

YOUR PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

Garrison Keillor may not consider himself a master storyteller, but the success of "A Prairie Home Companion" proves fans think otherwise.

Self-effacing Wobegon storyteller ending season right here in Kansas City

By BRIAN McTAVISH
Arts & Entertainment Writer

T ry telling Garrison Keillor that he's "America's finest storyteller" and the skilled yarn-spinner disputes the mantle outright.

The tout describing Keillor in his own publicity materials rings hollow to the native Minnesotan, who has written 10 books, appeared regularly in *The New Yorker* magazine and is the long-running host of public radio's acclaimed weekly rural-flavored variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

"It's a promotional phrase," Keillor said of the "finest storyteller" tag. "Nobody would ever use that phrase, except the people who are paid to come up with phrases like that."

Keillor was speaking by phone the other day in advance of his show's season-ending Fourth of July broadcast at Starlight Theatre in Kansas City.

"Writers accept promotion as a part of the business they're in," he said. "But you don't take it seriously."

Since 1974 Keillor has taken seriously his radio show, most of which he writes himself. The show's home base is the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul, Minn., but the program hits the road for about half of its 33 live broadcasts a year featuring comedy skits, music, authors and other guests. By public radio standards, it's also a big success. As many as 2.5 million fans tune in each week on 433 public radio stations across the country.

Among the program's myriad down-home elements — from mock radio commercials pitching, say,

Beebopareebop Frozen Rhubarb Pie to sing-along gospel music — the soul of "A Prairie Home Companion" remains Keillor's weekly monologue devoted to "The News From Lake Wobegon." Lake Wobegon is the half-imagined yet wholly tangible small town "where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all of the children are above-average."

But try pressing the 55-year-old Keillor to take a little credit for the transfixing front-porch atmosphere he creates in detailing the everyday, yet often eccentric lives of the hard-working, churchgoing residents of Lake Wobegon, and he'll have none of it. Without missing a beat, the veteran storyteller insists that he doesn't think

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LIVE LAKE WOBEGON

■ "A Prairie Home Companion" with Garrison Keillor will conclude its 1997-98 season with a national radio broadcast at 5 p.m. Saturday produced live at Starlight Theatre. Guests include Lawrence blues singer Kelley Hunt, Kansas City folk singer Iris DeMent and humorist and Kansas City native Calvin Trillin.

The two-hour show will be broadcast live by KCUR-FM (89.3) in Kansas City and KANU-FM (91.5) in Lawrence. On Sunday it will be rebroadcast at 10 a.m. on KANU and at 11 a.m. on KCUR. Any remaining tickets cost \$15 and \$20. Call 235-2700.

■ Also on Saturday, Keillor is scheduled to give a dramatic reading of the Declaration of Independence at 9:45 p.m. as part of the free outdoor Fourth of July celebration at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum in Independence. Fireworks will follow. For information: 833-1400, Ext. 229.

Photo by CARMEN QUESADA

E-2 The Kansas City Star Thursday, July 2, 1998

KEILLOR

Continued from E-1

he can tell a truly top-notch tale. Right, and Mark Twain didn't know his way around an anecdote, either. But Keillor is serious.

"I don't think I can, I don't really," he said. "I'm not very good at it. I'm good at impersonating it. I can stand up there and impersonate a storyteller pretty well."

Tom Keith, sound-effects wizard for "A Prairie Home Companion" since 1976, is familiar with Keillor's peculiar penchant for self-effacement.

"Garrison always talks about Minnesota modesty, and that's the epitome," Keith said. "I think he is a terrific storyteller — otherwise he wouldn't be at the pinnacle that he is."

"More than anything, I think it's his voice. It's very hypnotic, and it draws a lot of people in. I'm always amazed at the stories he tells that are very emotional. He takes it to that brink of emotional experience and then throws in a little twist that makes you kind of pause and then laugh. He never carries it all the way."

Connie Dover, a Kansas City area Celtic music singer, performed with instrumentalist Roger Landes on Keillor's show in January. She said she was attracted to the interesting personalities in Keillor's monologues.

"What I love about his stories are the characters he builds. Dover said, "They are so real. And he doesn't just talk about what they do. He talks about why they are who they are. So by the time you hear what happens to them, the story is full of meaning and you find yourself caring deeply about these people you've never met — and who he's probably just made up — for real."

