

# Public radio's private voice

## Garrison Keillor wants to be alone

By CHARLOTTE LOWE  
Citizen Staff Writer

Sitting on the steps of a back porch with Garrison Keillor, his horn-rimmed glasses tossed aside and his deep voice unwinding slowly like a road in the darkness, is a perfect way to interview the person some call America's best-loved folk humorist since Will Rogers.

He was host and creator of the popular radio program "A Prairie Home Companion" (began in 1974) and gained fame as a monologist, singer and novelist. Through all of it Keillor has brought that sitting-on-the-porch feeling to millions of listeners and readers.

It doesn't matter that the back porch he's sitting on this day is make-believe, just like Keillor's mythical Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon. The two-story white clapboard house has two porches but no middle. The moody twilight is courtesy of the lighting crew at Centennial Hall at the University of Arizona, where Keillor brought his "Third Annual Farewell Tour of 'A Prairie Home Companion'" for a performance Saturday night.

It doesn't matter. Keillor is for real. Keillor calls himself the "humorist that makes people cry." He is a true conversationalist, not a hustler, given to talking about the things that matter in life: family, work, home, love and betrayal, all interspersed with thoughtful pauses.

If you didn't ask, maybe he would never mention his new radio show, or his new book.

If you didn't ask anything, he would probably just sit there sipping foul-smelling coffee and singing softly with the pianist playing "Rock of Ages"

GARRISON, continued/3E



Minnesota Public Radio

Garrison Keillor said fame made life in Minnesota "lousy."

## No place like the 'Prairie'

By CHARLOTTE LOWE  
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REVIEW

Reviewing the touring performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" is like critiquing the Second Coming.

You can measure how ecstatic, mesmerized or tickled to death the crowd was. You can tell what you saw. But it's darn near impossible to say how it could have been done better.

The audience of approximately 2,400 in Centennial Hall at the University of Arizona was, as

host Garrison Keillor promised them, near to "worn out with entertainment" by the end of Saturday night's three-hour show.

Keillor and other regulars from "Companion" took the happy crowd back to mythical Lake Wobegon through music, monologues and comedy.

The eager audience (you could hear a collective intake of breath

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## Garrison Keillor: private voice of public radio

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in the background.

Trim and younger-looking than his 46 years, with stalky legs in blue jeans and a white T-shirt that he's been tucking in nervously for the past two hours, he looks down at his red socks and black loafers.

Deeper into the conversation he looks up without his glasses. His face is raw and blunt, with large, green eyes that nail down his words.

It's like talking to a friend from high school, finding out how life has been treating him.

Keillor said he left St. Paul, Minn., his home of 15 years, after the press and locals made his private life public following the publication of his first book.

"Life was so lousy there," Keillor said. "There was a kind of unbearable scrutiny. St. Paul is a graceful old city. Almost a perfect place to live. My friends were there.

"I had imagined, like (F. Scott) Fitzgerald who lived there once, that I would like to live on Crocus Hill. He never quite made it, he went to New York. So I did. I bought this big mansion on the hill.

"The newspaper did a big story on it along with a picture of our house and our address. I had a friend who knew the editor and had him ask her if this was going to be the end of it or was there more to come. The editor said to them I was news. There was no life there, no privacy," he said, bitterly.

Privacy also became impossible for his wife and almost-grown children. "It was just things like people knocking on the front door. Wanting me to sign their books. But that would happen all the time, while we were eating, sitting, talking, all the time," he said.

Soon after that, in 1987, Keillor left to try living in his wife's native country, Denmark. Now they live in New York.

"I would choose romance over country. I would betray my country for a woman, for my wife! My home is with my wife and kids now," he said firmly.

How does he feel about the rush, the wave of love that comes from the audience? Does that make up for having to change his life?

"I'm aware of the audience when I'm standing in front of them, but after that I'm back to a small domestic life where I work hard writing," Keillor said.

"Writing is a craft that takes all of

you. It's totally absorbing. So concentrating on anything else is impossible. I have no hobbies."

Keillor has filled three books with stories and has contributed to the New Yorker since 1970.

When he writes, he said, "It's not for an audience. It's for one reader. I don't know who or what gender. But it's just one person."

Many of the stories in his newest book, "We Are Still Married," take a satirical look at an area previously unmentioned in his Lake Wobegon stories — the psychic pollution caused by what he calls "a disease in journalism."

A former reporter who ended up writing obituaries for a daily newspaper, Keillor spoke with disdain of "slick magazines that have less than zero mentality. The people magazines. Magazines that have the city's name in their title and whose writing never causes anyone to feel any pain."

