

## Where the prairie meets the desert

Garrison Keillor brings heartland radio to Santa Fe Opera

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Garrison Keillor

Robert Nott  
The New Mexican

If you've ever tried to find Lake Wobegon, Minn., and failed, don't feel bad. You're in good company. Even Garrison Keillor, the author and radio personality, can't clearly articulate where the town is — and he put the place on the map.

Keillor, author of the *Lake Wobegon* series, is perhaps best-known for his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion* (reportedly named after Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minn.). His new book, *Love Me*, is a modern-day farce about a writer, heady with success, who lets his personal life head into a comic hell.

Keillor is bringing *A Prairie Home Companion — The Rhubarb Tour* to Santa Fe. He and the radio company, including singer-songwriter Stephanie Davis and mandolin virtuoso Peter Ostroushko, will do a live recording of the show at 7:30 p.m. today, Aug. 29, at the Santa Fe Opera.

*Pasatiempo* caught up with Keillor for an interview by phone from his office somewhere in the heartland of Minnesota — Lake Wobegon, perhaps.

**Pasatiempo:** Do you ever wish you could have done radio in its heyday, the 1930s and 1940s?

**Garrison Keillor:** No, not at all. It was crowded with much

more talented people than I. Also it was under the thumb of advertising-agency people and high-powered executives, just as television is now. I'm very lucky to have come into it when it was in ruins.

**Pasa:** But do you think we'll ever return to those days when radio theater was alive and well?

**Keillor:** I don't know. I wouldn't predict that they would. On the other hand, in this slumping economy, you have television networks that have much less money to do comedies — or any kind of new show — that has any real ambition or scope. It's only HBO that is doing things that people are talking about. If you are a writer, and you have an idea for something you really want to do, radio might start to look attractive to you, as opposed to doing a set-piece TV sitcom that gives you three sets, or four at most. So you can do the family's living room and dad's workplace and a coffee shop, and you can have four characters, and it has to be something that somebody can earn money on despite all these restrictions. Los Angeles is full of people who seem content to write things that never get produced and earn some money for it. I wouldn't care to live that way.

**Pasa:** Your new book, *Love Me*, has a very unpredictable, where-are-we-going-next approach to storytelling. Did you get a kick out of writing it?

**Keillor:** I had a lot of fun writing that book. There were two hard parts: slogging through the first draft — and my first

drafts are as bad as anyone else's first drafts — and the second hard part, cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting. Comedy is brevity, and you have to, in the last go-round, be very hard on yourself and throw away a lot of stuff that you are fond of. That's painful.

**Pasa:** In your book you give the character Shawn this paragraph-long quote about being a writer, comparing the daily ordeal to a golf game in which you can anguish over it all you like, but still you have to step up to the tee and swing. Do you feel that way about writing?

**Keillor:** That's how I want to feel. I write when I first get up — those are the best hours of my day. I get up around 4 or 5 in the morning, and it's like going out on the golf course for a golfer, I guess. I take a deep breath and start in. I feel kind of free and boyish.

Then, of course, later on, the day closes in on you, and people ask you for decisions. I'm supposedly running a business here, a radio show, so I have to choose between A, B and C all the time, 100 times a day. But as a writer working early in the morning, you make your choices in your unconscious, and you walk very happily down that road.

**Pasa:** How effective is radio for communicating a story?



The crew of *A Prairie Home Companion* taping a show