

'Prairie Home Companion' signs off



Staff Photo by Marlin Levison

Garrison Keillor led one of many curtain calls that prolonged the program considerably. "It's our last show," he said, "and there's nothing they can do to us."

By Colin Covert
Staff Writer

Well, look who's walking out that door.

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

Keillor: 'I'm going to miss you more than you miss me'

Keillor said he wants to return to writing after the last performance of his Peabody Award-winning 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 worthy of a New Orleans brass-band funeral. 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 extraordi-

nary ingenuity and persistence by the challenge of landing a scarce ticket. Undaunted by rejection letters, Sam and Ann Dibraccio of Brookfield, Wis., re-applied 10 times, even writing in verse. Their creativity was eventually rewarded with a pair of tickets.

Sally Spenser of Minneapolis, a photo retoucher for Dayton's adver-

tising department, spent yesterday afternoon with a hundred other die-hards lined up outside the ticket office in case someone turned in tickets.

"We're hoping against hope," she said, turning pink after several hours in the sun. A hard-core fan, Spenser credits the show with inspiring her to take autoharp lessons.

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Keillor

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Any discomfort she suffered in the "kicker line was insignificant, she said. "Being here is just a way of showing how much the show means to us."

Said Linda Doseason, "The interesting thing about standing in line is that I've made so many friends waiting here." Doseason, a physician from Iowa City, described herself as "the best Garrison Keillor fan in the state of Iowa."

"I'm not surprised by his decision to leave," she said. "As soon as he had the priest retire from the Catholic church in Lake Wobegon, we knew that he was planning to retire. But I think he'll be back in the spring. I don't think he'll be too long in Denmark. I was just in Denmark last fall and, well, it's not Minnesota."

College administrator Rob Finnegan, who flew in from Cleveland for the final show, spent a few minutes before curtain time at the World Theater boutique buying memorabilia for fans back home. When a friend was in line in the lobby, he decided to attend.

"It's a big occasion. We have pretty regularly back home. There's a big crowd of people who'll be listening to this."

"We're really excited about it," said his friend, Bonnie Burnett, a University of Minnesota financial aid officer. "I was really lucky."

Not everyone was there by his or her own choice, however. Ingelborg Cronhagen, the general manager of a linen supply company, arrived from Dalton, Ga., courtesy of the company's president, who was her the tickets.

"This is my first trip to Minneapolis," she said. "I've never seen the Bandana before. I had to have people explain to me what the word 'jester' stands for."

Cronhagen, originally from Germany, has followed the program closely for several years.

"It has taught me a lot about America that I didn't know. How rural people live, probably a part of America that is no longer quite in existence. It has helped me learn a lot about the people that I have adopted — or that have adopted me."

She supported Keillor's decision to end the program, she added.

"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 at 1754 St. Macentree College's Jane 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 approximately 4 million.

Keillor's guests for the final show were humorist Ron Blount Jr., guitarist Chet Atkins and Leo Kottke, singer Vern Sutton, folk singers Jean Redpath and Kate MacKenzie, conductor Philip Brunelle, pianist Richard Dworkin, autoharpist Steve Beck and the Karamahesh School Glee Club. Gov. Rudy Perpich watched from a box seat. St. Paul Mayor George Latimer was on the main floor.

The program itself was a sweet, sentimental farewell. The little town of Lake Wobegon metaphorically faded into the mist, and the program's "advertisements" — "Band of the Show Dog," ended with the cast heading out to St. Paul in a southbound blizzard. It was a rare song whose lyrics didn't contain a goodbye.

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

Repeated curtain calls prolonged the program considerably beyond its usual 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 blast their withdrawal pains with the knowledge that the program will live on indefinitely in reruns. The show's producer, St. Paul-based American Public Radio, will broadcast Prairie Home reruns in the traditional time slot for the rest of the year. A new series of shows with Noah Adams as host will debut in that time slot late in when "The Best of a Prairie Home Companion" will still be Sunday.

But for some, life won't quite be the same.

Frank Christian, an Edina microchip designer, and his wife Karen, came to their first "Prairie Home Companion" 13 years ago.

"My father was a folk singer and he helped (Keillor) "Prairie Home" people help us get started. I did a special attachment there," Frank Christian said. Their daughter, now 13, attended her first show as



Staff Photo by Martin Levinson

Garrison Keillor wiped a fake tear from Chet Atkins' eye during the final performance of "A Prairie Home Companion."

four months, adding her yowls to a Vern Sutton. Each melody, where else and listen."

And their plans for next Saturday night? Keillor assumed an expression of comic befuddlement and said, "Duuuuuh. I don't know. I mean, for 13 years we have not had to think about it."

Prairie Home Companion

July 1974 / Garrison Keillor, host of KSJN's morning program, debuts "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show, which is broadcast over the Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) network. Keillor had been writing a series of pieces for the New Yorker since 1970, and got the idea for the show while writing about the Grand Ole Opry.

1978 / "PHC" moves into St. Paul's World Theater, a crumbling old vaudeville theater.

May 1980 / "PHC" becomes syndicated nationally via American Public Radio. The national broadcasts begin with 30 public stations and grow to 50 within a month.

April 1981 / "PHC" wins a George Foster Peabody Award for excellence in broadcasting.

1982 / Keillor leaves KSJN's "Prairie Home Morning Show" for good after leaving just twice previously. Also, "Happy to be Here," a collection of his New Yorker pieces, is published and eventually becomes a best-seller.

January 1984 / "PHC" moves into the Graham Theater in St. Paul, pending restoration of the World Theater, which MPR had bought in 1981.

August 1985 / After Keillor lobbies legislators in Washington, the U.S. Commerce Department approves a \$106,000 federal grant to help MPR buy technical equipment for the "PHC" broadcast.

September 1985 / Keillor's first novel "Lake Wobegon Days" is in its sixth printing, tops the New York Times best-seller list.

October 1985 / Margaret Mink, executive producer of "PHC" since its inception and Keillor's longtime home companion, takes an indefinite personal leave of absence from her job. (She returned to the show in 1987.)

Dec. 26, 1985 / Keillor marries Lisa Sheppard, a former Danish exchange student, whom he had met in 1980 when they were high-school classmates.

Jan. 11, 1986 / The World Theater reopens.

April 26, 1986 / "PHC" celebrates the grand opening of the refurbished World Theater. The show is telecast for the first time after being filmed by KCTV. TV stations nationwide pick up the show.

May 17, 1986 / Pianist Butch Thompson, a regular on "PHC" since 1974, leaves the show. A month later fiddler and mandolinist Peter Ostroushko also leaves.

Feb. 14, 1987 / Keillor announces that he will leave the show as of June 13 to move to Denmark and resume a life as a writer where he will be not as much in the public eye. Noah Adams of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" program is named to replace him.

March 7, 1987 / Cable TV's Disney Channel premieres the first in a 17-program series of "PHC" performances.

June 13, 1987 / Keillor makes his last "PHC" broadcast.

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