

Keillor, Bedford Connect With Crowds

By Joe Pollack
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THE MICROSCOPE of theater examined contemporary America at Powell Hall and the world's greatest English language playwright at the Edison Theatre on Saturday, forming an unusual a two-night double-header as this city ever has seen.

But a surprising number of fans made the journey from Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company to Brian Bedford's Shakespeare evening, and they were thrilled throughout. Both the storyteller and the actor played to capacity crowds.

"The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet," Bedford's one-man show, had the better writer as the Tony-winning English actor let Shakespeare tell the story of his life in his own words. But the Grammy-winning Keillor, supported by his usual cast and bolstered by an appearance by Henry Townsend, a living legend of the blues, had a little more variety, plus his own special touches of wit and humor.

The tall, lanky Keillor, who practically reinvented radio theater with "A Prairie Home Companion," lopes around the stage like a basketball player looking for a pass. He was in a better mood than he has been in for several weeks (I'm a regular listener to the show via KWMU Radio), and he was practically rhapsodic as he discussed St. Louis' contributions through almost every facet of its history.

He described the city as "directing the game without being the center of attention," using an analogy based on the role of the baseball catcher as shown by Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola, and he talked about "the St. Louis Seven" — Tennessee Williams, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, W.C. Handy, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry and Scott Joplin — as a cultural cornerstone few cities could match.

The show seems amazingly casual; Keillor does his own warm-up for the audience, starting about 10 minutes before air. With the first notes of the theme, he removes his tie and begins talking, using some notes here and there, but apparently without a full script.

The multitalented, multidimpled Ivy Austin does an entire range of voices and accents, from bass New York to squeaky French, and her eight years with the New York City Opera are obvious when she sings.

Lynn Thigpen, who won a Tony in the original Broadway "Fences" and who has been at the Rep several times, sings beautifully, and Bill Parry rounds out the acting team, doing almost everything else. And then there's sound-effects man Tom Keith, who also does a variety of voices.

They teamed with Austin as the Lonesome Radio Theatre did a seven-minute adaptation of Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffman," with Austin as all the sopranos and the wonderful line, "Opera heroes are not very good judges of women." One of the parodies also rhymed "Barcarolle" with "camisole," a word play that drew both groans and applause.

Townsend thrilled the crowd in two appearances and returned for an encore after the broadcast part was over.

Keillor described early American storytellers as "ultimate liars," who convinced Americans to go west, where there was not enough gold and not enough water, and land that should have stayed in the buffaloes' possession. And he dipped into nursery rhymes, too, where the spoon who ran away with the dish was "two-tining" the fork.

His Lake Wobegone monologue dealt with the new cow-wash in town, a conveyor belt that takes the Holsteins through, washing and drying them, adding hot wax if desired and painting their hoofs for only a little extra. Sheer silliness, but superb. Amazingly, he does the monologue without a script, sitting on a stool and talking in a soft voice.

'The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet'

Brian Bedford, who has starred in classic drama around the world, and who will return to Broadway later in the year in a new translation of Moliere's "School for Wives," has the perfect rolling tones for Shakespeare, and a great understanding of the writer from a career that has included almost every one of his plays.

He has been touring in "The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet" for several years; he organized the production to show how Shakespeare told the story of his life — and the changes in it — through his plays and poems. Most of the words in the evening are Shakespeare's, but Bedford has added some exposition and some information about the writer's life as a road map.

Quoting from most of the plays and many sonnets, Bedford shows the young Shakespeare arriving in London with plays like "Loves Labors Lost" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in which he satirized the traveling troupes of strolling players he had seen as a boy in Stratford-on-Avon, especially in terms of Bottom and the homespun tradesmen in the latter.

According to Bedford, the sonnets show the emotional changes in Shakespeare, pointing up where he grew disillusioned and despairing, and setting the stage for the extreme bitterness and anger shown in the famous soliloquies from "Hamlet" and "Macbeth," both of which received well-nigh perfect performance and interpretation.

I've never heard as much raging anger from a Hamlet as Bedford showed in the speech where the Prince of Denmark tells Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery."

And, as Bedford points out, Hamlet's speech of direction to the visiting players is probably based on Shakespeare's own theories as both author and director.

One cannot compare Keillor and Bedford; their approach is as different as their material. And yet, both men prove the power and attraction of good writing and good speaking, and their performances show definitively why Keillor's show is on more than 250 radio stations, and why Shakespeare, after nearly 400 years, remains unchallenged as a writer.