The title story, "We Are Still Married," is about a simple woman, Wilma, who tells all to People magazine. She unabashedly reveals her up-and-down relationship with her husband, Earl, and their marriage falters as a result.

"It's about the willing surrender of privacy," Keillor said. "But in the end he takes her back. The moral is that in the end none of it mattered."

Is that the moral of Keillor and St. Paul?

"No, they don't matter," Keillor said adamantly. "They don't matter. It's like the guy who stole my car last year in New York. I'm thankful every day it's gone. It's ridiculous to have a car in Manhattan."

Keillor, who left "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1987, plans to create and perform in a new live public radio show, "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company of the Air."

In addition to sketches and monologues by Keillor, the program will feature performances of classic American music. It is to begin this fall.

What will it be like? "I'm curious to find out," he said. Then, after a long pause: "I'm sort of thinking about it during the tour." Could there be a show without Lake Wobegon? Without a hometown to talk about?

You never know. As Keillor said later, closing the Centennial Hall show, "Home is in the heart and where the spirit prospers."

### Tony Award winners

NEW YORK — Here is the list of Tony Award winners for Broadway's 1988-89 season. Winners were announced yesterday in ceremonies televised from the Lunt-Fontanne Theater by CBS.

Play: "The Heidi Chronicles," Wendy Wasserstein  
Musical: "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Revival: "Our Town"  
Actor, Play: Philip Bosco,  
"Lend Me a Tenor"

Actress, Play: Pauline Collins, "Shirley Valentine"  
Actor, Musical: Jason Alexander, "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Actress, Musical: Ruth Brown, "Black and Blue"  
Director, Play: Jerry Zaks,  
"Lend Me a Tenor."

Director, Musical: Jerome Robbins, "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Featured Actor, Play: Boyd Gaines, "The Heidi Chronicles"  
Featured Actress, Play:

Christine Baranski, "Rumors"  
Featured Actor, Musical:

Scott Wise, "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Featured Actress, Musical: Debbie Shapiro, "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Scenic Design: Santo Loquasto, "Cafe Crown"



The Associated Press

#### Philip Bosco

Costume Design: Claudio Segovia and Hector Orezzi, "Black and Blue"

Lighting Design: Jennifer Tipton, "Jerome Robbins' Broadway"

Choreography: Cholly Atkins, Henry LeTang, Frankie Manning and Fayard Nicholas, "Black and Blue"

A special Tony Award for continued excellence by a regional theater: Hartford Stage Company of Hartford, Conn.

## No place like the 'Prairie'

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as Keillor walked out on stage at the start of the show) was ready to see what they had previously heard only on radio. They got their \$16.50 worth.

Keillor had completely rewritten the show Saturday morning, tailoring it to Tucson with a rousing folk song based on a local Chamber of Commerce brochure. The new show staggered around a bit, but stood up and met the great expectations of its fans.

After his 1987 departure from the unprecedentedly popular public radio show, Keillor began what has become a tradition of "farewell performances." The first was June 13, 1987, when the last live performance of Keillor's weekly radio show was broadcast. The second farewell performance was held at Radio City Music Hall on June 4, 1988. This year's farewell tour, which includes 13 cities, is the most ambitious so far and has attracted sellout crowds.

Beginning with Keillor's soothing, magical words — "It's been a quiet spring in Lake Wobegon" — the audience cozied up with some of the show's most popular characters. Among them were:

• "The Sons of Knute," an organi-

zation represented by three men (led by Keillor) who dress like Zeigfeld Follies Vikings and are bound together by "dumb, blind loyalty."

• Sheila the Christian Jungle Girl, whose fur-raising adventures are dramatically revealed in the on-going radio serial "Buster the Show Dog." Sheila is played by Kate MacKenzie, who is also the boogie-in-her-socks soprano in the Hopeful Gospel Quartet. That group features Keillor and the breathy alto and country tenor of Linda and Robin Williams, respectively.

• The Williamses comprise the completely tacky Mavis and Marvin Smiley, who sang from their new (order now, not available in stores) recording of "All the finest Broadway songs done in bluegrass style."

• This is not to overlook the immense talents of Richard Dworsky as the Short Bald Pianist with Long Hair, who has a death grip on sensitive songs from the 1960s.

Keillor said at the end, "You never think so much of home until you leave. Then you hear their voices in the dark night before you sleep."

Will there be a return trip home? "As for 1990," Keillor said, "a shy person such as myself hates to suggest a fourth annual reunion, but if nobody else does, then of course I will."