

Behind the scenes with Garrison Keillor

By Debby Morse

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SAN FRANCISCO — Showtime is just over two hours away, and there's Garrison Keillor on the stage at Masonic Auditorium, rehearsing skits and songs with his co-conspirators to an audience of essentially no one.

Aides roam the aisles with clipboards, introductions are made, directions given, backstage doors slam, and still the unflappable host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" concentrates on his material, refining and polishing right up to the very last minute.

"Let's scratch Rush Limbaugh in the first line," says Keillor, and his fellow actors, Sue Scott and Tim Russell, instantly comply. "After Paul Simon, scratch Saul Steinberg." Keillor is fine-tuning a comical list of names to be read rapid-fire by Russell.

The live performance will be taped for airing to more than 2 million listeners before a sold-out audience of 3,000, and already avid ticket-holders are congregating outside.

On stage, Tom Keith, the sound effects man, rearranges his noisemakers on a table.

To imitate the sound of footsteps crunching through snow — a common effect for this folksy radio program based in the fictional Minnesota town of Lake

■ "A Prairie Home Companion" airs on KUOP-FM, 91.3, at 3 p.m. Saturdays and is repeated at 6 p.m. Sundays.

Wobegon — Keith squeezes a taped-up box of cornstarch. "Gotta keep it taped so it doesn't explode," he says.

An hour before showtime, performers and staff are herded downstairs, because the audience is clamoring to be seated.

A catered lunch is being served. "You're in San Francisco now," says a server, dishing out tofu kebabs, salmon on a bed of spinach, porcini mushroom and asparagus lasagne, and romaine salad with hearts of palm.

With 15 minutes to go before taping, performers have changed into spiffy clothes. Soon, the band is onstage, warming up the audience with spirited doo-wack-a-doo tunes. Tension is replaced by calm determination.

And we have liftoff.

Next thing you know, two robust hours have passed in the twinkling of an eye, the audience is roaring, and an exhilarated cast is taking final bows.

The producer says, "You're welcome to hang around. We just have to pack up now."

And off they go to Portland, for the next stop in their traveling show.