

Keillor delivers a Wobegon night



MARK WALLHEISER /Democrat
Garrison Keillor, host of NPR's
"Prairie Home Companion," performs
at Ruby Diamond Auditorium.

Show was funny, poignant, human

By Kati Schardl
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Thank St. Olaf — who may or may not be the patron saint of preserved fish products as well as the archetypal village of Lake Wobegon — for Garrison Keillor.

Thank a battalion of saints, in fact, the very army of sanctitude invoked by Keillor in his "Lake Wobegon Days" monologue Wednesday night at Florida State University's Ruby Diamond Auditorium. Send up your hymns of gratitude for Keillor as champion, chronicler and tour guide of "the old, sweet America." After being touched to

the core and moved to heaving spasms of belly laughter, it's possible to believe that America still exists.

Keillor wove the same spell he conjures each week on his National Public Radio broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion" for the capacity crowd, but with some fresh fillips. He had the silver-voiced assistance of Tallahassee's own Velma Frye, who has appeared nine times on "Prairie Home Companion."

Poet and FSU professor David Kirby — a dab hand at fine storytelling himself — introduced Keillor, noting it was poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's birthday. Keillor came out wearing a black suit, white shirt, red tie and his signature red track shoes and red



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KEILLOR

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socks.

As is his wont, he took a circuitous route to the heart of the night's particular Lake Wobegon saga. Keillor talked about being intimidated by "small crowds of Gothic teenagers whose faces glitter as if they've fallen face first into the tackle box."

He riffed on airport security and mused about what would happen if someone invented an underwear bomb. Would airports

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employ "crotch-sniffing dogs"?

"This is not the America I grew up in," he said. "Life can be bitter, but we need not be.

"I grew up in the old, sweet America, the real America."

Like a griot, like the spellbinding storyteller he is, Keillor took the rapt crowd to Lake Wobegon, past "the Farmers Union grain terminal" looming in the fields like a Greek temple into the heart of America's heartland hometown.

He paused for a couple of lovely duets with Frye. Their blended harmonies had some wiping away

surreptitious tears.

And then Keillor proceeded to unreel a story that twined like a kudzu vine into the collective consciousness in the auditorium. It would be a shabby, pale imitation to attempt to recount it in print. But it involved Keillor's rebellious cousin Kate, the amazingly rich inner lives of Lake Wobegon's Lutheran inhabitants and an ambitiously planned "ceremony of commitment" on a pontoon boat on the lake.

Like a master weaver, Keillor drew all the thread of his various stories into the loom of his art and knotted them into a warm

and glorious quilt. It was gaspingly funny, tenderly poignant and gloriously human.

Afterwards, a throng queued up in the aisles to go onstage and have Keillor sign copies of his books. His ever-questing, restless eye fell first on Hawks Rise Elementary School student Sable Thompson.

"Do you always stay up this late?" Keillor asked. Then he made up a limerick around her name that ended with a dog that sat under the table.

"It was cool," the 9-year-old Sable said after Keillor had autographed her program. "I thought he was really funny."

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