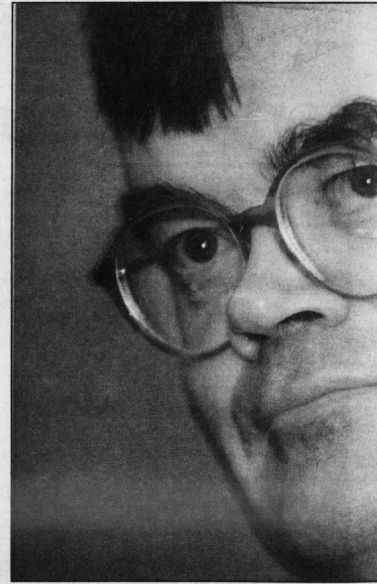


10 WEEKEND • THURSDAY, December 12, 1991

Live!
from New England,
it's ...
**Garrison
Keillor**



Garrison Keillor will broadcast three of his radio shows from the

NEW YORK — Time is running short for Garrison Keillor this particular evening. He is closeted in a small room behind an auditorium where, in a few minutes, he is scheduled to give a reading from his new novel, "WLT: A Radio Romance."

He is good-naturedly fending off questions from an out-of-town interviewer, talking about favorite topics like Minnesota and radio and writing for *The New Yorker*. There are interlopers popping in — people coordinating the reading who are meeting him for the first time, as well as obviously impressed glad-handers who could not resist the temptation to meet Mr. *Prairie Home Companion* himself.

People are tugging at Keillor in all directions and he remains unflappable, somewhat aloof but not unpleasantly so. He breaks from the interview to meet three strangers, repeating their names as he gives a friendly smile. Then he comes back to the interview. Then it's time to go on stage.

Tall and courtly looking in a gray suit with bright red tie, he strides to the microphone. One senses the few hundred or so people in the audience settling in comfortably, readying for the warm, reassuring feelings and gentle laughter they associate with his Lake Wobegon stories. Right away, he

On the air

Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company comes north for the holidays starting Saturday. The program will be broadcast from the Flynn Theatre Saturday, as well as Dec. 21 and 28, 6 to 8 p.m.

Tickets for the performances at the Flynn Theatre have been sold out for weeks, but you can still listen to it on the radio. Vermont Public Radio will broadcast the program at 107.9 in Burlington, 89.5 in Windsor and 88.7 in Rutland on the FM dial. WSLU in Canton, N.Y., at 88.3 FM and WAMC in Albany, N.Y., at 103.9 FM, also will broadcast the program.

establishes the mood with his rich baritone and self-deprecating wit.

"I'm going to read some selections from my new novel," Keillor says. He pauses for effect and continues dryly, "It's a cheesy story about rascally people who knew they were sinners and pretty much enjoyed it to the end."

The place breaks up. For the next 75 minutes, he tells about the rowdy souls who run this misbegotten Minneapolis radio station — the gospel singers who pursue women and whiskey in a decidedly un-Christian manner; the practical jokers who take the

pants off announcers reading the news; the lust-filled actors and actresses who cavort unabashedly off air when they are not spouting pious homilies about virtue and family in one sappy soap opera after another. It's a bravura performance, and he is rewarded with generous applause and, more important, frequent laughter.

"I try to entertain people, to invent and to surprise," he said shortly before the reading. "The verb 'to entertain,' to serious people like ourselves, seems dismissive or trivial, a less noble verb than 'to inform' or 'to educate.'"

"But it's very noble work, and it doesn't always succeed. You always know when you've let the audience down. They come in expecting to feel really good, and you've given them used goods — you've taken them around the block and they sit there with this vague sense of hopefulness instead of being amused."

This night, as in many others, people are clearly amused.

That has been the case since *The New Yorker* first accepted one of his humorous pieces in 1969. Keillor was a struggling 27-year-old writer from Anoka, Minn., longing desperately to be published in the same magazine of his boyhood idols — James

Thurber, A.J. Liebling, E.B. White. The New more stories, and America been the same.

In 1974, after doing *Ole Opry* for *The New Yorker* with the idea of putting a radio show in St. Paul living. Thus began his *Prairie Home Companion*, to 1987 and convinced cans that the best way nights was listening to of arcane musical and commercials and his monologues.

