



JYM WILSON, Free Press

WARMING UP: Garrison Keillor, author and radio cult hero, croons a tune in rehearsal at Middlebury College's Mead Chapel Friday afternoon.

Keillor warms up his goodbyes

By Kent M. Shaw
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MIDDLEBURY — Moments after he took the stage at Middlebury College's Mead Chapel, after a successful run-through of a ballad called "Remember Me," Garrison Keillor heard a sound engineer call out "Ya!"

"We should hire a guy for sound checks at the end of every song," Keillor quipped. "And the guy will just yell out 'Ya! The Affirmer.'"

Affirmations of Garrison Keillor's success as host of radio's Prairie Home Companion hardly seem necessary after all these years. When the small rehearsal audience Friday afternoon first heard that oh-so-familiar baritone, it all came back.

The four-hour rehearsal — the first get-together for the Prairie Home ensemble since Keillor's last National Public Radio broadcast in June — preceded

three shows at Middlebury of the Second Annual Farewell Performance.

As natural as Keillor appeared, wearing an open shirt and red socks with sneakers, the main attraction confessed to working a little harder than usual — getting the lines down, picking up on the timing.

"We used to do this every week," he said, resting after the rehearsal.

"I think that if you have a weekly schedule, that you depend on ignorance and you just sail through."

If Keillor had trepidations before the Friday night performance for Middlebury College alumni, the cast seemed relaxed and eager.

"I don't know why Garrison chose these people to do the show," said guitarist Robin Williams, who had been a Prairie Home regular with his wife, Linda, since 1975, the second year of the show.

"But Garrison is a good judge of

people and he knows how to pick them so that it will all come together."

The ensemble struggled for a time on the show's closing medley, working under the familiar Powdermilk Biscuits banner: "Heavens! They're Tasty!"

Unannounced, Butch Thompson, who has worked with Keillor since the first Prairie Home show, brought a Steinway grand piano to life behind the three-part harmony of Kate MacKenzie and the Williamses. It was a voice as instantly familiar as Keillor's.

Lots of the rest of the afternoon sounded, well, like a rehearsal.

Keillor and crew left at one point to rehearse a comedy script in a nearby stairwell.

Broadway and television star Karen Morrow was singing "You're The Top," when bassist Vince Giordano's G-string

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Towns said only a few communities have established a trust to purchase land or

quality of life preserved. It's one of those classic win-win situations."

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popped, sending college public affairs director Ron Nief to find a replacement.

A return to stage life — for now — at Middlebury College, puzzles some. Everyone but the maestro.

"We had a good time the last time we came up here," Keillor said of his 1983 Vermont visit.

"I think it's a good state for radio and for what we do. For as long as I can remember, Vermont has been a real paradise for acoustic music. It was just a decision to do what was pleasant and simple."

Then the cast rehearsed "Remember Me" one more time:

"Remember me when the candle lights are gleaming,

"Remember me at the close of a long, long day,

"It would be so sweet when all alone I'm dreaming,

"Just to know you still remember me."

Tickets for today's 4 p.m. show go on sale at the college's Memorial Field House at 11 o'clock at \$10 apiece.

The Saturday evening performance was sold out in minutes in March.