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Garrison Keillor Returns to the Manhattan Prairie

By GEORGE VECSEY
The New York Times
NEW YORK — Every year at this time, Garrison Keillor returns to a comfortable small-town environment that personifies his radio institution, 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

It is not Lake Wobegon, his familiar town on the Minnesota plains. Instead, he hunkers down for a month in his apartment on Manhattan's Upper West.

"People from the Upper Midwest are always astonished how easily life is lived here," Keillor said the other day. "You can get almost anything you need in two blocks, instead of driving 10 miles and getting out of your car four times if you live in a bungalow in South Minneapolis."

Keillor admits that "the radio audience is dubious" about his show's emanating from the big city, but the third of four New York installments will be heard Saturday at 6 p.m., live, around the country on public radio stations. (The show is broadcast on Vermont Public Radio Saturdays at 6 p.m. and repeated Sundays at noon.)

The show will originate from Town Hall on West 43rd Street in Manhattan, but all the tickets are long gone.

"New York is very important to us," Keillor said. "We come here mainly for the live audience. New Yorkers are not daunted by being the only two people in the theater who think something is funny. When you hear somebody laughing heartily, it helps. It's a very sharp audience, people who are there to have a good time, not many who come out of obligation, because their company bought tickets or they want to support public radio."

Keillor has had a long love affair with New York, and he even "retired" from radio and moved to Manhattan, where he wrote books and essays. Ultimately, he produced a version of "A Prairie Home Companion" from the city and then returned the show to its roots in St. Paul — with frequent road trips to San Diego or Nashville or wherever, but particularly New York.

"I always felt he'd be back," said Scott Rivard, the technical director. "He's addicted to it. New York gets his creative juices going."

Keillor explained: "New York is an unpopular symbol. When we did the show from here as 'The American Radio Company,' it didn't really sit well with our audiences. I still hear about it, when people get over their politeness."

Keillor knows the city. Last year, five minutes after the show, my wife and I spotted Keillor already being escorted to his table at a Venetian restaurant, Osteria al Doge, on the next block.

"I'm still a tourist in New York," Keillor insisted recently. "I walk around stunned and charmed at the same time. I'm not a true New Yorker. I never came to New York to 'make it.' I came here for three weeks in 1995 and discovered it was better to be broke in Minnesota."

Keillor says he does not change the show for its New York run. There are the popular cowboy skits and the Guy Noir detective skits, which could come from anywhere, and "whenever we're on the road, we always use local references."

Early in the first New York show, on Nov. 16, Keillor sang a parody of "Hush Little Baby (Don't Say a Word)," listing all the good things Daddy could provide in New York: Botticelli, Cafe



Garrison Keillor gives his "News From Lake Wobegon" monologue during a visit to Middlebury College in the early 1980s.

des Artists, Tiffany's, Nathan Lane, etc. etc. As a contrast, he described mid-November in the Twin Cities, when, he claimed, people stop going to chamber music concerts and start herding the cattle into the living room out of the wintry blasts.

For the first show, New York was the scene of Keillor's linchpin monologue, the weekly news from the fictional Lake Wobegon.

Hunched on a high stool at center stage, wearing a tuxedo and bright red socks, his eyes often closed, Keillor recited, with no notes, the tale of a man from Lake Wobegon who had come to New York to dance in an avant-garde troupe.

Now, with his knees failing and his career nearly over, the man had brought his parents to watch him dance his last performance, only to discover he would portray a flower, dancing naked.

Not only that, but his parents would

stay in his tiny apartment, where he had rented out the only bedroom to a woman named Sheryl, who had offered to let him share the bedroom. "As it happens, he is not attracted to women," Keillor noted, so the dancer declined Sheryl's offer, opting not to even try to fool his parents.

Toward the end of the monologue, Keillor closed his eyes and intoned, "Artists are the lilies of the field that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount," and then he recited the sermon. ("I happen to remember the verse from Sunday school, although I think I got it slightly wrong on the show," he admitted later.) He talked about the dancer's vulnerability and courage as he prepared to play host to his parents from Lake Wobegon.

"I did a lot of research with a friend of mine who knows the dance field," said Keillor, who expected that the monologue would bring critical mail "from people who are saddened in

ways they cannot express."

But in Town Hall, I saw several people nodding their heads, as if this were a tale about people from their own particular village. (Last week, he told a Minnesota Thanksgiving fable about a turkey that developed a crush on a large dog.)

Another value of playing New York for four weeks is the amount of talent available. "We usually do a little snooping for something special," said Christine Tschida, the show's producer, a Minnesotan who fell in love with New York when she worked at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for seven years.

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appearance by the mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer and the soprano Marie McLaughlin of the Metropolitan Opera. ("I don't think they would have come out to Minnesota just to sing a few songs," Keillor said.)

Saturday's guests include the cabaret singer Susannah McCorkle and a Canadian musical group, the Rankin Family, as well as surprise guests from "Prairie" friends and alumni now making it big near Broadway.

Then there are the skits Keillor churns out from home, faxing them Friday afternoon to the theater. The cast includes two popular Twin Cities radio hosts, Tom Keith, the versatile sound-effects man, and Tim Russell, man of many voices, who recently per-

formed an "Oedipus" parody, switching from George Bush to Jack Nicholson to Edith Barker (Jean Stapleton) to Ross Perot to Henry Kissinger to Rogers. Chris Forth, another Twin Cities regular, and Alice Playten, a Broadway veteran, did the female voices.

Prairie fans all have their favorite Keillor moments. Mine came on Jan. 26, 1995, when Keillor delivered a rhythmic, thumping raspberry about the new speaker of the House's threats to cut off public financing for social programs and the arts.

"New, New, a strange young coot, with a gleam in his eye and a smirk on his snoot, and now he's the speaker, and boy can he speak, like a big balloon with a very slow leak."

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