

# Keillor at home in Charm City



Garrison Keillor and Prudence Johnson sing a duet at an April dress rehearsal of "A Prairie Home Companion" in St. Paul, Minn.

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BY MARY CAROLE MCCAULEY  
[SUN THEATER CRITIC]

A historic meeting was held over the weekend between H.L. Mencken and Guy Noir, marred only slightly by the fact that one of them is dead and the other is fictional.

But if any two people should meet, it is Mencken, the dour journalist and humorist, and Garrison Keillor, the dour contemporary author and humorist. The latter sought to correct this historic deficiency Saturday when he brought his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, to the Hippodrome Theatre.

Keillor's alter ego is a recurring character named Guy Noir, Private Eye. As Keillor envisioned it,

Guy is in Baltimore on a job when he meets a lovely Salvation Army lass while she is reforming sinners on The Block. Just as Guy's heart gets broken — Guy's heart *always* gets broken — he is approached by Mencken's ghost. The two men adjourn to a nearby bar to discuss life and love.

Like any gracious host, Keillor gave Mencken the best lines, though under any circumstances, it would be tough to top Mencken. Among his most famous observations: "Nobody ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the American people," and "Marriage is a wonderful institution. But who would want to live in an institution?"

Though Keillor has appeared in Baltimore before, Saturday was the [Please see PRAIRIE, 6C]

# Keillor brings show to town

**PRAIRIE** [From Page 1C]

first time that *A Prairie Home Companion* has been broadcast live from Charm City. The two-hour radio show, with its mix of musical acts, skits and stories about a mythical Midwestern town named Lake Wobegon, has attracted a devoted coterie of fans since the first broadcast on July 6, 1974. Currently, the show has more than 4 million listeners each week who tune in to 580 public radio stations; tickets to the Baltimore broadcast in the 2,200-seat Hippodrome sold out in half an hour.

Each broadcast outside the show's base in St. Paul, Minn., always includes background about that week's location, and the Baltimore stop was no exception. The local references came thick and fast:

The Peabody Conservatory. Johns Hopkins Hospital. Babe Ruth. The Washington Monument. The Inner Harbor. Crab cakes. John Waters. Anne Tyler. Billie Holiday. Edgar Allan Poe.

The Hippodrome. ("It's a wonder they saved this place. Frank Sinatra sang here when he was 15.")

Inexplicably, there was no mention of William Donald Schaefer.

The marquee talent for the evening was singer-songwriter Carole King, who obligingly nipped over to Eutaw Street after testifying in front of Congress on environmental issues. But the other guests were local favorites: two members of the bluegrass band Seldom Scene and Deanna Bogart, the boogie pianist and saxophone player.

The clarion-voiced Jearlyn Steele got into the act with a Prohibition-era ditty set in Paradise on the Chesapeake, and guitarist Pat Donohue contributed a song that he said he wrote 25 years ago, "and then forgot about it, but I remembered it when I heard we were coming here." The song is about dance hall girls and contains the lyric, "I saw her mountains and I kissed her plains / Is that the

way it always is here in Baltimore?"

Indeed, the things that Keillor seems to like best about Charm City are aspects that Mayor Sheila Dixon and cultural tourism officials might be loath to mention. More than once, he touched upon a matter that is a sore point with civic leaders:

"Baltimore is the forgotten city on the Eastern Seaboard," Keillor said. "Most Americans have in their minds a clear picture of New York and Washington, but they cannot place Baltimore." In other words, Keillor sees Bawlamer as a little bit like his beloved Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot."

He also praised "Baltimore's beautiful red light district, with 30 strip joints" and pointed out, with seeming sincerity: "This town has not made the mistake of going too high-class."

Mencken himself couldn't have said it better.

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