



Garrison Keillor: New York is a great comic foil for such a keen observer.

Radio/Noel Holston

New Keillor show is the Big Apple Home Companion

The title is redundant: "American Radio Company of the Air"? What else would a radio company be "of," the dirt? And the designated acronym, "ARCA"? Sounds like a killer whale. Or should that be Keillor whale?

But never mind. The variety series Garrison Keillor started broadcasting from New York City three months ago — and which will originate live from St. Paul's World Theater for the first time today at 5 p.m. — is better in deed than in name. Much, much better.

"American Radio Company" is a worthy successor to "A Prairie Home Companion." You could almost say it is "A Prairie Home Companion," only with a little mousse on its cowlick.

Although the music leans closer to Rogers and Hart than Flatt and Scruggs, it's still eclectically chosen and classically American. You'll hear songs here you're unlikely to encounter anywhere else on radio. Keillor still reads sweet and cryptic messages from people in the audience to their friends and families in Pine Bluff, Palo Alto and Poplarville. He and the regulars still do funny commercial parodies, and he still uses Lake Wobegon as a touchstone, morally and comically, even if Pastor Ingqvist is likely to wind up costarring in a monologue with a subway-car sermonizer with whom a hopelessly polite fellow rider from Minnesota foolishly makes eye contact.

The new show has a decidedly New York flavor.

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Last week, for instance, Keillor told an anecdote about racing to catch a subway train, the token for which costs \$1.15. "They picked this figure because no one knows how to make change for it," he said, getting a huge laugh, followed by applause from his audience at the Majestic Theater in the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Maybe the folks in Pine Bluff didn't get as big a charge out of the line, but I have no doubt they "got" it, just as I'm sure they got the parody "This Old Apartment," in which space-conscious New Yorkers found absurdly ingenious ways to renovate and nest in everything from attics to elevator shafts.

New York is a great comic foil for such a keen observer as Keillor. Like Woody Allen, he obviously loves the city's rhythm and energy even as he recognizes its grubby surrealism. So he can play ingratiatingly both to the people who feel superior because they don't live there *and* those who feel superior because they do.

Keillor is a less dominating presence here than he was on "A Prairie Home Companion." He gets marvelous support from Ivy Austin, Paul Binotto, Pamela McLernan and Richard Muenz — a multitabled foursome collectively known as the Broadway Local Radio Theater Company — veteran "PHC" sound-effects whiz Tom Keith and Bob Elliott, of Bob & Ray fame.

Austin, a terrific comedienne with

an unmistakable and (for me) irresistible boopsy voice, also stars in a madcap satirical serial-within-the-show called "The Story of Gloria, Young Woman of Manhattan." In last week's installment, Gloria had followed her boyfriend, Victor, a dropout from a punk group called the Weasels, to a New Age community near Seattle. There she encountered Dr. Bob Leaping Dog, who had been stockbroker Bob Ferguson before he discovered his natural powers as a healer. While Dr. Bob was chanting to "restore her aura," Gloria, holding the crystal he'd given her, hallucinated that she was dancing in a conga line at the Rainbow Room and singing, "I just wanna conga/Longa and longa/With you."

There's nothing on radio quite as varied and inventive as this show with the redundant title and awkward acronym — almost nothing on TV, either, except for "The Tracey Ullman Show."

Tonight's broadcast on KSJN (91.1 FM) and about 250 other public radio stations nationwide will feature the aforementioned regulars, Bob Fisher and the Coffee Club Orchestra, and musical guests Eileen Farrell, Butch Thompson and the a capella R&B group True Image. The World Theater already is sold out for Keillor's homecoming, but the best seat, truth be told, is an overstuffed chair near a fireplace and a radio.