

Garrison Keillor brings radio to the stage, fits show to Idaho

By Julie Fanselow
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BOISE — In our visual, totally televised world, little is left to the imagination. That is what makes "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company" such a delight.

"I went into radio because it was my dream since I was a little boy to be invisible," Keillor told one interviewer. And to another: "There's no romance on television; it's just the Wal-Mart of the mind. Radio is infinitely sexier."

So what happens when even Keillor is live, on stage and there before your very eyes? I wasn't sure what to expect last Saturday when Keillor brought his show to the Morrison Center at Boise State University as part of the radio company's 1992-1993 tour.

Sure, I'd seen pictures of the tall, bespectacled, red-socked Keillor. Everyone in the sold-out Morrison Center knew exactly who he was when he walked out on stage for a 15-minute "warm-up" before the broadcast began.

But it's that melodious butter-scotch baritone voice that really defines Keillor ... that, and his warm, witty and wry looks at life in the heartland.

Precisely at 4 p.m., the Coffee Club Orchestra played the show's theme. Keillor tapped his toe in time as he sang the familiar words:

"I hear that old piano from down the avenue,

I smell the onions, I look around for you

My sweet old someone coming through that door

It's Saturday and the band is playing

Honey, could we ask for more?"

I felt compelled to close my eyes and just listen, like I do most Saturdays at 4. But there were other people on stage with Keillor. Sure, they've always been there, but I'd never really paid attention.

There was Ivy Austin, a small woman in white blouse, black miniskirt, hose and heels who looked like her every word would recall Betty Boop. But when she opened her mouth, I realized this is the woman responsible for a myriad of familiar American Radio Company characters, from wise-cracking Brooklynites to everyone's dear old Mom.

There was Richard Muenz, who delivered a variety of barnyard voices



Courtesy of American Radio Company

In the age of video, Garrison Keillor's voice, imagination make him a star.

es during the opening rendition of "Don't Fence Me In," as well as the wonderfully fake French accent when he spoke of "Bwah-zay, Eeedahoo, one of zee greatest French cities of America."

And there was Tom Keith, sound effects man extraordinaire, who created the cacophony that filled out the show ... meowing cats, crashing airplanes, footsteps, coyote calls and so on.

Keillor was there, too, of course. He wrote most of the material, and once, during his famous "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue, he had the stage to himself.

But often, he wandered off into the wings, letting his company carry the show. So I ended up just as impressed with Keillor's co-stars as with the star himself.

Keillor worked a lot of Idaho lore into the show. Predictably, there were plenty of potato jokes, including a funny skit about the naming of Tater Tots, and many mentions of

the state's natural beauty.

The skits also made several mentions of Lewis and Clark. Keillor told how the explorers met an Indian guide who delivered a child while leading the Easterners across our rugged state, and of the affectionate Shoshoni Indians, who constantly hugged the visiting white men. "Friendly, embracing men and women who give birth while backpacking ... still here in Idaho, I'm sure," Keillor said.

But modern Idaho was well represented, too, mostly by folksinger Rosalie Sorrels. I couldn't help but think while she was singing how many people across the nation were marveling at her voice. The national exposure should do well-deserved wonders for her record sales.

All in all, it was a rare and thoroughly enjoyable opportunity to see — not just hear — live radio in action. Next time I listen to "American Radio Company," I will appreciate it all the more.