

Garrison Keillor's '3rd Farewell' in Tempe a charm

By Salvatore Caputo
The Arizona Republic

The frame house sitting on the stage at Gammage Center in Tempe is a home on a prairie of the mind. It's a two-story affair, with a front porch on the right and a bay window on the left.

It's a familiar house, having set the scene for mythical Lake Wobegon, Minn., last year at Radio City Music Hall when performing writer Garrison Keillor did his Second Annual Prairie Home Companion Farewell Show.

The musicians on tour with the third annual farewell are working out a gospel tune onstage, worrying over some parts as they sing: "My soul is washed in the blood of the lamb. . ."

Keillor, tall and lean, saunters onstage in casual dress. Red is his color. The same bright red shines from his shirt and from the socks that peek out beneath his black slacks.

The four singers on the stage are standing at microphones with black windscreens. Keillor picks up the one with the red windscreen, of course, and adds a very round bass to the song. Tired faces are revived, the writer's arrival helping to kick up the flagging energy level.

The stage is full of good humor, and Keillor seems to inspire repartee.

Singer Kate McKenzie tells him, "We've got a new tune worked up." Singer Robin Williams gives him the "so there" look of a recalcitrant child and says, "And we worked it up on our own."

Keillor, in mock hurt, responds: "And you didn't even ask me?"

When one of the singers suggests, "We need more of Garrison on the monitors," pianist Richard Dworsky starts tinkling *More*. It takes a few seconds before it registers, but soon, the entire cast is groaning at the musical pun.

Keillor, a writer by temperament and profession, also is a surprising showman, able to captivate audiences with his slow, almost whispered tales

STAGE REVIEW

A Prairie Home Companion: The Third Annual Farewell Tour

Monday, Gammage Center, Tempe.

of the small-town lives in Lake Wobegon. His creation, *A Prairie Home Companion*, was one of public radio's biggest success stories, spurring listeners to donate to local stations and making big-selling successes of Keillor's Wobegon books, *Lake Wobegon Days* and *Leaving Home*.

Keillor closed the radio show down two years ago, after 13 years on the air, and left his St. Paul, Minn., base for life in Denmark and then in New York, where he works for *The New Yorker*.

Talking with an interviewer during a break, Keillor is the same laconic "shy person" he is in his monologues, carefully deliberating each phrase before he lets go of a word.

"This is a show that keeps changing," he says of his road show. "The monologue has tended to be the same. The music has changed. I write every day."

Keillor is known for song parodies and setting more serious lyrics to music as well.

On deck for the Tempe show is *The Airline Prayer*, based on a flight Keillor took out of Denmark during which an engine exploded. Keillor sings, "Lord, don't let the pilot snooze / Tighten all those bolts and screws / . . . Lord, don't make me appear on tomorrow's news."

"Shy people," a demographic group Keillor professes to be a founding member of, tend to think about these things. Also on deck is *Buster, the Show Dog*, which on radio was an affectionate pastiche of old adventure serials that made extensive use of sound-effects man Tom Keith's vocal



Stephen Munteer/The Arizona Republic

Garrison Keillor rehearses for his show at Gammage Center. On Monday, he guided the Gammage crowd down familiar paths of fancy to Lake Wobegon.

characterizations.

But the one-shot nature of the current show has taken away some of the cliffhanger appeal. "I rewrite that each day," Keillor says. "It's just a writer's tendency to revise. As long as you can revise, you do."

The opportunities for revision will end this weekend, when the final show of the tour is broadcast nationwide. It will be heard in metropolitan Phoenix on KJZZ (FM 91.5) at 4:30 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. Sunday.

A small-town man from Anoka, Minn., Keillor is taken with life in the big city. When asked by his Eastern-bred interrogator how things were when he left New York for the tour,

he replies, "New York does not change. It has the stability of chaos."

This prompts an observation about the contrast between Eastern and Western cities: "It's hard to believe that Phoenix and New York are in the same country." Possibly as a result of such culture shock, Keillor says he is suffering from "Tour Tunnel Syndrome, or T.T.S."

"I'm awfully curious about Arizona," he says, "but this isn't any way to really see the country. . . . The sameness of the hotels is comforting, and you don't feel like venturing out away from the group and meeting new people."

Spoken like a true "shy person."