'Whole great tableau'

When Keillor steps into the spotlight at Starlight during the second half of the radio show Saturday, "It's been a quiet week in my hometown, Lake Wobegon, Minn.," keeping it real will be one of the qualities of good storytelling on the host's mind.

"I think that it has to be believable," Keillor said. "Nobody's interested in listening to lies. And it has to have a certain economy and shapelessness to it. Stories are defeated by flabbiness and redundancy. And, of course, it's always good if a story is funny. If there's any way to bring it in that direction, that's always better."



I like the idea of being close to the center of the country on the Fourth of July. I'm very fond of the Fourth of July. I mean, it's a holiday that's looking for some kind of revival.

— Garrison Keillor, on his show's July 4 broadcast at Starlight Theatre



Above: 'A Prairie Home Companion' host Garrison Keillor

telling a story. At right: 'A Prairie Home Companion' performers Keillor (from left), Sue Scott, Tim Russell and sound-effects man Tom Keith

Photos by FREDRIC PETERS



Keillor's storytelling role model growing up was his great-uncle, Lou, who visited Keillor's family almost every Saturday night.

"We sat in the living room and listened to him talk about the days before we were born, which to a child is endlessly fascinating — to me, anyway," Keillor said.

"It was the thought, first of all, that there was life before you and that life was in color back then. Even though they only had black-and-white photography, the grass was green, the sky was blue. And people of ancient times, which to me was the 1880s and '90s, were not cardboard characters but were real people, and they spoke and they had personalities. They were real."

"When it dawns on a person that history was real, that changes everything. Then you become a storyteller. And a storyteller is someone who has the responsibility of conveying the reality of the past."

"Otherwise people's lives tend to be terribly small, terribly circumscribed and narcissistic — the life

of someone sitting in the dark and watching television, which has very little sense of history, the life of consumers."

"People need stories in order to realize — not just to know, but to believe — that our lives in 1998 are part of a whole great tableau and pageant, and that we're connected to all that went before us, and there's a gravitational pull from the past."

Keillor felt the tug of the Midwest this holiday weekend.

"I like the idea of being close to the center of the country on the Fourth of July," he said. "I'm very fond of the Fourth of July. I mean, it's a holiday that's looking for some kind of revival."

Wherever the Fourth is still treated as a communitywide celebration, it's more than likely to be in a small town, Keillor said.

"It's just easier to organize in a small town than it is in a place like Kansas City or Minneapolis," he said. "In a small town, if you had six people and in April or May they looked at each other and they said, 'You know, we ought to do

something about the Fourth of July,' those six people could do it. And it could really be good. You could have fireworks and a parade and a picnic. And you could have a speech and somebody read the Declaration of Independence. You could put on something with a real bang."

What kind of radio party can be expected from Keillor this Saturday at Starlight?

"I always like to give a speech on the Fourth," he said. "And it should always be very short. I'm sure that there will be some sketches devoted to it. I don't know just how much. Calvin Trillin is going to be on the show, and I think that the idea of casting Bud Trillin as Thomas Jefferson is really appealing to me."

Avoiding the grind

"A Prairie Home Companion" typically appears to go off without a hitch each week, but the backstage hubbub before and during the show is another story.

"Artists, actors running up and down stairs, in and out of dressing

rooms," Connie Dover recalled of her stint in January. "People rehearsing scripts 5 feet away from you, saying lines that you know they're going to be repeating in front of an audience of millions an hour later."

"Everything seeming to be in a state of rehearsal and planning until the very last minute. And then something magical happens, and it all comes together. Suddenly you're led onstage and it's over before you know it. And you look back on it and you think, 'I had a really great time. What happened!'"

While fascinating fun for guests, continually writing and performing under such pressure led Keillor to end his show in 1987. But two years later he was back on the radio.

"I made the mistake of quitting," Keillor said. "I should just have reduced the length of the season and taken some time off."

"Now I don't let it become a grind. You go to places that you really want to go to, and you just do the radio show. You don't go off and give speeches to the Na-

tional Convention of Human Resource Managers. No matter how much money they offer you, you don't go to do it. And you don't agree to write things you don't want to write. You make very few commitments, except the radio show."

"I could go on doing this show for years, if it weren't for the fact that people do cease to be funny at a certain point in life, and I think it's probably around your mid-50s. But I'm a good enough writer that I can sound as if I'm funny, even if I'm not."

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