

## A bit of high-tech magic brings Keillor's small-town world to life

By Elizabeth Maupin

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

A bright red-orange light shines insistently from stage left at Carr Performing Arts Centre: "ON AIR."

It is 6 p.m. on Saturday night, and *A Prairie Home Companion* is coming to you from Orlando, live.

Across the stage, an electronic console the size of a small Mazda spews forth yards and yards of thick red and blue wires. Not far away, in the wings, two computers, a printer and a copy machine emit their quiet hums, and just outside the building the white arc of a satellite dish reaches toward the skies.

But onstage, all that high-tech equipment somehow fades from the mind. All that matters, at 6 p.m. this Saturday night, are the deep, mellow voice of the tall man

standing center stage and the insistence of that bright red-orange light.

Listeners to public radio stations all over the country tune in to *A Prairie Home Companion* just to hear that voice — the voice of host Garrison Keillor, who began this anachronism of a live radio show in St. Paul, Minn., 20 years ago and has been at it almost ever since.

The 1.8 million people who listen to Keillor's show tune in for a decidedly old-fashioned mixture of bluegrass and gospel music, comedy skits, the commercials of such imaginary sponsors as Guy's Shoes and Bertha's Kitty Boutique and a 20-minute monologue known as "The News From Lake Wobegon," in which Keillor simply unleashes that remarkable voice and talks.

Those at home with their radios hear nothing but low-tech music, low-tech com-

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begins Monday.

to do to please us.

## Show keeps changing right up until air time

**KEILLOR** from A-1

edy, low-tech voice. But even *A Prairie Home Companion*, which makes its home in St. Paul, is on the road to such cities as Orlando more often than not. And even a public-radio show has to move like a well-oiled, much-pampered machine.

About two dozen people travel with *A Prairie Home Companion*, and at 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon, nearly every one of them is either on the stage or in the wings on either side of it. There is one notable exception: Keillor, who writes for most of the two days before a show, is nowhere in sight.

On this Saturday, Scottish folk singer Jean Redpath is singing center stage, her rehearsal costume a cotton blouse with the shirttail out and a pair of nondescript cotton pants. A sound engineer at a console in the middle of the theater is talking by headset to another on the stage. Musicians, actors and technicians wander quietly in and out.

Just off the stage, a woman in a stylish beige suit and pearls sits intently at a notebook computer. Christine Tschida, the show's producer, whose responsibility it is to make sure this umpteenth *Prairie Home Companion* moves successfully from beginning to end.

Crowding the stage, placed every which way atop two red Oriental rugs, are a jumble of microphones, music stands, sound monitors, musical instruments and sound-effects equipment, the property of sound-effects whiz Tom Keith. The only nod to stage scenery is a hanging sign that says "Cafe Boeuf," one of the show's fictional sponsors. The stage lights are off, and a harsh, unflattering half-light fills the house.

There is no fanfare at 3 p.m. when Keillor arrives, Styrofoam coffee cup in hand, a lank, slightly rumped figure in a white shirt and black pants. The musical rehearsal continues, and the star simply joins in, singing with his hands in his pockets, his voice a mild bass.

Musicians and actors run through an ad for the Fearmonger Shop, which is pushing alligator repellent for visitors to Florida ("Practically odorless!"); a story about a duct-tape salesman moving to Orlando to run a theme park called Adhesive World; and a skit about Valentine's Day that leads into an ad for Be-

Bop-a-Ree-Bop Rhubarb Pie.

"This isn't playing as well as it needs to," Keillor says quietly at the end of the skit. "We need to trim it a lot or it needs to go bang bang bang."

"It should go bang bang bang," someone else says. The skit doesn't appear in that night's show.

The piano tuner arrives at 5 p.m., and the rehearsal peters out. Cast and crew members wander off. Keillor sits next to Tschida at another notebook computer, both of them silent, both of their faces absolutely intent. A few minutes later he's leaning over the copy machine, making changes in pencil on his script.

At 5:20 p.m., 40 minutes before show time, ticketholders are being seated in the theater. Keillor is still in the wings, handing his changes to Tschida and director Dan Rowles. "How did this first half get so short?" he asks.

Tschida says she pulled out a couple of numbers. The three of them huddle.

"I don't know where the monologue's going tonight," he says.

Yet when the red-orange "ON AIR" light goes on, it seems Keillor knows exactly where everything is going.

He gives Orlando a lot of gentle pokes in the ribs: Disney World, he says, is a powerful enemy of family values, with Mickey and Minnie cohabitating unmarried and Donald running around without his pants.

Jean Redpath, Robin and Linda Williams, Kate Mackenzie and the other musicians perform precisely on cue. Keillor and the actors do their skits. And Tom Keith, by tearing apart a Styrofoam plate, imitates the sound of a man's bones going through a wringer washing machine.

But it's at 7:20 p.m., give or take a minute or two, when the show gets to its heart.

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town," Keillor says, and then he tells a long story about a man named Harold, a Norwegian who moves to Florida and finally on to his heavenly rest.

Keillor sits on a red stool and then he gets up and paces, stark in his dark suit, his voice soft and reticent, speaking of Norwegian farmers in the northern Minnesota woods.

Two dozen people wait and watch backstage. Nearly 2,500 sit motionless in the theater, and another 1.8 million or so nationwide.

The computers hum, the satellite dish beams, yet *A Prairie Home Companion* once again comes down to this: A voice and a microphone and that insistent red-orange light.



Keillor