

THEATER

## Keillor Dazzling Down River

By Joe Poffack  
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ONLY in America can a man with a wonderful singing voice stand on a stage, take a microphone and sing without risk of bodily harm. But listening to Garrison Keillor sing is a small price to pay to listen to him tell stories, because Keillor is an uncommonly brilliant storyteller.

In looks, voice and style, Keillor is as unlikely a star as ever came down the pike from Lake Wobegone, Minn., and yet, the tall, shuffling man with a pink shirt and matching red socks and tie, round glasses and an unruly forelock held a Fox Theatre audience enthralled for more than three hours Tuesday night.

It was the first St. Louis visit for Keillor, former host of "The Prairie Home Companion," and current host of "The American Radio Company of the Air," heard locally over KWMU-FM, and he explained it by saying that people who live "up river" are sometimes shy about visiting those who live farther down.

Keillor has superlative companionship in guitarist Chet Atkins in what they call the Sweet Corn Show. Keillor tells stories and joins the Hopeful Gospel Quartet for songs; Atkins tells just a few stories and plays in magical fashion. He sings occasionally; his vocal quality is not much better than Keillor's, but it's fine for songs like "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex on His Television Show?" There's an excellent backup quartet, and Keillor's son, Jason, accompanies his father on a couple of songs, too.

Like most of the people in the audience, I've been a radio fan of Keillor's for many years, and I've read his fiction in the New Yorker and other magazines. So Keillor gave us what we were used to and what we wanted, and we loved it. We heard the familiar mock commercials for Powdermilk Biscuits and Aunt Bertha's Kitty Boutique, gossip about Lake Wobegone, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average," a few poems, some country and gospel songs — and the monologue that he creates each week for the radio show.

The monologue left me bedazzled. It was about 20 minutes long, delivered in the familiar husky, sometimes-whispered tones, and all of it — all of it — came from memory. There were no stumbles, not an "er" or an "um." Like all great storytellers or comedians, he uses pauses to great effect, or he repeats a phrase for emphasis. He builds brilliantly to a series of comic climaxes with the slightest of pauses before the punch line, as in "March is designed by God to show people who don't drink what a hang-over is," or, in describing Lake Wobegone gardeners, how they compete to grow "the biggest tomatoes, the sweetest sweet corn, the fewest zucchinis." And he brings the story to a crisp, effective conclusion.

Atkins, who picked up a fiddle ("it's a Stradivarius — and it's new") for a few numbers, gave a virtuoso demonstration of guitar work, including a medley of Beatles tunes, Don McLean's "Vincent," "Autumn Leaves," "Avalon," "Mr. Sandman" and others.

Robin and Linda Williams, members of the gospel quartet, also appeared in full Nashville Cowboy regalia, replete with sunglasses and rhinestones, as Marvia and Mavis Smiley, with a charming medley of Broadway show tunes to bluegrass-tinged. Their "Broadway Bluegrass" then got a local angle in "Berry Bluegrass" with a similar rendition of "Johnny B. Goode."

Keillor's opening routine touched on the Fox Theatre interior design and whether it was a threat to monogamy, and he showed his Minnesota heritage of populist political thinking when he preceded a poem on urination by saying it had been written "without a government grant, strictly on my own time with my own dollar." Keillor also pointed out "I have a ballpoint pen with a notch cut in it for each critic I've fooled."

Add a notch, Mr. Keillor, and come back soon to pick up another.