

Woe! 'Prairie Home Companion' be gone

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Well, look who's walking out that door.

A throng of strong women, good-looking men and above-average children from nationwide filled St. Paul's World Theater Saturday to say farewell to Garrison Keillor at the final performance of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor said he wants to return to writing after the last performance of his variety show. Next week he and his wife of two years, Ulla Skaerved, will move to her native Denmark.

For some at the theater, the end of the show's 13-year run was like a bad dream delivered by The Fearmonger's Shoppe ("Serving all your phobia needs since 1954"). Others felt that ushering out the show demanded a rousing sendoff. But all felt the need to say goodbye in person.

Because of an overwhelming volume of requests, tickets for the final show were assigned by lottery. Some fans were moved to extraordinary ingenuity and persistence. Undaunted by rejections, Sam and Ann Dibraccio of Brookfield, Wis., reapplied 10 times, even writing in verse. They eventually received tickets.

Sally Spenser of Minneapolis spent Saturday afternoon with a hundred other die-hards lined up outside the

ticket office in case someone turned in tickets.

Fan Ingeborg Cronhagen, the general manager of a linen supply company in Dalton, Ga., supported Keillor's decision to end the program.

"Marrying a woman from a foreign country, this is the best thing he could do. After living in her country he will understand her so much better."

"A Prairie Home Companion" had come a long way from its modest debut in 1974 at Macalester College's Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center, when an audience of a dozen or so dropped by. The show gained a new audience when it began airing nationally in 1980. Within a few years "Prairie Home" was one of public radio's most popular offerings with an audience of about 4 million.

The program itself was a sweet, sentimental farewell. The little town of Lake Wobegon metaphorically faded into the mists. The program's adventure serial, "Buster the Show Dog," ended with the cast heading out of St. Paul in a southbound boxcar.

"I'm going to miss you more than you miss me," Keillor repeatedly assured the audience. The response was disagreement.

Repeated curtain calls prolonged the program well beyond its usual



Garrison Keillor in the last "Prairie Home Companion."

two hours. "It's our last show," said Keillor, "and there's nothing they can do to us."

The audience was in a warm, nostalgic mood. A number of couples, carried away by the occasion,

danced in the aisles during the intermission.

Loyal fans can blunt their withdrawal pains with the knowledge that the program will live on indefinitely in reruns.