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Prodigal son comes back to the prairie

By Noel Holston
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REVIEW

Given Garrison Keillor's affection for Biblical references, it's tempting to characterize Saturday's broadcast of his "American Radio Company" from the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., as the second coming of Lake Wobegon's prodigal son.

More than five years have passed since Keillor decided to stop production of "A Prairie Home Companion," the folksy radio variety show through which he had become a national star, and headed east in search of peace and writing time.

More than three years have passed since he got homesick for radio and launched the more cosmopolitan "American Radio Company" in New York City.

Now he's back where he started. Although Keillor has broadcast "American Radio Company" from Minnesota venues several times in the past three years, Saturday's show was his first as a resident Midwesterner (he has a cabin in western Wisconsin) since June 1987.

This may not be cause for killing a fatted calf, but it was reason enough for midwesterners to eat their hot dish Saturday with the radio tuned to Minnesota Public Radio.

Saturday's show, for which bleachers were added to the 916 permanent seats in response to the heavy ticket demand, was the first of six consecutive broadcasts from the World Theater.

After that, Keillor will take the show

to New York for four weeks and perform a Christmas show from Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Then, after a brief vacation, he'll return to the World Theater for six more shows in January and February. It's probably safe to assume competition for tickets to those shows will be less heated.

After another road trip, including a month in New York, Keillor will bring "American Radio Company" back to St. Paul for four more broadcasts, capping its longest season to date — 32 performances.

"We have three nice runs at the World, at the beginning, kind of the middle and at the end of the season," said Christine Tschida, the show's producer. "So it continually comes back to the World Theater and really establishes it as our home base."

Tschida said listeners this season should expect more emphasis on Keillor's Lake Wobegon monologues and a slightly different approach to the musical content, though three-season veteran Rob Fisher will still be in charge.

"We had a lot of shows with a big orchestra last year, the Coffee Club Orchestra, and the musicians are terrific," Tschida said. "But a lot of them are based in New York, so we're going to be using some local musicians and we're going to be going a little bit smaller and simpler. Garrison likes to sing, and he feels his voice is probably



Garrison Keillor

better in front of a simpler instrumentation."

Another opening in the season opener, Keillor will be working with a six-piece band, guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins and a 12-member choir from Plymouth Congregational Church. Support in the sketches will come from actress-singer Ivy Austin, the last remaining member of the Broadway Local Theater Company that Keillor assembled in 1989, and sound-effects whiz Tom Keith, an indispensable contributor to both of Keillor's radio series.

Many of the shows will have themes. Tschida said that, among other things, Keillor "wants to do a Bean Festival and a Rhubarb Pie Festival, with an

actual bake-off." Keillor and other writers develop those themes in quirky response to "where you're going to be, what time of year it is or what holiday is coming up," she said. "For instance, Saxophone Day is the first weekend in November. So we thought, well, we'd better book a saxophone player on that date. Then it also came up that it's the anniversary of (existentialist writer) Albert Camus' birthday, so Garrison said maybe we ought to do a segment on 'sax-istentialism.'"

This weekend, however, they kept it simple. The theme of the season opener was "the season opener and (getting) back to the World Theater." And not a moment too soon, some would say.