red socks, has always made an imposing figure.

And there's a lot of tomfoolery on stage between Keillor and the rest of the "Prairie Home" gang — sight gags, grimaces, stares. These kinds of things are fun to watch and give the theater audience an intimacy with the show that the radio audience has never enjoyed. When the show celebrated its 10th

anniversary in 1984, it put on a visual extravaganza complete with dancers in banana costumes. Unfortunately, the radio audience was not privy to the treats.

It's also fun to see favorite

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performers such as Scottish folksinger Jean Redpath, pianist Butch Thompson and fiddler Peter Ostroushko. You can enjoy their talents on a radio program but it adds a new dimension to be able to see them. Redpath, for example, did some Scottish "mouth music" last night — nonsense songs done in dance-tune rhythms — that were great fun to hear. It was even more fun, though, to see Redpath wind up and deliver them.

Last night's one-time-only TV broadcast also gave the show's fans an opportunity to see three of the program's least acknowledged stars — Howard Mohr, Fred Newman and Tom Keith (who is better known as "Jim Ed Poole," Dale Connelly's sidekick on Minnesota Public Radio's "Morning Show"). Mohr, who has a voice like a zombie, actually looks like a normal person. Newman and Keith, who do the show's sound effects, look like they have a lot of fun slapping their faces, barking, mewing and clucking like chickens.

"A Prairie Home Companion" makes good TV. That shouldn't be so surprising. After all, it's a performance show. It may be staged for radio but it plays to a theater audience made up of people who wait weeks or months for tickets to "see" the show. Despite Keillor's conceit about the purity of radio, a good show is a good show, whether it's enjoyed on radio or TV.

Keillor didn't make many concessions to TV last night. The "Prairie Home" troupe still read from scripts as they did the wacky skits that have come to characterize the program, including an "advertisement" for chicken-feather house siding. Still, the televised show bore a resemblance to other

successful TV performance shows on the Public Broadcasting Service such as "Austin City Limits" or Grand Ol' Opry specials.

In some ways, last night's broadcast represented a fulfillment of Keillor's dream. "A Prairie Home Companion" began in 1974 after Keillor wrote an article on Nashville's Opry for the New Yorker magazine and proposed doing a similar show here. Twelve years later, "Prairie Home" has achieved Opry-like success and looks as good, if not better, than its inspiration. About the only difference is that while Opry fans pop up with Instamatics to take pictures of their favorite performers, the more upscale "Prairie Home" fans take their photos with less obtrusive 35-millimeter cameras. No flash-bulbs here.

If nothing else, the TV broadcast proved that "Prairie Home" could make it as a regular TV show. It lost some vitality by not being broadcast live, gaining the kind of "canned" look that seems inevitable with videotape. But it looked different enough and was interesting enough to work as TV.

If Keillor does go TV on us, though, he would be well-advised to do a little less mugging for the camera. At one point last night, Keillor turned his back on the theater audience throughout a humorous scat song about a cat, playing shamelessly to a camera at the rear of the stage. Performance shows work best when the camera is less intrusive than it was at times last night.

The core of last night's show, as always, was Keillor's monolog about Lake Wobegon, the mythical community that has become an industry for Minnesota Public Radio.