



Garrison Keillor plays G.K., the host of a radio show during its last broadcast, in the movie *A Prairie Home Companion*. AP 12044

## FROM THE PRAIRIE, THIS JUST IN



STEVE PERSALL  
TIMES FILM CRITIC

Garrison Keillor takes a break from stumping for his new movie, *A Prairie Home Companion*, to bring his Midwestern sensibility to the bay area.

Garrison Keillor is a world away from bucolic Lake Wobegon, Minn., sitting in the Scribner building where the novels of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were published, his telephone conversation competing with the din of Manhattan traffic.

The 63-year-old author, humorist, syndicated columnist and host of National Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion* could give Howard Stern a clean fight for the title of King of All Media. His resume lengthens to include actor and screenwriter for Robert Altman's film version of his popular radio show, which opens nationwide June 9.

Unlike Stern, he isn't entirely comfortable with the attention such versatility brings. Fronting a film is especially new to Keillor, who nonetheless remains as dryly unflappable as his radio and print persona.

"It's very different from anything I've ever been involved in; a very boom-or-bust business where a movie's success in the first week means everything," Keillor says in his rich Midwestern burlesque. "It all comes down to one roll of the dice, it seems. That really goes contrary to the psychology of creation, which is more over the long term."

"Of course, I know nothing about this art form so I'm on pretty solid ground."

Keillor was nearing the end of a day-long gantlet of interviews, likely facing more inquisitive reporters than during

### PREVIEW

Garrison Keillor, 7:30 p.m. tonight at Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$19.50, \$25.50 and \$35.50, available at the box office, online at [www.tbpac.com](http://www.tbpac.com), or by calling (813) 229-7827.

any of his previous endeavors. Keillor is equally curious about them, perhaps collecting ideas for a future radio skit or essay.

"I find it noteworthy and very civil that the same people who will review your movie are asking you questions," he says. "The jury is sitting and having coffee with the accused before the trial starts."

"In book publishing it's very different. People who review books wouldn't necessarily interview the author. Reviewing books is done from a great height, from Mount Olympus, and you hand down opinions on stone tablets. This way (promoting films) is rather nice."

*A Prairie Home Companion* is a rather nice film, too. Keillor spent more than a decade honing the script, shaping 32 years of relatively formless, homespun radio entertainment into two hours of cinema. He reimaged it as the show's last broadcast before corporate types ring down the curtain, with familiar radio characters portrayed by the kind of ensemble dream cast perhaps only Altman can attract.

Please see **KEILLOR 4E**

4E TIMES ■ THURSDAY, MAY 18, 2006

## Keillor from 1E

Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin play the singing sisters Yolanda and Rhonda Johnson, while Kevin Kline perfectly embodies Keillor's alter ego, detective Guy Noir. The singing cowboys Dusty and Lefty are there, portrayed with gusto by Woody Harrison and John C. Reilly. At the center of Altman's film is the host, known only as G.K. Yet with Keillor in the role, even telling tall tales seems autobiographical enough.

"Altman embraced the actors and the actors brought it off," Keillor says, offering an example: "The Johnson girls are performers who have failed and failed again, but they're not failures. They have a great dignity."

"When they stand on stage and talk about singing to Mama to make her smile, you know it is part of their routine, but they really believe it. The cliché that's spoken for effect also affects the person speaking it, because it's true. Altman captures that beautifully."

Perhaps Keillor will discuss the movie tonight in Tampa, in one of his frequent live solo appearances. Eleven books, countless essays and poems and 32 years of live radio provide plenty of material to choose from.

"I do a number of stories pieced together," he says. "I may bring a piano player and do a couple songs. It's all kind of up in the air."

"I expect that one story I'll do is a story I'm trying to make into a screenplay. It's about a memorial service for an aunt that takes place in Lake Wobegon, with a pontoon boat and 22 Lutheran pastors. I like telling that story in front of an audience to get a better grip on it for writing into a screenplay."

