

Intellectual paradise — listening in on Keillor

Bloomington, Ind., Feb. 22 — Forelock plunging to his eyebrows, bespectacled face mashed into an evil fogggy squint, baggy beige shirt hanging from the long padded body that a crisp black tuxedo will grace in a couple hours, Garrison Keillor peers out into the vast gloom of the Indiana University Auditorium and says:

"It's like church."
And so it is — not just the stout, ornate building itself, but the air of reverence within it.

Any show business star tends to be the sun around which a room orbits, but this star is from a separate, smaller universe, without television or movies or DJs to magnify him or to hang him in the heavens to begin with.

He is in public radio, for pity's sake. He must have done it with talent — with intellect. Anyone savvy enough to be in his presence, even on assignment for a campus newspaper or a tiny FM station, must think himself part of an elite.

When the star turns downstage, with his foam cup of — *What? Coffee? Smart? Beer?* — and utters a sentence, it seems freighted like a parable not meant for the masses, who know only Kevin Costner and Madonna and other false messiahs and un-blessed virgins.

Guessing game

Was he speaking to himself? we wonder. To the headset-wearers and clipboard-wavers swirling around him on stage? To us assorted pass-holders who speak the calm lake of seats?

What is appropriate behavior for a handful of eavesdroppers on a casual rehearsal for a show they'll soon see with a paying crowd of nearly 4,000?

A strange, stifling atmosphere descends. Because it seems tacky to applaud practice, by Austin's pealing rendition of *Can't Get Indiana Off My Mind* echoes in hollow silence. A few barks of laughter greet the basso profundo duet by Garrison and Richard Marx, a bit that will touch off a roar when American Radio Company airs live in a packed house.

The auditorium at Indiana U-

Was built in '41
And designed by a man from
Fort W-a-s-h-i-n-g-t-o-n.

Its capacity, 3,800 seats
C-o-u-s-e-o-u-s-e-o.

It's for opera, grand opera
For immense ladies wearing
big hoo-crris.

All in a day's work

"I sang so well you didn't recognize me," Garrison says.

"I'm missing a note, Maestro, but you'll fill me in," he says.

This portion brought to you by the Kinsey Institute, America's leading authority on sex. . . .

We're in the Yellow Pages under "You Know What." A guy goes out on a date. . . .

"Is that romantic?" he chides the orchestra. "Strings swelling? Yes! Yes!"

Two, three hours of this. Shuffling papers, scratching out three minutes of dialogue in *Lonesome Radio Theatre*. Hovering over sly, petite by Austin through a Hoag Carmichael love song. When we hear it again in the real show, we'll have the satisfaction of the chosen few, but lose the joy of revelation.

Meanwhile, we wait, and hope for our own audience — with the star who creates his own firmament.

As air time nears, we are paraded, single file, into the bowels of the old theater, into a room the width of a fruit cellar, set up with a table and microphone. A frazzled PR man keeps trying for Garrison, bringing Ivy and Richard and the rest of the cast to still our growing.

But Garrison is not snubbing us. Garrison is fusing. He is re-writing and re-writing, tinkering with the saga of Indiana Dan or the *News from Lake Wobegon* to the last minute.

"Sorry," the PR guy finally says. "His door's shut. There's some major writing going on."

We understand. We obey, marching back upstairs and through the auditorium. It is filling and buzzing, like church on Easter.