

TELEVISION

The sophisticated bumpkinism of 'Prairie Home' and Garrison Keillor

**GARRISON KEILLOR:
THE MAN ON THE RADIO
IN THE RED SHOES**
2:30 a.m. Wednesday,
WNSC (Set the DVR)

By LINDA WINER

For a man selling the simplicity of America, Garrison Keillor is an awfully complicated fellow. And that may be the real message of this leisurely 90-minute "American Masters" documentary, with overlapping portraits of the land and the man.

With the looney-folky pacing of "Mr. Keillor's Neighborhood" and the restless darkness of a humorist who named his imaginary Minnesota town "Lake Wobegon," the show goes on the road and into the studio

with him as he creates — with a canny handcrafted flair and controlled chaos — his public-radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

On and off since 1974, Keillor has been the rangy, offbeat voice (and red shoes) from St. Paul, Minn., a character unafraid of the whimsy in wanting people to "see what radio used to look like."

The telecast includes the requisite bushels of wit and wisdom, images of a Heartland peopled with scrubbed faces, loon-calling contests and metaphors on the spiritual quality of rutabaga. Not incidentally, all the music — he insists he wants "blues but roots blues, country but roots country" — is first-rate.

Keillor always has had the face of an odd duck and, at 67, he seems sur-

prised to have acquired a fuzzy scowl and Andy Rooney's eyebrows. He alludes to a dark childhood with hard parents, and about tearing up a photo of himself when he was a child because he was dismayed at seeing a "strange person. Nobody is ever going to be his friend."

He maps but does not really explain the midlife restlessness that chased him to Copenhagen, then Central Park West, then a log cabin in Wisconsin and back to St. Paul — culminating, 12 years ago, with the apparent life-changing birth of a daughter with his third wife.

He speaks of his early fear of "living an ordinary life," then concludes — perhaps a bit disingenuously — "That's what we all get. Ordinary lives. And it is good enough."



KIMM ANDERSON — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

Andra Suchy and Garrison Keillor sang "Side by Side" during Saturday's anniversary broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion." The public radio variety show debuted July 6, 1974, with about a dozen people in the audience.

Keillor — celebrated in a Robert Altman film, ridiculed by Homer Simpson — says this country was made great by its kindness, not its anger.

Less provocative than Studs Terkel, less comforting than Charles Kuralt, this is a sophisticated bumpkinism from which American masters are also made.