

Lake Wobegon meets S.F. Bay

Garrison Keillor's radio show is City's home companion — for a day

By David Armstrong
EXAMINER MEDIA CRITIC

THE FIRST THING you notice at a live broadcast of Garrison Keillor's "American Radio Company" is how visual the whole thing is.

There's guest-star Bobby McFerrin's 10-member a cappella Voicestra, resplendent in color-splashed outfits.

There's Ivy Austin, the show's superb resident female singer, addressing the microphone in a casually elegant double-breasted jacket.

There's Big Lou, the only-in-San Francisco accordion player, doing a tune on the squeeze box, her huge blond bouffant hairdo jiggling slightly as she snaps her chewing gum, then giving the capacity crowd a cheery, end-of-song wave. Her white cowgirl boots, she confides to the host, were "given to me by a gentleman admirer."

And there's the star himself, arched, dark eyebrows, eyeglasses and forelock defining his broad face. Perched atop a stool as he spins out a perfectly modulated monologue about Lake Wobegon, Keillor jiggles his leg like a nervous

teen-ager, hitching up his pantleg to reveal fire engine-red socks.

Of course, none of this would mean a thing if the "American Radio Company," the New York-based successor to Keillor's popular, St. Paul-bred "Prairie Home Companion," didn't work on the radio. It does — marvelously.

The two-hour weekly show — as evidenced from Saturday's live, nationwide broadcast from Masonic Auditorium — is a smooth, well-paced mix of music, monologues, sketches, snatches of letters and messages from listeners.

One audience member at the Masonic scribbled a proposal of marriage to another fan, not forgetting to add where he was sitting. Reading the proposal aloud, Keillor recited the writer's row and seat number and deadpanned, "Just in case she's not sure who the guy is."

Two hours is a long time, but time flew; we must have been having fun.

Certainly, the 3,200 fans — who snapped up all the tickets shortly after host-station KQED-FM started hawkling them — loved almost everything about Keillor and his literary Minnesota of the mind.

Well-scrubbed, well-dressed, middle-aged and pale of complexion, the audience looked as though it would gladly vote Farmer-Labor if the party was on the ballot here.

Now in its second season, Keillor's "American Radio Company" originates about half of its yearly

26 shows in New York, airing the rest from the road. The show's initial heavy Noo Yawk orientation did not go over well in the heartland, and Keillor, who made his reputation by throwing affection-

ate jabs at his native Midwest, got the message: thus, his recently revived Lake Wobegon monologues and broadcasts from the nether regions far from Manhattan.

Keillor — inevitable but suc-

cessfully — worked regional material into Saturday's show, contrasting San Francisco, which he called "the capital of self-esteem," with the Midwest, where parents re-

[See KEILLOR, B-9]



Garrison Keillor's broadcast from Masonic Auditorium drew 3,200 fans — one who proposed marriage.

◆ KEILLOR from B-1

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mind their children they're no better than anyone else and they better not forget it.

Keillor and the show's excellent singer-actors, the aforementioned Ivy Austin and her male counterpart, Richard Muenez, spun a well-made story about a sad holiday encounter at the Cannery.

Portraying Pete the poet, a failed versifier who now toils in a Cannery bookshop, Keillor shares lonely confidences and glasses of wine with Austin, the shop manager, just before closing time on the last day before Christmas.

Austin plays a Berkeley woman who used to run a place called The People's Deli — "for people who weren't ready to become vegetarians, but wanted to know the animals lived rich, full, meaningful lives." She, too, is lonely and misses the shared sense of community she used to feel.

Into this nook of gentle epiphanies stumbles Muenez, who reads the situation all wrong. He's looking for a gift for his wife — he has "The Whoopie Cushion Book" in mind — but sticks around to flirt with the lady manager.

The skit was funny, sad and delicately drawn. Like most of Keillor's humor, it never went all the way into cynicism at one extreme or sentimentality at the other, yet somehow avoided bogging down in the boring middle.

Keillor is a benign presence, but he's not without edges. In the middle of a paean to Christmas, he remarked that Christmas is "the best publicity Jesus will get this year. The rest of the year, his name is connected with Christians, a dull and often cruel people not known for their imagination or taste."

Then he moved on to talk about what he really likes about the holiday. He's deft and canny, a sophisticated innocent.

He's also a smart host who

knows when to let his cast regulars and guests shine.

McFerrin's accomplished Voicecestra radiated talent on four numbers, ranging from African-derived rhythms to European-derived chorale harmonies.

Music director Rob Fisher di-

rected a 16-piece band (five regulars and 11 Bay Area musicians) with crisp precision.

And off in his own corner of the stage, the "American Radio Company's" secret star, sound effects artist Tom Keith, put on a show-within-a-show, crumpling a styro-

foam plate to invoke the sound of a burrowing mouse and simply cupping his hands to approximate the wind on the Golden Gate Bridge.

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