

Keillor ready to air pretty good show

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GARRISON KEILLOR can spin a tale taller than his 6-foot frame. "People love stories about themselves," he says. "They like to hear themselves talked about so long as the storyteller is honorable and tells the truth, but not too much of it."

The popular down-home humorist, known for his bedside voice and tales of the fictional Lake Wobegon, is in Billings today to broadcast his nationwide show at the Alberta Bair Theater.

Long sold out, the show will feature the tradition "local act" segment. Keillor helps select the talent himself, and chose popular Montana poet and philosopher Wally McRae to share the stage and banter with him.

Yellowstone Public Radio and its station manager, Marvin Granger, were instrumental in arranging the show's Billings broadcast.

Keillor says he tries to orient his shows to the region in which he's performing, so 2 million listeners will hear something about life in the West today when Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast to 340 public radio stations.

The two-hour variety show is a potpourri of comedy sketches, Keillor's signature monologue, "The News From Lake Wobegon," and music of all kinds.

Also on tap today is a musical act, "The Jo Miller/Laura Love Connection," a two-woman act described by k.d. lang as "the Roches meet the Sons of the Pioneers." Backed by their own band, they combine African and Caribbean rhythms and traditional music for a style they've dubbed "Afro/Celtic."

Joining them is humorist Ian Frazier, praised by Newsweek a few years ago for his "gentle, laid-back befuddlement." His first best-seller was "Dating Your Mom" and he has been compared to such heavy hitters



Garrison Keillor will broadcast "Prairie Home Companion" live from Billings today.

as Twain and Thurber. The show's regulars — sound effects wizard Tom Keith, and Keillor's own band — will also dress the stage, along with other Wobegon denizens such as Chris Forth and Tim Russell.

The show quickly sold out — at \$35, \$27 and \$20 a seat — after tickets went on sale in early

spring, with public radio backers getting first crack at the 1,500-seat ABT house.

Granger said Friday that the Billings station stands to make about \$7,500 for its endowment fund from the reception that follows the show. Caterer Tom Nelson is preparing hundreds of Continental-style hors d'oeuvres,

including salmon and asparagus spears, Black Angus tenderloin on baguettes, dim sum, chicken pizza with walnuts.

Reception host is the Western Heritage Center and 300 people paid \$40 each, Granger said.

"Unfortunately, we're absolutely at our maximum for both the show and the reception," Granger said. "In fact, we had to get permission from the city to spill out onto the front yard at the reception."

Keillor will attend the party, something he doesn't always do, "to mingle and pay homage to his friend Pat Williams," Granger said. Keillor has appeared at several Williams fund-raisers and campaign booster sessions here.

The show draws a circle for Granger, who hired Keillor at Minnesota Public Radio back in the mid-1960s. But the two gentle-voiced men haven't really seen one another for 20 years, Granger said. One of his favorite Keillor lines is "I have a great face for radio."

Fans of "Prairie Home" can expect the Keillor wit as he visits his usual stomping grounds: Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Guy's Shoes ("Try them on; they're no worse than any other shoes") and more.

Keillor said his custom is to start writing the show Thursday morning. He gets the actors together Friday and runs through the script with the music director.

Fans remember that in 1988, the show got to be too much for him and after 13 years of "Prairie Home" he signed off.

"I was tired, but I really needed only a summer off. We were doing 48 shows back then."

He now does 33 shows a year, which he considers "more reasonable for a season."

Inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame, he was lauded as "contemporary radio's most inventive humorist."

Ticket holders should be in their seats at 3:45 p.m. The radio audience may tune in at the usual 4 p.m. on 91.7 FM in Billings and many translators throughout the region.