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LIFE

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# Keillor, cast build fabled town skit by skit

Frantic pace goes until show starts

By DEBORAH HASTINGS

ST. PAUL, Minn. — During rehearsal, the boss menders backstage, straggle to himself. He doesn't so much wander as he circles like an approaching jet.

When he descends from on high in anybody's guess. He's also the air traffic controller.

It's also his airport. The boss is Garrison Keillor, the simpatico and sometimes oblivious creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," the public radio show adored by a million from broadcast live from Minnesota's mythical Lake Wobegon — home to Norwegian bachelor farmers, strong women, good-looking men and above-average children.

This is not the gentle narrator you hear on the air — that witty, sensitive observer of tripartite and tribulations. This is a complicated and detached ruminator, issuing orders that change faster than weather. His loyal, highly professional staff stays right in step.

Does the script? No problem. Get the mayor of International Falls, Minn., on the phone and patch her into the live broadcast? Alright, then. Fill five minutes of otherwise dead air because he's not about his much-loved monologue ("Well, it's been a quiet week here in Lake Wobegon...") in the middle of a live broadcast? You betcha, as they say in Minnesota.

He's written books, essays, columns and a screenplay but he's most revered for what he is on Saturday nights: tender teller of tales from a town that does not exist; impresario of an exceptional house band and troupe of actors who deliver a dizzying series of skits, songs and sound effects.

His need for others on a show he's hosted for 31 years appears purely practical. It is impossible to sing every song, play every musical instrument and read each actor's lines — simultaneously, anyway. If he could, he might just would.

He started hiring writers not too long ago, but virtually the entire two-hour program still comes out of his head. Which is its beauty or its conceit, depending on one's viewpoint.

But for now, take a moment to enjoy this view: stage right at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul. Dimmed house lights bank the old, refurbished auditorium in burnished gold. The 968 red-upholstered seats are empty. Outside, the cast and crew are rehearsing. This is the well-oiled and often magical machine that produces "A Prairie Home Companion."

There are two shows on a recent weekend. Friday's performance



AP photo

won't be broadcast — it's staged only for the program's workshipped hometown audience, and serves as a kind of dress rehearsal for Saturday's regular show, which will be broadcast coast-to-coast on more than 500 stations and later aired in Europe.

At 2 p.m. Friday, the night's musical lineup is led by love, the Everly Brothers classic "Love You," a 1957 hit by Elvis Presley, "I Can't Stop Loving You," made memorable by Ray Charles and Freddy Fender's country promise, "Before the Next Twenty Pails."

Keillor and band leader Rick Dworshak — a short, bobbing, balding man who can loquaciously play most any song off the top of his head — are working out chord changes with the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band. He has not shined. His hair stands on end. His body language said: "I am thinking. Approach at your own peril."

Keillor, who turned 68



Garrison Keillor, above, right, and Prudence Johnson rehearse a song for "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn. Keillor, left, works on the script during a rehearsal.

on Aug. 7, has never cared much about his appearance. His forehead is a cliff dropping into overgrown eyebrows that hang like swollen rain gutters. His foot's, gungy frame hangs at odd angles. His legs go on for miles.

"I have a face for radio," he said quite often. Words are most important to him. Writing, he

believes, is rewriting. He does the latter during rehearsals, after rehearsals and during the broadcast. A song is in. It's out. Likewise for the comedy skits.

The performers learned long ago to roll with it. "This is his show," smiles bassist Gary Raynor, who's recorded with Janet Jackson and played with the Count

Basie band. "We put this together very fast. There's not a moment to waste. Everyone just kind of gives him space. He always has a vision, and he knows what it is."

Stage manager Albert Webster may be the hardest-working man in Lake Wobegon. He tops as the out-of-town gig — say, where from a third to a half of the season's 98 performances. He handles all arrangements for the troupe's yearly cruise, when the actors and musicians entertain a sold-out luxury liner for a week.

Then there's his real job: keeping the show on schedule, despite morphing dialogue and disappearing songs.

