

Keillor finds his way through big-city show

By S. Keith Graham
Staff writer

Thank an unknown Georgian if you're glad Garrison Keillor, the bard of Lake Wobegon, returned to radio after a self-imposed three-year exile.

"It was around the Fourth of July," said the writer, humorist and radio star, rambling into the tale in his trademark low-key baritone. "Would have been the year before last." He was biking with a friend in Gettysburg, Pa., when the stranger with a Southern accent stopped them.

"He said, 'When are you coming back?' Mr. Keillor recalled. "And it sort of startled me. "He didn't say, 'Why don't you?' or 'Are you gonna ever?'"

That Georgian — and the rest of the laid-back but loyal fans who made "A Prairie Home Companion" a movement as much as a radio program — got the answer last year when Mr. Keillor started his new show, "American Radio Company of the Air," broadcast on public radio stations around the country, including Atlanta's WABE-FM (90.1) from 6 to 8 p.m. most Saturdays.

Based in New York, far from "the little town that time forgot," the new show is not "A Prairie Home Companion." But for those who love the Keillor blend of whimsy and nostalgia, it's the next best thing. Normally broadcast from a Brooklyn theater, "American Radio Company" comes to Atlanta for a live performance Saturday.

"A Prairie Home Companion" reached a peak audience of 4 million before Mr. Keillor called it quits — and moved to Denmark, the home country of his wife, Ulla Skaerved — in 1987. Looking back, he said, the show ended with more dramatic finality than he intended.

"When you end a show like that, you don't mean it to be permanent," he said, sounding pensive as he talked by telephone from his Manhattan office. "But somehow it's hard to make those subtle distinctions. I enjoy saying



Cheryl Walsh-Bellville/Special

Garrison Keillor (center) brings his "American Radio Company of the Air" to the Fox on Saturday with (from

left) Richard Muenz, Bob Elliott, Ivy Austin, Mr. Keillor, Pamela McLernon, Paul Binotto and Tom Keith.

PERFORMANCE PREVIEW

Garrison Keillor's "American Radio Company of the Air"

5:45 p.m. Saturday, Fox Theatre, 660 Peachtree St. N.E. \$20.50-\$24.50. Featuring theater organist Hector Olivera of Atlanta, Bob Elliott (of "Bob and Ray"), Robin and Linda Williams, the Coffee Club Orchestra. 249-6400

goodbye but I like to reserve the right to return at some point."

Once off the air, Mr. Keillor stayed in Denmark for only a few months before moving to New York. When he decided to return to radio — largely because of the thoughts the questioning Georgian had stirred, he claims — he set the show in New York "because I live here."

There are still frequent reports from Mr. Keillor's fictional rural community, but "American Radio Company" is more urban in its themes, more sophisticated — and carefully scripted — in its presentation.

There are still funny fake commercials: "Lucky Charm Soap — more than a cereal, you can wash with it, too." But a large orchestra has been added, and the musical lineup includes more jazz, doo-wop and Broadway show

tunes and less folk music than before. An ongoing melodrama focuses on "Gloria, A Young Woman of Manhattan," while another recent skit described a downtown Manhattan golf tournament with players that included authors Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut and Arthur Miller.

"I think it's been a better show, but it hasn't been as much fun to do," Mr. Keillor said. "The hardest thing for me is to try to figure out what I should do when I get out onstage alone and talk." Those monologues, an eccentric combination of comedy routine, literary storytelling and essay, are at the heart of the show, and he likes to view them as a time when a writer puts aside his manuscript and ventures out alone to talk to people.

The problem is that what worked in Minnesota doesn't feel right in New York. "The Lake Wobegon stories I always felt were wonderful," he said. "I look back at it as a rare moment of such grace onstage ... where you stopped performing and crossed over a line into some other realm. ... It really was such an easy piece of work."

It was so easy, in fact, that Mr. Keillor felt comfortable going onstage with only a few notes and improvising.

Not so in New York. "Now I still feel lost and no doubt sound a little lost," he said. "I'm sort of groping my way toward something and I'm not sure what it is."

His aim, he said, is to bring in Lake Wobegon while recognizing he is in New York. The pieces are less pastoral, less episodes in themselves.

"For some reason," he said, "standing up on this stage and trying to do what I used to do, I found out I couldn't do it. This was a real horrible discovery."

"It just didn't feel right to stand up in front of Brooklyn, in front of this audience, and talk about the wonders of small-town life. It seemed cruel."

Groping though he may be, Mr. Keillor is committed to bringing the show back for another year after the current season closes in June. "American Radio Company of the Air" now reaches 2 million listeners, and its producer, Minnesota Public Radio, expects to woo back more of the old "Prairie Home" audience with an expanded lineup of shows in the fall.

What Mr. Keillor will do in the long term remains to be seen.

"My wife is the one who thinks about the future," he said. "I just worry about next Saturday night."