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COVER STORY

Keillor preserves radio days

By Bob Hoover
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Hear that voice — the "Hel-looo" on the telephone — and everything slows down to match the rhythm of Garrison Keillor. The resonant baritone with its flat vowels and bucolic phrases has carried Keillor on the ether of radio to his own, lofty niche in American culture.

It all started in St. Paul, Minn., in 1974 with "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor's folksie imitation of "The Grand Ole Opry" which grew slowly into a nationwide hit on public radio. Keillor wound up on the cover of Time magazine, wrote two bestsellers based on the show and then ended it in 1987 in a flurry of good and bad publicity.

But, Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot," lives on beyond its original radio home and is now the little town that Garrison Keillor cannot leave.

His New York version of "A Prairie Home Companion" — "The American Radio Company" — will be broadcast live from Heinz Hall tomorrow at 6 p.m. The audience here and across the country will sit patiently through the various acts including a duet with Keillor and Fred Rogers, selections of 1930s jazz by the Coffee Club Orchestra, the mandolin playing of Peter Ostrushko and Keillor's modern versions of old-time radio dramas.

But, that entertainment is just the warmup for the centerpiece of any Keillor appearance — The Monologue or "The news from Lake Wobegon," which will be delivered in the inimitable Keillor style at 7:30 p.m.

The rest of the show is just the icing on the homemade angelfood cake baked by Keillor for his weekly church basement supper talk.

When he began his new show three years ago, he thought of leaving Lake Wobegon to doze in the sun. After all, he had left his home state of Minnesota for the big time of New York and started a novel without a Wobegon link.

However, as they say, "You can take the boy out of the country..." Lake Wobegon returned to live again each week in Keillor's stories which have touched what Lincoln called "the mystic chord of memory" in so many people.

Keillor's detractors sense there's a cynical manipulator at work in his world of "bachelor farmers," Lutheran ministers and the other ordinary people of Lake Wobegon. Writer Hilary Masters believes Keillor is part of the "false nostalgia" wave inspired by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Keillor bristles at those sentiments. "I still have affection for the homespun life, for its sweetness and naive ways," he said. "That life is not dangerous or cynical in any way. Yet, the critics don't always see it like that."

The Minnesota culture in which he grew up, with its rural, Scandinavian roots, is the stream which Keillor has tapped for his half-hour radio dramas of life, bitter and sweet. Despite their isolation and simple life, the residents of Lake Wobegon face all the issues of modern American life with its moral ambiguity, confusion and guilt.

"Somehow, he can just stand up there and reach inside himself to find those wonderful stories," marvels Mark Singer, New Yorker magazine writer and longtime Keillor friend. "He taps into his own experiences like nobody else around today."



Garrison Keillor's "The American Radio Company" airs live from Heinz Hall tomorrow.

Singer said the basis for the monologue is "a single typed page, like a precis of a monologue. Garrison comes out on stage with no notes, nothing in his hands. He spins this incredible story out of a single page."

Keillor, like his Lake Wobegon characters, is taciturn and polite, but he volunteers no personal information. "He is truly very shy," said Singer.

"People who talk too intently about themselves make me very uneasy," Keillor said. "My characters have this bias against self-analysis. I think they may doubt as to what extent it is really possible to look inside themselves."

"It's a sort of Christian view, really, that God looks into your heart and the hearts of everyone and sees what's there. He knows and that's enough. My characters understand that they are not that different from other people. They lack that self-fascination that seems to occupy so many people anymore."

It is the Christian view which is a hallmark of his stories, often leading to a theological debate that could be heard in a divinity school.

"Yes, indeed I do call myself a Christian," Keillor said. "I am a deeply flawed person, but to call myself a Christian is not to claim any particular virtue or merit."

Keillor avoided political issues on "A Prairie Home Companion," steering a moderate course, but he has become more outspoken on "American Radio Company," criticizing the Persian Gulf war and the Bush administration. Still, "I don't want to flog anybody with my views."

His latest novel, "WLT," with its sexual content, also broke with his genteel image and "bitingly upset a good many readers," he said. "I wrote them back and told them that a writer's hardest job is to amuse himself and that's what I

did. I think they understood. At least, I hope so."

For his next book, it's back to Lake Wobegon. "I'm just putting around with it now, maybe thinking of sending some folks from Lake Wobegon to Europe for a look around. It will be a good excuse for me to go visit Denmark again."

Denmark is one of those interview areas best avoided right now, as Keillor is in the midst of divorcing his Danish wife. The conversation should center on tomorrow's show, he gently insists.

"Well, we'll do a little bit of Stephen Foster's songs, let Fred Rogers sing and then, I'd like to sing a duet with him."

