



File Photo

## Woeful days in Lake Wobegone

### Minnesotans give chilly response to the return of Keillor, their prodigal son

**By NEAL KARLEN**  
Times News Service

**G**arrison Keillor smiled as he listened to the ovation swelling from the capacity crowd shoehorned into the World Theater in downtown St. Paul.

Keillor — recently repatriated to Minnesota after a bitter, self-imposed exile — knew, however, not to acknowledge the applause from this audience, which had braved 30-below-zero wind chill to witness his live national radio broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Those unfamiliar with Minnesota's sometimes hate-hate relationship with its most famous son might assume that a high-decibel din was a salute to Keillor. A homeboy, he had conquered the country's airwaves and stood at the center of a \$100 million-a-year media industry and mail-order company that relied heavily on selling yuppie gawgaws based on his stage persona: a humble yarn-spinner from fictional Lake Wobegon, Minn.

"A Prairie Home Companion" had grown from being a local phenomenon to a program with a national audience of 1.9 million listeners tuned in to 284 public stations. His loyal audience, cutting across several beloved demographics, has given him ratings more enduring than Arthur Godfrey's and book sales bigger than Howard Stern's.

The critics have been equally kind; in a 1985 Time magazine cover story Keillor was dubbed "a radio bard" whose "storytelling approaches the quality of Mark Twain's." Recently, Keillor was granted the honor of being brutally satirized on "The Simpsons."

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After Sunday night's program, the 51-year-old humorist would take his live radio show on tour, ending with four weeks at Town Hall in New York beginning on Saturday. (In New York, his program is heard at 6 p.m. on WNYC-FM on Saturdays and repeated on WNYC-AM at 2 p.m. on Sundays.) But though this would be his last performance in Minnesota for several months, Keillor knew he wasn't getting any home-field advantage.

On the contrary. Standing at his microphone, the gangly 6-foot-4-inch host understood that this rousing ovation could not possibly be for him. So he turned to greet James Earl Jones, who had just walked out of the wings. Holding a script, Keillor had written, Jones beamed at his reception. "This is a great audience you have here!" he said into Keillor's ear.

"For you," the host replied. "Not me."

Indeed, Jones went on to narrate a voice-of-the-Bible tale of Minnesota in February.

Though the intonations were vintage Jack Jafferson in "The Great White Hope," the words were clearly those of the man standing a few feet away.

"And it was February and it was cold and the snow piled up and the people murmured against it, saying, 'Why has the Lord God sent this plague of February upon us? Let us return to the desert ... Palm Springs, two weeks.'"

When he finished, Jones received an ovation. "Minnesotans, bless their hearts, are an earnest people," Keillor said later. "They believe the harder that they clap for James Earl Jones, the more it demonstrates they're not racists."

After the ovation came the usual eclectic mix of live music. Sprinkled between were mock commercials for establishments ranging from Bertha's Kitty Boutique to Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If they don't have it, you can probably get along without it").

**See Page 4: Keillor**

