



Garrison Keillor amuses audience with tales of Lake Wobegone.

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Keillor's whimsical images fill State Theater

By AMY LONGSDORF

Garrison Keillor stands on the dividing line between two generations of humorists. On one side are wits like Mark Twain and Will Rogers, who perceptively, but gently, poked fun at human foibles. On the other are monologists like Spalding Gray and Calvin Trillin, who skewer American culture in provocative and essential ways.

When he's at his best, as he was last evening, during a benefit performance for Easton's State Theatre, Keillor draws from both worlds, imbuing his work with compassion, as well as prickly insight.

The tall, suited Keillor, who is best known for his public radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" and his best-selling books, acts as a congenial host for an evening of rambling reminiscences, clever one-liners and poems in "wonderful bad taste." While Keillor's material is rarely falling-down funny, his humor stems from his

ability to stack whimsical image upon whimsical image, until just a mention of a character's name can draw laughs and shocks of recognition.

Nearly all of Keillor's amusingly interlocking stories take place in Lake Wobegon, an imaginary Minnesota hamlet where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average." Set in the Sidetrack Tavern, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and the Chatterbox Cafe, Keillor's tales focus on an easily recognizable cast of small-town types. There's the ingenious waitress-turned-car-saleswoman Darlene, her husband Arlin, the town drunk Mr. Burkee and his brother, "the other Mr. Burkee."

Standing in front of stools and a potted plant, Keillor asks us to contemplate Minnesota's one-time governor, a man "with a \$50 haircut on a 50-cent head." He does comic riffs on male car buyers who won't admit they don't know everything about cars and flabby old-timers, who carry their "distinguished bellies" way out front.

"Their bellies look as if they should have names of their own."

Like all good monologists, Keillor has a remarkable retention for auxiliary details. Extramarital affairs are kindled when a couple chaperone a 4-H convention. A faulty sewer system leaves Wobegon's lawns spongy and its roses a "lurid shade of crimson." Dangerous post-coital chatter of the "Who would you be with, if you weren't with me?" variety is, according to Keillor "jealousy looking for somebody to dance with."

From his opening "Happy To Be Here" song to his gently meandering memories of Lake Wobegon through his closing sing-along session, Keillor celebrates small pleasures. But it doesn't take long for those small pleasures to add up. His explorations of everyday life eventually become as bracing as the Minnesota winters he so poetically evokes.

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