

# Keillor finds rapt fans for his blend of old and new

By Judith Green  
Knight News Wire

SAN FRANCISCO — Banner up. Rug down.

The makeshift stage in Masonic Auditorium is ready.

On the blue banner: "GARRISON KEILLOR'S AMERICAN RADIO COMPANY," framing



GARRISON KEILLOR

a school textbook map of the United States: pink states and mint-green states, pale blue and buttercream states.

On the floor: an oriental rug, red, orange and gold. It travels with the company. "It's nice and warm, don't you think?" That's producer Christine Tschida.

At the back of the hall, the tech people have piled a mound of machinery, needed to "uplink" the show to National Public Radio's satellite. A transmitter. Mixer boards (where music and voices from 50 microphones are hand-blended into composite sound for the radio).

Looped and coiled around them are about four miles of wires and cables, wrapped in shiny black electrical tape and tangled beyond remedy.

All the crew guys wear Santa hats and have preoccupied expressions.

### Polishes and rewrites

In a bare dressing room behind the stage, a writer frowns into the screen of a lap-top computer, polishing the last rewrites.

It's 10 a.m. Dec. 15 — five hours until the show goes up.

The Coffee Club Orchestra warms up on the small stage: 11 musicians hired locally, led by violin, cello, first woodwind and drummer from New York.

Conductor Rob Fisher is the show's music detective and arranger. No matter how small (a chirping doo-wah descant for "What a Wonderful World") or how immense ("The Nutcracker" ballet, compressed into eight minutes and re-scored for a 15-piece band), it's up to Fisher to find it, adapt it, make it sound good. "Everything has to be made to order," he says.

This show is music-heavy. In addition to "Nutcracker" and "Wonderful World," it has the Pachelbel canon; a new song, "Hanukkah

in Santa Monica," by Tom Lehrer; a multi-verse Danish Christmas carol with a brass chorale; and "Santa Lucia" for accordion and orchestra. The day Fisher left New York for the West Coast, 91 pages of music arrived by fax.

"They have to be good readers," he says of the musicians.

Every song must be re-keyed to suit the singers: versatile soprano by Austin, who can be Joan Saez one minute and Lily Tomlin's bratty Edith Ann the next; Richard Muenz, who croons in the voice of Bing and reads mock public-service an-

nouncements in the voice of God; and, of course, Garrison Keillor, creator and star, whose pleasant, non-descript baritone opens every broadcast with the nostalgic "I hear that old piano," just as it used to open "A Prairie Home Companion" with Hank Snow's "Hello, Love."

### A common denominator

"My singing proves anybody can," Keillor says. "I'm a low common denominator."

As befits a featured attraction, Keillor skips the first hour of rehearsal: the set-up, the sound

checks, the first reads.

He arrives on stage at 11 in an old black sweater, off-white pants, moccasins and his trademark red socks. (He has 17 pairs. He reportedly wears them since telling the world in a Lake Wobegon monologue about wearing red socks as a nerd in high school.) He's 48, a big man, 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with baby-fine brown hair.

Today he also has an abscessed tooth. He's stoic. Everyone else is in pain. Staffers from sponsor KQED-FM send out for a doctor, a dentist, penicillin; his manager wor-

ries, his producer frets.

### He's a perfectionist

Keillor, a perfectionist, goes ahead with rehearsal, checks every musical and sound-effects cue, even hears the station breaks, fillers and other people's songs.

The one thing he doesn't rehearse is the monologue: "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town..."

As on "A Prairie Home Companion," forerunner of this show, Keillor takes about 20 minutes (of the two-hour show) each week to chron-

icle the people and events of Lake Wobegon, Minn., a loose recasting of his own home town of Anoka, Minn. He had thought to leave it behind when he closed that show in 1987, but the Lake Wobegon sketches kept their grip on his listeners. In the second year of "American Radio Company," he brought back the monologue by popular demand.

But it seems that one way he holds everyone in the hall spell-bound, including the onstage musicians and crew, is to let the monologue unfold live on the air.

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