



Photos by ALISON REDLICH, Free Press

Garrison Keillor rehearses with a large cast of band members and actors Tuesday during a sound check before a live showing of "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Shelburne Museum.



ABOVE: Tim Rottet of Vergennes, a stage technician with All Tech Sound (ATS) Corp., checks equipment Tuesday.

RIGHT: Fred Newman of the state of Georgia makes a series of accomplished barnyard animal noises during Tuesday's sound check and rehearsal at the Shelburne Museum.

On the air

"A Prairie Home Companion," Vermont Public Radio, today at 6 p.m.; rebroadcast of an April 2001 show from Sacramento, Calif. The new fall schedule begins Sept. 27.

A day on the Prairie

Keillor and Co. come to Vermont

By Susan Green
Free Press Correspondent

The chemical toilets, all 30 of them, stand like silent sentinels just to the south of a grassy Shelburne Museum field dotted with red clover.

"I'm the Porta-potty man," explains Tim Hogan of Milton, as he sets up the johns at 10:30 a.m. in anticipation of the 3,000 people who might need them throughout the evening.

It is a steamy Tuesday in August — Aug. 19, to be exact — at the site that will host a sold-out 6:30 p.m. concert featuring Garrison Keillor. He's the folksy yet erudite Minnesota native who

has been tickling America's collective funny bone for the better part of three decades. His program of music and skits, "A Prairie Home Companion," is broadcast nationwide every Saturday on National Public Radio.

This summer, only reruns of the show can be heard over the airwaves. However, 17 live performances are scheduled across the country in what's been dubbed The Rhubarb Tour, a name that acknowledges Bebop's-rebop Rhubarb Pie. Don't bother to ask for this baked good at the local supermarket. Along with Powdermilk Biscuits, it's a deliciously fictitious sponsor of Keillor's ongoing "Guy Noir" detective saga.

"We have a weekly audience of four million listeners," says former Vermont Public Radio development director Tony

See PRAIRIE, 10D



10D

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PRAIRIE: Frivolity, food abound on 'Home' set

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Judge, now the fund-raiser for "Prairie" projects. "It's normally a two-hour program but ends up being over three hours on tour because Garrison's having so much fun."

Sound check

To prepare for the one Vermont stop on Keillor's 17-city swing, the Shelburne Museum Green is swarming with crewmembers hired by the promoter, Higher Ground Presents. In the hot sun, they hoist a stack of speakers above each side of the stage.

"We use a computer program to adjust the sound," says Tim Rollet, a systems engineer for the Rutland-based Atomic Professional Audio. "It's designed to give even coverage across a vertical field with 85 to 90 percent accuracy."

Heavy trusses holding spotlights are also lifted into place. Two generators provide all the required power.

"We can supply the stage with 1,200 amps," explains Gary Lemieux, a South Burlington master electrician.

Does Keillor use less juice than, say, Metallica? "We'd probably need twice that for rock shows," Lemieux says.

"We couldn't do Lynyrd Skynyrd here," suggests Higher Ground partner Alex Crothers, invoking another ear-splitting ensemble. "The key thing is finding acts that fit the place."

The Rhubarb Tour is the final summer event at a venue that has witnessed Willie Nelson, Tracy Chapman and Alison Krauss — all fairly mellow performers. "I hope we're invited back in 2004," Crothers adds.

Food repose

The stagehands for this gig are fueled by hearty meals. They break at noon for a lunch that includes sausage-and-pepper sandwiches, veggie garden burgers and a deli platter. The dinner menu promises T-bone and strip steaks, cheddar chive mashed potatoes and cherry pie — alas, not bebop-a-rebop Rhubarb.

The equipment is set up by 3 p.m., when the visiting troupe arrives for the requisite sound check. Under an open tent behind the stage, hospitality coordinator Teresa Lorenzo of Burlington



ALISON REDLICH, Free Press

Teresa Lorenzo of Burlington, a hospitality coordinator for Higher Ground in Winooksi, delivers ice buckets to artists and musicians' trailers at the Shelburne Museum on Tuesday before Garrison Keillor's show.

puts out a spread: bagels, cheese, fruit salad, chips and dips, popcorn and a basket with herbal cough drops and breath mints.

In a black T-shirt, faded jeans and leather sandals, Keillor ambles over to grab a snack and schmooze with Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, his four seasoned back-up musicians. "Ummm, this tastes like homemade guacamole," the 61-year-old humorist proclaims, unaware that it is not.

"I'd better ration myself. I don't want to founder in the middle of the show."

Keillor's comic sensibility is frequently scatological. Guest musician Peter Ostroushko, an acclaimed fiddle and mandolin player, jokes with him about what foundering might entail.

At a brief rehearsal, however, these artists never miss a step. Keillor warbles a duet with Stephanie Davis — he calls her "the singing cowgirl" from Montana — on a beautiful ballad, "Talking to the Moon." They also harmonize on two Elvis classics, "Love Me Tender" and "I Can't Help Falling in Love With You."

This romanticism is eclipsed by Keillor's mischievous wit. "More vibrato," he tells Davis, before grabbing the back of her head and gently shaking it to encourage that vocal quaver.

The singing cowgirl doesn't mind a bit. "This tour is the coolest thing I've ever done," Davis says during a break. "It's a laugh a minute with Garrison."

Fred Newman, Keillor's on-the-road "sound designer," is

equally pleased with his job. "Where else can you get to do live sound effects with the best storyteller in America?" he asks rhetorically, before emitting barnyard noises for a "Turkey in the Straw" instrumental by the Shoe Band.

"Garrison has a very clear vision, and we all do what we can to help that vision come true."

Keillor's ambition, with only a few minutes left until show time, is to finish the night's "Guy Noir" script on the IBM ThinkPad in his dressing-room trailer. He has already added geographically relevant lyrics to "Up On the Roof," the classic Carole King song: "When this old world starts getting you down/ just head on up to Shelburne, Vermont..."

Curtain opens

In New Hampshire two days earlier, presidential hopeful Sen. Bob Graham of Florida made a brief guest appearance with Keillor. "But when Garrison mentioned Howard Dean," Fred Newman recalls, "the crowd roared its approval."

Keillor has always seemed topical without being overtly political. "I'm just an old Democrat," he cautions, still tapping at his laptop keyboard. "There's no need to wave it around. Every so of-

ten, though, I do get in trouble. I wrote a song a while back, "We're All Republicans Now," that offended some people."

That sort of whimsy probably wouldn't bother Vermont's many Keillor aficionados, who react with utter delight as the start of what will indeed be a three-hour show. He has changed into a black suit, red tie and soccer shoes. The outfit is appropriate for his title role in the newly minted "Guy Noir, Private Eye" episode, which concerns a man plagued by flutulence in Winooksi.

Crothers, whose club is located in the Onion City, couldn't be happier. "I'd love to do more of this kind of thing, but there aren't many like Garrison out there," he says. "That's what makes him so special: He's in a class by himself."

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