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# 'A Prairie Home Companion' moves gently into TV

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — It's a half hour before show time at the World Theater, home of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," and the place is packed. If asked what would attract such a varied crowd — young and old, hip and hapless — the best guess would be a state fair. Some are already seated, many more are four deep at the lobby souvenir shop with its various Lake Wobegon T-shirts and cassette collections of host Garrison Keillor's monologues. At the concession stand, Detroiters will note that Stroch's is served alongside the mineral water.

Inside the 1910 vintage opera house, restored through Keillor's two-year "Save the World" fund-raising drive, is a high, shallow performance space, a house that feels wide and flat, with eight boxes, four on each side of the stage, and two balconies. The only clue that something is different tonight is the presence of a TV camera in one of the boxes. There are others scattered about the hall, but the loss of one of the flying cupcake boxes seems the worst intrusion.

After 13 years on public radio, Garrison Keillor and his "A Prairie Home Companion" have moved into television.

A PRODUCTION of Minnesota Public Radio, "A Prairie Home Companion" airs live at 6 p.m. Saturdays from St. Paul's World Theater and is beamed by satellite to more than 270 public radio stations, including Detroit's WDET-FM (101.9), around the country by American Public Radio. The weekly radio audience is estimated at four million.

Weekly cable TV broadcast of the show began March 7 via the Disney Channel, which has some 3.2 million subscribers. (One edition of the show was carried by PBS last year during a fund-raising period.) Disney tapes the two-hour show for rebroadcast from 9 to 10:30 p.m. the same evening. Thirty minutes are removed from the first portion of the show, as both "Prairie Home Companion" staff and the Disney producers felt two hours would be too long for most TV viewers. Keillor's weekly Lake Wobegon monologue comes during the second hour of the radio show.

For the transition to television, there are four stationary and two handheld cameras. The set has been slightly redesigned, with new risers and a 1940s-style bandstand. A bare brick wall and steel door to the parking lot are the only backdrop. "Lighting is the principal staging tool," says Tom Vogel, Minnesota Public Radio vice-pres-

ident for national programming. "We will not use anything that is just a scenic device for TV. This is going to be an honest, straightforward presentation of the show."

In rehearsal earlier that Saturday afternoon, there was only an occasional joke to indicate that anyone onstage was thinking of the show's TV debut. Keillor tells a cameraman to be sure and get a closeup when Billy Ware of the Cajun band Beau Soleil plays spoons on a gospel number. "Are your pants zipped, Billy?" Keillor wonders. "I'll be sure to ask that tonight."

Wandering back and forth among the empty seats is producer Margaret Moos, calling out suggestions, complaints, gentle reminders as musical numbers and then sketches are given a final run-through. Moos left the show more than a year ago but has returned for these final shows. And Keillor is happy to have her back.

"It's great. I think she does all the things that a producer is supposed to do and more," he said. "It is so crucial to have somebody else who knows everything you've done, and who sits there and watches you do it and says that's good; that isn't so good; forget that. And she's that kind of a person. I want to have this benevolent, despotic producer to save me time. . . I think it is important to have somebody who has veto power. But you have to trust them."

THIS NIGHT'S lineup is familiar to longtime listeners: the James Daogogy Chicago Jazz Band; Beau Soleil from Lafayette, La.; guitarist Leo Kottke, and singer-guitarists Robin and Linda Williams, singer Kate MacKenzie and special effects man Tom Keith. (Long-time house band the Butch Thompson Trio is no more, following the cancer-related death in January of drummer Red Maddock and the departure of Thompson to pursue his own career.)

A few minutes before air time, Keillor delivers a short introduction to the theater audience. The radio link is piped into the theater and everyone on stage seems to brace for their launch into TV space. Keillor, holding a stack of papers in one hand, pats his trouser pockets for a pen.

"A pen?" he asks the people in the front row, seconds before he is to begin singing the familiar "Hello Love" theme. A photographer crouched near the empty orchestra pit flips a pen Keillor's way. As cable TV beams its first glimpse of Keillor to the nation, he is seen missing the toss.

"Fitting," says Moos later, laughing as if secretly pleased that the introduction of TV has not stolen the show's live radio looseness. "I thought it was perfect."



A bare brick wall and steel door to the parking lot are the only backdrop for the televised version of "A Prairie Home Companion." Performing with Garrison Keillor in the first show were Kate MacKenzie, Linda Williams (center of trio), and Robin Williams.

## How to get tickets

Tickets for the remaining "Prairie Home Companion" shows are made available on a monthly basis. Tickets for a given month go on sale the first day of the previous month. (April is already sold out. May goes on sale April 1.) Requests for tickets will be accepted up to two weeks before each sale date. Earlier requests will be returned. Preference is given, in descending order, to Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) members, members/subscribers of other public radio stations, and people who live outside the St. Paul area. About half the seats go to MPR members. Ticket requests from one month are not carried over.

To order tickets, send a letter stating the dates you are interested in, the number of tickets (with a limit of eight), and name, address and daytime telephone number. Payment must accompany the letter in the form of a check or money order. Cost is \$11 for MPR members, \$12 for non-members, with a \$1.50 handling charge. Write: World Theater Box Office, 15 E. Exchange St., St. Paul, Minn., 55101. For information, call 612-922-9000 and ask to hear the "Prairie Home Companion" tape.

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