At 3 p.m., Webster still doesn't have a script for tonight's performance. He never really gets a final

See PRAIRIE, 2D

Delicacies get large roles in production

By DEBORAH HASTINGS

The Associated Press

In "A Prairie Home Companion," Midwestern food and food products provide not just sustenance and pleasure, they help overcome shyness, ease humiliation and calm tortured souls.

They even have their own catchy theme songs.

The staples of life in Lake Wobegon include: Powdermilk biscuits — mythical sponsor of the radio show; "Heavenly" they're tasty and expedient. Give shy persons the strength they need to get up and do what needs to be done... Get 'em in the bright blue box with a picture of a biscuit on the front, or rascally made in the brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness.

The attendant song, started with instrumental solos by members of the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band gets the audience clapping and singing along. "Well, has your family tried 'em, Powdermilk? Has your family tried 'em, Powdermilk?"

A Beqopareep rhubarb pie — during the program it's usually offered as the antidote for all calamities short of nuclear annihilation.

The actors and band launch the musical ode to a vegetable that looks like colery on steroids: "One little thing can revive a guy, and that is a piece of rhubarb pie. Serve it up nice and hot. Maybe this ain't as bad you thought. Mama's little baby loves rhubarb, rhubarb. Beqopareep rhubarb pie."

The Catchup Advisory Board. The show went so far as to copyright the name of this recurring skit, after deciding to use a made-up spelling of the condition instead of deciding between ketchup or catsup.

In each episode, husband and wife Jim and Barb experience some crisis of spirit or finance or complacency. The solution? More ketchup.

Bandleader Rick Dworshak sings the jingle "Life is flowing, like ketchup on (each rendition features a wirt and unlikely simile: french toast, socks, green boxes, to name a few)."



Tin Russell and Sue Scott rehearse a scene for a production of "A Prairie Home Companion." The show is set in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, where all the children are above-average.

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## PRAIRIE

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one, just a succession of marked-up pages as the day wears on. Webster gets each version to actors Sue Scott, Tim Russell and sound-effects guy Tom Keith.

"A lot of it's off the top of their heads," Webster said jokingly, "and other body orifices."

Like most of the cast, he lives nearby: Drummer Arnie Kinsella, a wry and tiny man barely visible behind his high-hat cymbals, commutes from New York's Staten Island.)

"We all come here every weekend to do a really fun job," Webster said.

Where else could a group of actors and musicians put on a radio show featuring renowned guests like actress Meryl Streep, author Calvin Trillin, musician Bonnie Raitt, comedy bits, gospel songs, audience sing-alongs and poetry readings?

At 3:45 p.m., Kellor is having second thoughts. "I'm going to scratch 'Teardrop,'" he said. "It's gone."

He debates bandleader Dworsky about whether he's singing the right notes.

"How do I know that you're right and I'm wrong?" Kellor asks.

Dworsky hands him the score.

"Oh, the sheet music," Kellor draws.

The actors' call is for 4:30 p.m., but Scott is stuck in a traffic jam. Russell and Keith wait downstairs in the green room.

At 5 p.m. Kellor announces: "I'm thinking of restoring 'Teardrop,'" he said.

"Try it."

The band obliges.

"If he brings you happiness, then I wish you both the best," sings frequent musical guest Prudence Johnson.

No. Kellor decides after a few bars.

"That's it," he said.

"It's gone."

On to

"Loving You," whose lyrics Kellor has rewritten.

Now it's an ode to erupting children. He rhymes diarrhea with bad tortillas.

At 6:30 p.m., the actors



Behind the folksy sound of every broadcast of 'A Prairie Home Companion' is a mix of old-fashioned vocal effects and modern sound engineering. Sam Hudson controls the audio for a Saturday night production that is broadcast nationwide.

AP photos

said, "Todd is going to do a couple of songs with the audience, and you're going to play."

Dworsky nods. Schwartzberg looks terrified. He has to borrow a guitar from the band.

"In the key of G," Schwartzberg begins. "I play this song a lot with kids. It goes 'I'm in the mood to clap my hands, hey how about you?'"

