

Keillor's tales of Lake Wobegon, theology remain a hit on the road

By Bruce Buursma

On the great circle tour of America, the imaginary canary yellow International Harvester school bus, vintage 1949, careened into Chicago on Saturday. It deposited a lanky, lonesome Lutheran into the city of "big padded shoulders," the "center of American manners" and the semi-sanctified national headquarters of his church.

Garrison Keillor, the radio raconteur and writer who lived in Minnesota and Denmark before finding himself "wonderfully out of place" in New York City, was back at home on the stage of the Chicago Theater.

And for two hours, before a soldout auditorium and more than 1 million distant listeners, Keillor's "American Radio Company of the Air"—the reincarnation of his immensely popular "A Prairie Home Companion"—held forth with its trademark edge of theologically orthodox baleful joy.

The show, produced by Minnesota Public Radio and heard live on more

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than 200 public radio stations, including Chicago's WBEZ-FM, is in its second season. It is more and more a reprise in format and feel of "A Prairie Home Companion," which was broadcast weekly for 13 years to an audience that may have reached 5 million at its zenith.

The Chicago production featured the traditional gospel stylings of the Barrett Sisters from Morningstar Baptist Church on the South Side and the breathtaking a cappella renderings of Chicago-based Acme Vocals.

The centerpiece of the show, of course, is Keillor's monologue, "The News from Lake Wobegon," his make-believe hometown village in Minnesota. And his Saturday night musing, delivered from a stool on stage—the pant legs of his gray suit hiked up to reveal his signature red socks—ricocheted from the ruins of the town's long-abandoned movie theater, its

roof having collapsed finally under the weight of the winter snow, to the vexing decision of a lone soul not to wear a yellow ribbon at the local high school, to the pleasures of a class trip to mythic Chicago.

Keillor's description of the destruction of the Main Street movie theater was evocative and tender, recalling a concrete-block structure that nevertheless was "a palace full of mystery and romance ... a sacred place in my town for reasons nobody every dared talk about."

The demise of the building will bring out wrecking crews in the spring to haul away the rubble and leave only a hole in the ground. "But the architecture of a girl's neck and shoulders," Keillor added, "is permanent. You can study it in school, but you only learn it in Braille."

Keillor was equally self-disclosing with his tale of David Tollerud's refusal to wear a yellow ribbon in symbolic support of the American war effort, disrupting the rhythm of conformity at the high school and discovering, in the process, that "Lake Wobegon is not his home."

Such a lesson, Keillor said knowingly, will "save him time and sharpen his interest in geography."

But if Lake Wobegon is no longer Keillor's home, the galaxy of tormented theological wanderings still is where he lives, as underscored by his plaintive "Anthem of a Middle-Aged Lutheran."

"I'm 48 now, soon I'll be 50, then I'll retire, then I'll be dead," Keillor sang before beseeching the Lord to transform him from a stoic Lutheran into an Episcopalian before that final day.

"Episcopalians get to be wild, think what they want to, pull out the stops," he wailed. "They have the writers, artists and dancers. We have the altos, plumbers and cops."

"Meanwhile, I'll go on being a Lutheran, singing in choir and doing my share," he concluded. "Waiting to rise and be in Your presence, hoping that life is looser Up There."

It was a prayer, like all segments of his Chicago show, that concluded with a hearty amen of applause from the assembled multitude of 4,000 Keillor believers.