

For a night, Pittsburgh enters Lake Wobegon

By Adrian McCoy

For The Pittsburgh Press

Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company is something of a lost art — a live radio variety show. It makes its first Pittsburgh stop Saturday for a sold-out show at Heinz Hall.

The monologues are usually written at the last minute, with Keillor sometimes working on them literally up until show time. Some of what comes out isn't even in the script. Those improvised moments "are the best ones," Keillor says.

Keillor prefers the mystique of radio to the more workaday medium of television. Even with live radio, he works to maintain that mystique.

"The people sit in the dark and I'm not so much aware of them. We don't worry too much about what the show looks like. I just do it as a radio show. A radio show is free and unself-conscious. You can walk over and talk to the guys in the band, or you can walk down and talk to the audience if you feel like it.

"If TV does anything impromptu, it requires an army of cameramen and technicians to capture the event, whereas radio is really a great seat-of-your-pants enterprise. You can change direction at the last minute. That's good for a person like me."

The American Radio Company lineup includes music, comedy sketches and Keillor's signature "News From Lake Wobegon" monologues. There's "Lonesome Radio Theatre," brought to you by Guy's Shoes, whose major selling points are that they come pre-scuffed and will "probably fit."

The live shows are geared to whatever town or city they happen to be in. A recent broadcast from Clear Lake, Iowa, site of Buddy Holly's final performance and fatal plane crash, featured renditions of Holly's tunes. Another, from Bloomington, Ind., included a musical tribute to native son Hoagy Carmichael.

The Pittsburgh show hasn't jelled completely, and probably won't until sometime Saturday. Keillor is sorting through impressions of past visits to Pittsburgh — a place that strikes him as "exotic."

"Where I come from, we tend to tear down things



Garrison Keillor likes the personal nature of radio

and put up something new. The Scandinavians are not noted for being sentimental about old buildings. Pittsburgh is a city that seems remarkably preserved. And not only the sort of buildings that often get saved — the mansions and the churches — but also working buildings like factories and warehouses."

He promises to "tell what has to be told about Lake Wobegon" and "make fun of whoever is still running for president." Guests for Saturday's concert include Fred Rogers' "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Pittsburgh is one stop on a 15-city tour. Next season, American Radio Company won't be on the road as much. Keillor plans to do eight shows from New York and hopes to relocate the broadcast to one site for four or five months.

"Traveling as much as we've been doing the last

Garrison Keillor's
American Radio Company

Where: Heinz Hall.
When: 6 p.m. Saturday.
Tickets: Sold out.

couple of years is not conducive to writing and telling stories. Most of the stories I would tell now have to do with airports."

All the tour stops are considered as candidates for that residency, but Keillor declines to say if Pittsburgh — or any of the others — are frontrunners.

Keillor bought a one-way ticket out of Lake Wobegon five years ago when "Prairie Home Companion" ended. The time and space between him and his home state make it tough to tune in the ideas that inspired the Wobegon stories, and he's thinking about returning to Minnesota.

"I think I run low, and that's another reason to be in one place. It's also a good reason to visit my relatives more often than I do. They are my great sources, as they well know — they clam up. But I still pick up quite a bit from them.

"The thing I fear is that the world I describe is really a long time ago and may not exist anymore."

If so, he may follow the example of a writer he admires, Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose stories deal with Jewish village life in pre-Holocaust Poland. "Singer continued to write lovingly about this world, making new stories about it after it had disappeared from the face of the earth."

Keillor is working on two books, a novel about Lake Wobegon and a children's story. The latter he describes as "a poem about a cat who is dissatisfied with life and who goes off to live the high life of a famous, and in time wealthy cat, and then returns home, having learned its lesson."

Although Saturday's event is sold out, listeners can pick up the broadcast at 6 p.m. on WQED-FM (89.3).