The therapist explains that during this number, the audience will clap, then shake their hands above their heads and then turn in a circle. A therapeutic hokey pokey, as it were.

Kellor doesn't speak. He's wearing that frown he gets when he doesn't like something.

Twenty minutes to show time.

Kellor stands in the wings, his monologue its usual mystery.

But it never ceases to produce the same reverent response: Silence descends when he plops on a stool, bends into the microphone and weaves another intimate dispatch from the placid shores of a community so small you never need to use your turn signal, because everyone knows where you're going.

On the counter of his dressing room rests a ragged, half-sheet of paper. He has scrawled "Nearer, My God, to Thee" — the hymn reportedly sung by those sinking with the Titanic.

Metaphor or musical selection?

The music therapist is staring straight ahead like a man about to be hanged.

The house lights dim.

In the dark, Dworsky begins to play.

"Oh, hear that old pi-

ano ..."

are rehearsing. Show time is in 90 minutes.

To his sound-effects table, Keith has added shoes (he buys very old pairs at thrift shops because they have harder soles and make more noise) and three pieces of black fabric.

There also are miniature doors with metal knobs, a dead bolt lock, a rotary dial telephone (to get that old-fashioned, metallic br-i-i-n-g-g) and a box of small stones (in which he will walk his palms to simulate footsteps on a gravel road).

For the next 30 minutes or so, the actors run through other bits, including a scene from Cafe Boeuf, where the patronizing waiter speaks in bad puns and French-accented gibberish (it said so in

the script: "French Gibberish").

"What wine goes with zee pea-nuht buhterr and jellie sand-veech? Why zee pea-nuht new-arrt, but of course. Heh heh heh."

Kellor listens with a faraway look. His mouth hardens into a perfectly shaped, upside-down U. This happens

when he's not crazy about the way his lines are being read.

Kellor has written his monologue, but he rarely lets anyone see it. It's all in

his head.

Ten minutes to show time; the house is full.

In his tiny dressing room, Kellor changes into a white shirt and black pants. Then he paces, fiddling with the knot of his red tie, which matches his red socks and his red shoes — the uniform of every show.

He strides across the hardwood floor to center stage and turns to face the Shoe band.

He lifts his arms and nods to Dworsky at the piano, who plunks out the well-known notes that begin the show's theme song.

"Oh, hear that old piano," sings Kellor, "from down the avenue ..."

The audience claps and whistles.

Curtain up.

The show goes off with nary a hitch, but there were last-minute changes

Friday's audience couldn't see.

After dying twice, "Teardrop" rose again.

Kellor's monologue — which included tornado sirens, pie baking and a bird — ended abruptly, for reasons only he knew.

"That's fun," Webster whispered into his headset. "He's cut it short by five minutes."

And so, in the cold light of Saturday as rehearsals begin anew for tonight's broadcast, here's the question: How much of the show has Kellor changed overnight?

A lot, it turns out. And he's still at it.

He's rewritten the skits. And then there's the matter of the music therapist.

No one has seen him, and Kellor has invited him to perform during the broadcast.

By 2 p.m., Scott and Russell are reading through revisions. Kellor scolds them for a gl-libbing.

"Writers don't like to see actors invent dialogue," he said.

"Well, alrighty then," said a grinning Scott, the only female actor. She is the voice of gun molls and sultry, breathless bimbos ("Guy Noir, Private Eye") and no-nonsense cowgirls ("Lives of the Cowboys," starring herders Dusty and Lefty).

At 3:15 p.m. a nervous-looking man in glasses approaches the stage manager.

"You're the music therapist?" Webster asked.

"Yep."

"You have any idea what you're supposed to do?"

"Not a clue."

Kellor has reappeared.

Webster presents Todd Schwartzberg of the McPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis.

Like a lamb to slaughter, Schwartzberg trails Kellor across the stage to meet Dworsky. By way of introduction, the boss



Finnish and Norwegian fiddlers perform 'Polka Internationale' on a recent edition of 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

