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Master storyteller Keillor conjures up a captivating evening at Oakdale

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By ROGER CATLIN
Courant Staff Writer

Garrison Keillor came loping down the aisle at the Oakdale Musical Theatre in Wallingford Saturday night like a professor late for a lecture.

Wearing glasses, with tousled hair, a tan suit and a red tie matching his red socks, he certainly looked professorial.

And some might mistake what he does on stage as lecturing.

But Keillor, as his millions of readers and radio listeners know, does more than lecture about Lake Wobegon, the mythical Minnesota town he claims as hometown.

Instead, he recreates an entire community, revealing its residents' inner fears and longings through close examination of a fabric others might find ordinary. In a deep, slow-moving storytelling style, he is as captivating in his time as Mark Twain must have been in his.

But his 45-minute monologue on

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the latest news from Lake Wobegon, this time concerning a widow affected by the aphrodisiac powers of mutant sweet corn (among other things), was just part of a 3½-hour program of songs, poems, homilies and a lot of fine guitar work by his special guest Chet Atkins.

Keillor probably sings more than he ought to. But plenty of his songs, especially those he writes himself or rewrites from old cowboy ditties, are amusing and sharp as the humor he plies elsewhere.

He is nothing if not current. He began by saying he always looked forward to that day, particularly at 12:34 p.m. and 56 seconds on July 8, 1990, when everything — 12:34:56 on 7/8/90 — “seemed to line up.”

Some of his other material, however, especially his poem and song about old cats, were time-honored crowd favorites. He sang both the theme from his new radio program and that of its beloved predecessor, “A Prairie Home Companion,” both of which were being broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio as he went around and around on the revolving stage.

Atkins, in what he described, astonishingly, as his first visit to the state, proved to have nearly as good a deadpan sense of humor as the host. And nobody could approach his influential finger-picking style, some of which was so intricate, such as playing the bass and lead parts to “Lady Madonna” simultaneously,

that he had to explain it to the audience first.

And what an audience it was. Not the stereotyped, literate, thirtysomething public-radio listeners at all, but a sizable older majority in brightly colored blazers and white shoes who seemed to have been imported by bus from rural Minnesota.

But Keillor's storytelling powers being what they are, maybe he conjured them all up, along with the bachelor Norwegian farmers' of whom he spoke.

Summary: future frontier for 'Troll' ...