

about Lake Wobegon.

On air with Garrison Keillor

Gannett News Service

TIME: Friday, 6 p.m., 24 hours before the show will air, this week's first rehearsal of Garrison Keillor's *American Radio Company*, a radio variety show of skits, shick and song that airs live Saturdays over American Public Radio. Produced by Minnesota Public Radio, the show is in its third season.

PLACE: Dingy three-room office suite on Manhattan's lower West Side. An orange and purple sunset glows through grimy windows.

CHARACTERS: Garrison Keillor, 49-year-old radio raconteur and shy guy, official chronicler of Lake Wobegon, creator of the retired radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, subject of three PBS television specials beginning Nov. 29; Ivy Austin, blonde chanteuse with the Betty Boop voice; Richard Muenz, stage and radio actor; Dave Barry, the *Miami Herald's* syndicated humor columnist and guest star; Christine Tschida, radio producer surgically attached to a stopwatch.

SITUATION: Keillor huddles over scripts he finished writing only minutes before. He taps his cheek with a felt-tip pen and arches his bushy brow when Austin recites the opening verse to the 1936 song, *Sing, Baby, Sing*.

KEILLOR: "I was raised by a Harlem mammy!"

BARRY: "Tell him your suggestions for changing it, Ivy."

AUSTIN: "Harlem nanny. East Side granny. South Side Sammy."

KEILLOR: "I don't think it's bad. But if you want to drop it, just change it to something four syllables — great grandmother, my Yiddische mama. It doesn't need to rhyme. New York mama."

TSCHIDA: "You could say, 'I was raised by a Jewish mother.' (In Jewish-mother-ese), 'Well, I got music, nothing worries me.'"

MUENZ: "Change it to 'Eat, Baby, Eat.'"

TIME: Three hours later at the show's first music and technical rehearsal.

PLACE: Cavernous, 50-foot-ceiling, sound-eating reading room of the New York Public Library, latest venue for the show, which is broadcast from unlikely places.

CHARACTERS: Rob Fisher, short-haired music director and leader of The Coffee Club Orchestra, who will work until 3 a.m. composing music to fit Keillor's radio dramas; Tschida, still clocking the show with that damned watch; Scott Rivard, technical director who transforms the show's banter and bon mots into radio waves.

SITUATION: Characters discuss how they make Keillor's vision of this week's theme — "slaves of literature" — come alive.

FISHER: "This is my favorite job. (Rubs eyes swollen with fatigue). I get to work with great musicians, do new things every week. (Yawns) I work so many hours. But I don't want Garrison to know. He wouldn't want to think he's causing people to work so hard. I don't want to inhibit whatever it is that allows him to be creative."

RIVARD: (In a Minnesota twang) "I get the show on the air. The worst thing was at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in our first season. The knob that sent the program to the satellite burned off, and we got one minute of dead air. Garrison was pretty cool. Whatever goes wrong, you take it in stride. It's live radio. And it keeps coming whether you're ready or not."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The show will air Saturday on PBS-TV.