His latest weekly show, *Prairie Home Companion*, which he continues that eclectic storytelling.

Conversing with C experience. As in his manner, he is controlling question comes and guorously in his chair over the other. His while he gathers his pause so long between seems he has finished c Then the eyelids su

"It's a cheesy story about rascally people who knew they were sinners and pret

— Garrison Keillor

THURSDAY, December 12, 1991 • WEEKEND 1 1



JYM WILSON, Free Press

Flynn Theatre in Burlington. The first broadcast is Saturday.

g, S.J. Perelman and Yorker soon took on rican humor has never

g a piece on the Grand w Yorker, he came up ing together his own , Minn., where he was hugely popular "Prai- " which ran from 1974 ed millions of Ameri- ay to spend Saturday this marvelous blend ts, storytellers, mock own Lake Wobegon

now, "American Radio has hosted since 1989, c mix of music and

Garrison Keillor is an writing and stage de- ed and deliberate. The he leans back in- , one long leg crossed eyes frequently close thoughts, and he can en sentences that it or is dozing off.

ddenly open, he looks

at you intently and continues speaking, al- ways throwing out a well-turned phrase or dry observation. His hands accentuate this feeling of contemplation. He strokes his chin, or folds his hands in his lap, or holds them together, pointing skyward, like a churchgoer — Let us now ask Brother Garrison to lead us in prayer.

Keillor emphasizes that "WLT" "is not nostalgic at all for the 'Golden Age of Radio.' I don't think it was that golden. The old radio shows that people collect on tapes and traded at conventions — it's like people collecting plastic purses. It's perverse."

But as Keillor talks about Minnesota, it's clear that the auld sod retains a firm hold.

"More than anything, there are the relatives of mine I miss," he says wistfully. "I miss the way they talked; I miss their voices; and nobody will ever have their voices again. They spoke an English I don't find any more because their English was, of course, of their own experience, their lives.

"It's missing so much. My grandmother, my uncles — their voices, I think, are more the basis for the Lake Wobegon stories than anything you can find in Minnesota now."

— TIM WARREN
The Baltimore Sun

ty much enjoyed it to the end."

r on his new book, "WLT: A Radio Romance"

Rehearsing with the 'American Radio Company'

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, shtick 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.

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 grammy. 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 Yiddish mama. It doesn't need to rhyme. New York mama."

TSCHIDA: "You could say, 'I was raised by a Jewish mother.'" (In Jewish-mother voice). "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.

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 turned 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."

TSCHIDA: "Garrison would like to think this is simple. All these people scurrying around are trying to create that illusion. When we were at Sea World, Garrison wanted to get a sea lion on the show. But sea lions can only be out of the water for a certain number of minutes. Garrison was in the middle of singing when the animal comes lumbering on stage because he had to get wet again in five minutes. Garrison walked over and sang to the sea lion."

TIME: Saturday, 4:30 p.m., 90 minutes before showtime.

PLACE: Austere trustees room at the New York Public Library.

CHARACTERS: Tom Keith, semi-balding sound effects guy who creates chicken clucks and jet engine roars with his mouth. Dave Barry, special guest, who has written a calypso song — "I'm In Love With A Proof-Reading Woman" — and will ad-lib with Keillor about natural childbirth.

SITUATION: First run-through of re-worked scripts, newly composed music and sound-effects-in-progress. The 12-piece Coffee Club Orchestra plays scores orchestrated moments before. Actors scan new lines just faxed from Keillor's up-town apartment. A portable computer printer and copying machine hum in the background.

KEITH: "Sound effects people listen differently to the world. I use the vocals when there's a lot of sounds that come one right after the other, when you don't have time to find the gadget on the table, pick it up, do it and find another. I once told Garrison I couldn't do an elephant trumpeting, so he wrote it in. I still can't do Donald Duck."

BARRY: "I'm most nervous sitting in that rehearsal room, with just the professionals, reading stuff aloud, thinking I'm making a fool of myself. Before the show, Garrison is really focused. You don't want to talk to him. You figure he's thinking about so many things. Not getting feedback is very unnerving. Radio is not what I do. I feel like a fraud being here."

— LISA FAYE KAPLAN
Gannett News Service