

Garrison Keillor's 'Company' is welcome on public radio

By Richard Harrington
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Much of Garrison Keillor's charm comes from his ability to make people look forward to listening to radio, from his gift for imbuing that medium with the depth, warmth and humanity that used to be commonplace in radio's golden age. Keillor's is a kinder, gentler radio, and it's nothing but good news that it is back on the air in the form of "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company of the Air," which premiered Saturday evening on public radio stations.

The first radio variety show to be broadcast from New York in 35 years, "ARCA" is similar to the classic format Keillor developed in Minnesota with "A Prairie Home Companion," and some of the elements suggested continuity: Pianist Butch Thompson celebrated the joyful elegance of Jelly Roll Morton; greetings were passed on from the live audience to listeners at home; a holiday, Thanksgiving, provided inspiration for musical and theatrical segments; and there were several mock commercials. Keillor even ambled amiably through a song and, toward the end of the two-hour show, reminisced about Lake Wobegon, the Minnesota community that became more real than most hometowns and where, thankfully, "everything is exactly the same."

At the same time, Keillor made it clear that he's a New Yorker now. The radio sketches and even the mock commercials

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Saturday night
Airs on Vermont Public Radio

had a decidedly tougher urban edge. A "Letter From New York" (written by Ken Lazepnic) played with sexual and social stereotypes: In a city where women wear suits and men dresses, it doesn't take long to realize you're not in Kansas or Minnesota anymore. Another long segment, "The Story of Gloria," promises an ongoing drama about the perils of a very modern woman who has a lot more on her mind than hair.

Where Keillor and his writers once tapped into the complex simplicity of rural society, they now seem to be turning their attention to the modern cityscape. The pace is certainly different; it remains to be heard whether the material will be as rewarding. But judging by Saturday's efforts, the writing is sharp, and the ensemble work, much more ambitious than on "Companion," is fluid and impressive.

On the musical side, "ARCA" offers the same eclectic mix in its ongoing celebration of American music. On hand were the wonderful doo-wop a capella group, True Image, and Rob Fisher with the Coffee Club Orchestra, providing rich textures and further recalling olden, golden days. On the other hand, a pair of Tom Lehrer satires fell flat, and Keillor's interpretation of Chuck Berry's "Back in the

U.S.A." suggests he should leave certain celebrations to others.

What makes Keillor so effective, of course, is not his singing, but his speaking, and those hesitant, mellifluous excursions that are half memory, half fantasy. As always he can be playful, poking fun at the publishing world and at exploitative kiss-and-sell family memoirs written by absolute nobodies (the American Booksellers Association is a major sponsor of the show). As Keillor notes, "If you want revenge, don't get a gun: Get a word processor." He also toyed with public television fundraisers, revised historical tableaux and the plethora of nonsensical organizations in America.

The greatest warmth was reserved for the Lake Wobegon monologue. Earlier, Keillor had made it clear that he is now a New Yorker, though insisting that it is "possible to love and belong to two places at the same time." It's time that will tell, though one hopes that distance won't diminish his appreciation and understanding of the greatest little town impossible to find on any map. New York's a lot bigger; it remains to be seen whether it will provide inspiration as deep and direct. Then again, as Keillor sang at the beginning of his show, "It's Saturday, the band is playing, honey, could we ask for more?" He even answered the question a little later, ostensibly while addressing the audience: "So glad you came back ... hello, hello, hello."

Hello, indeed.