

Waiting for Garrison

By Amy Killinger
Free Press Staff Writer

Just a few hours before the American Radio Company airs its first program from the Flynn Theatre Saturday, the cast and crew are waiting on stage. They are waiting for Garrison Keillor, who is entrenched in his hotel room finishing off the show's script. The rehearsal was due to start at 2 p.m., but at 2:30 he still hasn't arrived. He's sent word that he may be awhile.

In between the tangle of microphones, wiring and instrument cases, everybody takes the delay in stride. Bob Elliott of Bob and Ray fame, slouches on the back of the stage. Sound effects wizard Tom Keith highlights his script, noting his speaking and sound parts in different colors. Producer Christine Tschida, a dark-haired woman with a stopwatch hanging around her neck, emanates a restrained urgency as she paces the stage.

When asked whether this is routine, Tschida answers that nothing about the show is routine. "There's no usual," Tschida says. "That's what makes this show unusual."

Tschida decides to rehearse some of the scripts without Keillor in them. Show regulars Adam Bryant and Ivy Austin step up to the microphones at the front of the stage. Bryant runs through his Lotta Waita commercial, using the breakneck pace of old-fashioned radio commercials. Near the end of Bryant's verbal barrage, Keillor strides on stage clutching a handful of paper.

The new scripts quickly are handed out to the cast as Keillor takes off his signature red tie and drapes it over a stool near his mike. It's 3 p.m., three hours before air time.

"OK, let's attempt this here," Keillor says, marking a casual but purposeful mood.

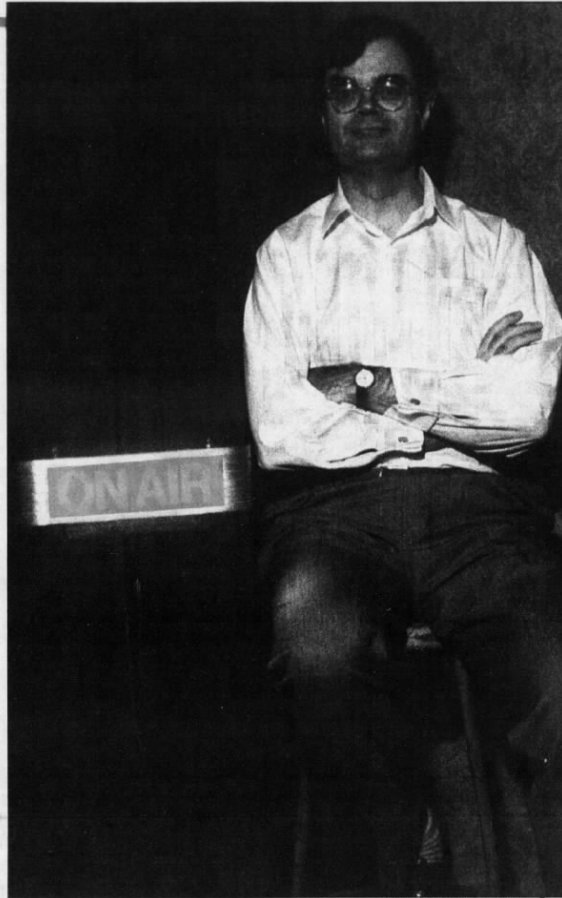
He starts the rehearsal with a skit he wrote for Elliot. It's a strange story of Elliot getting locked out of his apartment on Christmas day. He winds up flying around New York in his Mickey Mouse pajamas. He flies to his sister's apartment, where he knocks on the window. Keith tries to simulate the noise of a window opening with his mouth, but it sounds more like someone sucking down a thick malt.

"Why are you sucking on that glass?" Keillor asks. "You don't know where that glass has been."

The rehearsal proceeds through the other scripts, but in no special order. Tschida times everything. The Lonesome Radio skit, a story of a harried New Yorker going to the monastery of St. Vermont, runs 12½ minutes. That makes Keillor pucker his face in concern then muse out loud about cutting the "aerobics" section.

"I left you 14 minutes so you will be fine," Tschida responds.

Throughout the rehearsal, Keillor offers suggestions to the actors and Keith. He asks Keith to add a squeal to the sound of a car racing up a



ADAM FIRE BRENER, Free Press
Garrison Keillor's shows at the Flynn Theatre in Burlington are sold out. Radio listeners can tune to 107.9 FM in Burlington, 89.5 in Windsor and 88.7 in Rutland (VPR).

ramp in the car crash skit. He cuts lines as they go. After a read-through of a Cafe Boeuf skit, he axes Austin's Midwestern character.

The cast has read through everything except Keillor's monologue, which he doesn't rehearse. Next, he goes over the show's carols with the musicians. They rehearsed Friday and earlier this afternoon without Keillor. He sings some lines from a round he plans to sing with the audience. He hasn't finished writing all the verses.

"I don't know how many verses there are, but there are a goodly number," Keillor says.

The Essex Children's Choir comes on stage and Keillor lumbers off stage where two computers and a copier are set up on a table. He settles in front of the keyboard while the choir sings.

On stage the singers and their director, Constance Price, are visibly nervous about the nearing airtime. They were supposed to rehearse at 4 p.m. Two girls in the front row hold hands. Still, the choir's sound is nothing short of pristine. Tschida tries to calm them down.

"We have a long time before we go on air," Tschida says. "Maybe, if we are lucky, we will have a million and a half people listening to you."

That does nothing for their nerves. The choir runs through four songs. Tschida times each. By about 5 p.m. they are done and Keillor comes back on stage to rehearse the show's opening.

That done, the rehearsal is finished at 5:15 p.m. Even though Keillor admits he doesn't know how his monologue will end, he takes a few minutes to talk to reporters who have sat in on the rehearsal. He also still has to tailor the mishmash of rehearsal into a show, selecting the order of skits and musical numbers with Tschida and music director Rob Fisher.

"You start off in a leisurely way and suddenly you're far behind," Keillor says.

Despite the pressure he's in no apparent rush. Working this close to airtime doesn't rattle Keillor's folksy cool.

"If I had any sense it would."