"It's easy to do a show by yourself; that's just for fun. The radio show is always good, bracing hard work. It's like potato-picking except you don't have to bend over."

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New York Times (2004)

## A Keillor home companion

Garrison Keillor speaks as he composes prose, a bit cockeyed yet firmly focused on heartland principles and life's tiniest pleasures, as you can hear on his radio show, which airs Saturdays and Sundays on WUSF-FM (89.7), and read in his columns, which appears frequently on the *St. Petersburg Times* op-ed pages. These examples culled from the Web site for *A Prairie Home Companion* ([www.prairiehome.com/publicradio.org](http://www.prairiehome.com/publicradio.org)) suggest the wit his Tampa audience will hear tonight.

—STEVE PERSALL

**On writing:**  
"The fact of the matter is that the people who struggle most with writing are drunks. They get hammered at night and in the morning their heads are full of pain and adverbs. Writing is hard for them, but so would golf be, or planting alfalfa, or assembling parts in a factory."  
"The biggest winners are the writers who get prizes and fellowships for writing stuff that's painful to read, and so they accumulate long resumes and few readers and wind up teaching in universities where they inflict their gloomy pretensions on the young. Writers who write for a living don't complain about the difficulty of it. It does nothing for the reader to know you went through 14 drafts of a book, so why mention it?"

**On Midwestern upward mobility:**  
"Here in the Midwest, we're brought up to act older and to be solemn little children, and serious young people. Many of us don't indulge in extravagances (vacations, impractical cars, haircuts that cost more than \$10) until our late thirties and early forties. Having been middle-aged for most of the first half of our life, we start thinking about maybe sowing some of the wild oats we've kept in the granary."  
"Of course, it's hard to be wholly foolish knowing as much Scripture as we do, but sometimes in a particularly warm spring, we achieve a breakthrough and trade in the van on a red MG convertible, have our hair bleached and our foreheads botoxed, take dancing lessons, buy the powder-blue tuxedo, look at beachfront property on Antigua, and switch from beer to Campari. Our friends are embarrassed for us. We disappear for six months and return, chastened, and take a back pew in church."

**On President Bush:**  
"These are troubling times for all of us who love this country, as surely we all do, even the satirists. You may poke fun at your mother, but if she is belittled by others it burns your bacon. A blowhard French journalist writes a book about America that is full of arrogant stupidity, and you want to let the air out of him and mail him home flat."  
"You hear young people talk about America as if it's all over, and you trust that this is only them talking tough. And then you read the paper and realize the country is led by a man who isn't paying attention, and you hope that somebody will poke him. Or put a sign on his desk that says, 'Try Much Harder.'"

**On losing weight:**  
"How shall I find the strength? Through the power of self-righteousness, that's how. I will sit with my celery consomme and undressed salad of bitter greens and look across the table at your gazelle au jus and think, 'I used to be a helpless glutton like these pitiful idiots and thank you, Lord, for lifting my feet from the miry clay and pointing me to the heights that I currently occupy.'"  
"Pure, airtight self-righteousness is a powerful engine. There is a bony, blue-nosed, bulle-eyed Puritan inside each one of us, and I intend to find mine and put him to work."

**On the occasional pleasure of cellular telephones:**  
"I woke up this morning with the blues and felt like lying my head on some kneesome railroad line and let that 8:19 ease my troubled mind. But the 8:19 doesn't run anymore, so instead I lay my head against a cell phone and talked to Mona, and we chatted about the old days, back when there were cabooses and hitchhikers and fruit porches and cars had engines you could tinker with and the songs on the radio were songs we loved to sing and men wore hats and looked classy in them and people were less snobby because they'd been through the Depression and gradually I felt reassured about my place in the natural order, like a goose in the left wing of a V hearing my fellows honking fore and aft as we skim over the treetops, flapping with one wing, holding a cell phone with the other."