Oh, there will be the news from Lake Wobegon, but as of late Wednesday, Keillor had not started to work on it.

Keillor also talks briefly about his future personal plans: Building a house in Wisconsin — just across the river from Minnesota and sort of casting back there. "He will keep his New York apartment, though. I still feel like a tourist here, but New York's a great town. It's one of the few truly American cities left, just like Pittsburgh. Places with a character and culture all their own. In fact, you would hardly need fiction if you lived in Pittsburgh," he said, adding:

"You know, the sun sets so early here in New York. Right now, it's casting a beautiful orange glow over New Jersey."

That's a shy radio person's way of saying, "So long until tomorrow." So, I did the same.

If you're going

There are no seats left for the American Radio Company performance at Heinz Hall. The show will be on WQED-FM at 6 p.m.

BOOK REVIEW

Emotions waft through 'WLT'

WLT: A RADIO ROMANCE by Garrison Keillor. Viking. \$21.95. 401 pages.

By Bob Hoover
Book Editor, Post-Gazette

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now, put the foundations under them."

Henry David Thoreau's exhortation to follow the imagination introduces Garrison Keillor's first "real" novel, an original story separate from the "Prairie Home Companion" radio show world which was the source of his earlier works.

Keillor believes in the power of radio to build castles in the air so it's not surprising that "WLT" is the story of a radio station in Minneapolis, just across the Mississippi

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WHAT'S HOT

Movies in Pittsburgh

- Wayne's World (10 screens) \$75,000
- Stoof or My Mom... (8) ... \$75,000
- Memoirs of a Geisha (10) \$50,000
- Fried Green Tomatoes (9) ... \$49,000
- Medicine Man (9) ... \$40,000
- Final Analysis (9) ... \$35,000
- Rocks the Cradle (9) ... \$33,000
- Father of the Bride (10) ... \$15,000
- Radio Flyer (5) ... \$40,000
- JFK (6) ... \$16,000

Source: Figures are estimates of business done in week ending yesterday.

Theater in Pittsburgh

- Cats, Benedum (93%) ... \$20,874
 - Three Sisters, Public (88%) ... 3,309
 - Miss Evers' Boys, City (83%) ... 1,278
 - Nunsense, Sher. St. Sq. (90%) ... 404
- Total paid admissions at city's professional theaters for the week ending last Sunday.

Videocassette rentals

- Thelma and Louise
 - The Rocketeer
 - Regarding Henry
 - Pain Break
 - Hot Shots
 - Double Impact
 - Midstayers
 - City Slickers
 - Jungle Fever
 - Dying Young
- Source: Billboard magazine nat'l. survey

Records — singles

- Mr. Big ... To Be With You
 - Right Said Fred ... I'm Too Sexy
 - Michael Jackson Remember the Time
 - Vanessa Williams ... Save the Best
 - Eric Clapton ... Tears in Heaven
 - Shanice Wilson ... I Love Your Smile
 - Atlantic Starr ... Masterpiece
 - Tevin Campbell ... Tell Me What ...
 - Prince ... Diamonds and Pearls
 - Amy Grant ... Good For Me
- Source: Billboard magazine nat'l. survey

Records — albums

- Garth Brooks ... Ropin' the Wind
 - Natalie Cole ... Unforgettable
 - Nirvana ... Nevermind
 - Bonnie Raitt ... Luck of the Draw
 - Garth Brooks ... No Fences
 - Michael Jackson ... Dangerous
 - Michael Bolton ... Time, Love ...
 - Boyz II Men ... Coolio/high harmony
 - Color Me Badd ... C.M.B.
 - Metallica ... Metallica
- Source: Billboard magazine nat'l. survey

Books — fiction

- Rising Sun ... Michael Crichton
- The Road to Omaha ... Robert Ludlum
- Hideaway ... Dean K. Koontz
- Scarlett ... Alexandra Ripley
- Vox ... Nicholson Baker
- Guardian Angel ... Sara Paretsky
- Private Eyes ... Jonathan Kellerman
- Byrones ... LaVyle Spencer
- Fugitive Nights ... Joseph Wambaugh
- McNally's Secrets ... Lawrence Sanders

Books — non-fiction

- A Return to Love ... M. Williamson
 - Revolution from Within Gloria Steinem
 - Den of Thieves ... James B. Stewart
 - Awaken the Giant ... Anthony Robbins
 - Backlash ... Susan Faludi
 - More Wealth ... Charles Glavin
 - Unto the Sons ... Guy Talese
 - How to Satisfy ... N. Hayden
 - Me ... Katharine Hepburn
 - Memoires ... Ralph Emery
- Source: Publisher's Weekly