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PERPETUAL humor machine

Garrison Keillor's genius for extracting comic brilliance from everyday life leaves Dave Barry in awe

INFORMATION ON MIAMI SHOW, 3E



DAVE BARRY

When Garrison Keillor fans — and they are everywhere — find out that I've been on his radio show, they inevitably ask: What's he really like?


I always answer: I really don't know. This is the truth, even though I've spent a fair amount of time with Keillor — on his show, in rehearsals, at a couple of dinners.

I do know that he's a generous host, and very smart, and he can be funny as hell even when he's not on the radio. But he's not an easy guy to get close to; as far as I can tell, he truly is the shy person he has always claimed to be. For all the time he spends in front of the public, he always seems to be keeping a major part of himself hidden, somewhere inside his big shaggy head.

You get the feeling that the real Keillor is peeking out through the deep-set eyes of the public Keillor, watching you, watching everything, gathering material and feeding it into his astoundingly prolific, state-of-the-art Humor Processor.

It's always running, his

PLEASE SEE KEILLOR, 3E



CHUCK PADLEY / HERALD FILE

LIVE WIRES: Garrison Keillor, top, will broadcast live from Miami today. In 1997, he and Dave Barry, above, rehearse for a 'Prairie Home Companion' show in Miami Beach.

What's Keillor like? A processor moving at hundreds of smiles per hour

► KEILLOR, FROM HE

Humor Processor. When the room gets quiet, which it often does when Keillor is in it, you'd swear you can hear it humming, a deep hummmmm. When this is happening, everybody else on the show — the actors, the musicians, the guests — sits and waits to see what the Keillor brain is going to produce.

And it always produces. It produces an unbelievable quantity of material.

Imagine having to fill a big chunk of an hour with original stuff — skits, jokes, parody commercials, original songs, stories, and so on. Imagine having to do this every week, for a faithful audience that has heard everything you've ever done and will know if you're repeating.

Imagine having to deal with that pressure. I would be insane by the second week.

But Keillor is relentlessly calm. At least he always seemed to be, when I watched

him work. I'd go to the rehearsal, the day before the show, where Keillor runs through parts of the program with his guests and his wondrously talented and highly adaptive cast of actors and musicians. We'd all be handed scripts, and we'd read through the skits, with Keillor providing some, but not much, direction. The material often had an uneven, almost stream-of-consciousness feel; some of it would be hilarious; some of it was just ... weird. You'd be reading your lines, and you'd be thinking, *What the heck does this MEAN?*

When this happened, the room would fall silent, and the Humor Processor would hum. Sometimes we'd take a break. When we returned, there would be new scripts, sometimes radically rewritten, always funnier, often with lots of new material, with the funniest lines almost always written for others to say, Keillor making his guests look good.

We'd rehearse some more,



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HOME OFFICE: Garrison Keillor at work in his dining room.

IF YOU GO

► Public Radio host Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" broadcasts live at 8 p.m. today from the AT&T Amphitheater in downtown Miami's Bayfront Park, 301 Biscayne Blvd.

► Most reserved seats (\$50) are sold; lawn seating (bring a blanket) is \$25. WLRN-91.3 FM, which is staging the fundraising event, will have a ticket booth open from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. at the amphitheater (cash only). The audience is expected to be seated at 5:30 p.m. Listeners can hear the show live between 6 and 8 p.m. on WLRN-91.3 FM.

any, save for the making of old's theater critic.

and it would keep getting better, but Keillor never stopped tweaking it. I mean, *right during the show*, on live, nationally broadcast radio, he'd be tweaking it. A musical group would be performing, and he'd be backstage, altering scripts and changing the order of the bits, saying, in a totally relaxed voice, things like, "OK, I don't think we'll do ... this. I think maybe instead we'll do ... this."

And everybody would scurry around, making instant adjustments, and then we'd go out on stage, and the bit always turned out fine and funny, as if we'd been rehearsing it exactly that way for weeks. This goes on throughout the show; and in the middle, Keillor ambles out, alone, to center stage — a man in no apparent hurry, a man who does not appear to have a single worry on his mind — and performs his monologue, without notes, telling a long and involved and sometimes funny and sometimes poignant and sometimes strange story

that soars and swoops, but always, right on time, comes safely back to Earth, or at least Minnesota. I watch him do this and — as a guy who struggles mightily to produce one column a week — I think: *How does he DO that?*

CHARMING HOST

After each show I've been on, I've gone to dinner with Keillor, in a small group. It's always a pleasant meal, and he's always charming and entertaining. But he doesn't talk about the show, what he does, how he does it. I figure he must be thinking about it, because he has another show coming up next week, and the week after that, and the week after that. It has to be on his mind. But you don't see this; you just see a guy amusing his dinner companions. When the evening ends, he thanks you politely and drifts off into the night, on to the next show

Hummmmmmm.
I need to get one of those things.