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He charms radio listeners with humor, humanity

By MIKE HUGHES
Gannett News Service

At first glance, Garrison Keillor doesn't look like a cross-cultural phenomenon.

He is a tall, craggy man of 38. He has a sleepy-looking face that barely emerges between his floppy hat and his shaggy beard. He speaks in a quiet voice, just this side of a whisper.

In big cities and tiny burghs, people sample the humor and humanity of Garrison Keillor.

And every so often, he sneaks up on you.

Keillor was talking, for instance, about his first efforts on stage, with his now-national radio show, "Prairie Home Companion."

The first show came from a 300-seat theater.

He stepped onstage, peered out and saw 15 people. "That can sober you up real fast."

"Wasn't he uncomfortable?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "But I was brought up in a very

fundamentalist family. We didn't feel that suffering was something that couldn't be enjoyed."

At any time, Garrison Keillor crosses between humor and profound social thought.

The name Keillor is English, the name Garrison is fantasy. His real first name is Gary, but he added the rest for effect.

That fancy name, however, is Keillor's sole note of immodesty. He is quiet and casual. Even his height seems to be understated.

(He insists he's 6-foot-3, but seems to be a few inches taller.) When his show this year won the Peabody Award (the top award in broadcasting), he skipped the ceremony.

"Our producer went instead," he said. "I get to be out here on stage every week. She should get something."

That award-winning show — underwritten by Cargill, Inc. — is a peculiarity in the modern world of theater in St. Paul, Minn., at 5

p.m. CT every Saturday.

It bounces off a satellite to 174 National Public Radio stations, most of them using it live. Local listeners can hear a delayed broadcast of the "Prairie Home Companion" Saturday nights at 10 p.m. on WSKG, Endicott, 89.3 on their FM dials. Other nearby stations airing the show are WELA in Scranton, 89.9 FM; WXXI in Rochester, 91.5 FM; and WBFO in Buffalo, 88.7 FM.

Keillor grew up in Anoka, then a cozy Minnesota town of 5,000. He was a carpenter's son with a longing to be on radio.

His fundamentalist family felt television was immoral and refused to watch it. While the rest of the world was watching the tube, he was savoring the final days of network radio.

Then he arrived at the University of Minnesota and decided to be a campus disc jockey.

"I was working as a parking lot attendant at the time. Radio paid better and it happens to be indoors. In Minnesota, that's an important consideration."

He did well — so well that in 1968 he became a morning disc jockey for the entire Minnesota Public Radio system.

That's when Keillor began his rambling talks about life in the make-believe town of Lake Wobegon. And a year later, he began writing pieces for New Yorker magazine.

That's how he happened to do a magazine story about the "Grand Ole Opry." He promptly suggested a northern version of the show for Minnesota Radio.

"I just thought it would be nice to do once a week, to get away from the typewriter," Keillor said. "...As far as being a hobby is concerned, I guess you could say it got out of hand."

After the first audience of 15 people, the show quickly shifted to a cozy, 88-seat theater. "Then it started to be fun," Keillor said. "The show ran out of money, went off the air for a while, then came back.

And then the rush began.

Somewhere after the first year, "Companion" started to gain a cult following. It moved to bigger and bigger theaters. Now it produces weekly sell-outs at the 650-seat World Theatre in St. Paul.

The musicians on the show are an odd mix. Most are folk or old-

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time, but others range from a jazz band to a face-slapper.

Keillor writes commercials for all the make-believe sponsors, including the rousing theme song for Powdermilk Biscuits. He does humor bits, sings parodies, and reads messages from listeners to their friends.

He rambles into a Wobegon monologue that is as much a commentary as humor.

Winding through all of that is a warm strain of humanity. During last Saturday's broadcast, for instance, he gave a touching rendition of the Christmas story — telling of shepherds who trembled when the angels caught them passing the bottle around the campfire, of three wise men from an eastern university whose grant didn't cover worship, and other twists to the tradition.

When the satellite broadcast began last spring, Keillor became a star. That seems to embarrass him. He groans about "friends who suddenly think I've inherited a gold mine."

He hasn't, Keillor insists. But there is one advantage to all the fame, Keillor grants.

"It's a very easy way of meeting people and instantly getting to know them. I always have had trouble meeting people."

Make the most of odd-shaped room

QUESTION: I have a small one-bedroom apartment with an L-shaped living-dining area. The living area is relatively sufficient for my needs. I have a small table I can use to serve dinner. I don't mind serving on trays or small tables. What good can I make of the

short portion of the "L", which was intended for dining room furniture?

ANSWER: You are fortunate that you don't have to use that space for dining. Too often the furniture one has either doesn't fit the space, or even if you can purchase scaled-

down dining room furniture, it's a tight squeeze at best. Usually, that end of the room ends up unattractively crowded and uncomfortable.

I prefer to see this area used as an extension of the living room. Coordinate it with design and color so that it blends nicely, but is distinct enough to give you the feeling of another room or more space.

The problem I had with the room in the photograph was that the back wall (which might ordinarily have been the wall on which to place a buffet) was not entirely flat.

Three-quarters of the way to the end of the room, the wall recessed about three inches. I found this a maddening little feature that might have been done away with before construction was finished by simply extending the wall along the same place. But there it was, just a nuisance.

On the rods are a shirred plain fabric in a deep rose beige of exceptionally beautiful hue, making it look as if there were no jog in the wall. The wall was painted rose-beige, nearly a wheat shade.

This automatically created a lovely soft background for the area, without a hint of the defect. To incorporate this space into the living room, a plain day bed

with head and foot piece was used. The piece was upholstered in contemporary crewe made in India. The fabric combines rose-beige, yellow and natural on a background of off-white cotton.

On the bed are large comfortable cushions covered in chintz. The polished hardwood floor is covered with a wool rug with a pattern of rose beige and natural shades.

This little space, at first designed as a dining room, could now be used as a guest bedroom or a private writing retreat. But there's extra seating for buffet dining, and at large parties people can sit on both sides of the covered bed, which can also double as a chaise lounge.

The tavern table makes a handy bar, especially since it's just a step from the kitchen. If topped with a larger board and shifted to the floor, all party needs can be centered there.

Designing Woman

Rita St. Clair



Rita St. Clair is president of a firm of interior designers in Baltimore and New York City.



Fabric background and right furniture can add space to small apartment