

SLIP BACKSTAGE WITH VETERAN
CAST MEMBER SUE SCOTT

PRAIRIE HOME' PERENNIAL



Courtesy of Dana Nye

"A Prairie Home Companion" performers, from left, Fred Newman, Tim Russell, Sue Scott and Garrison Keillor, will bring their radio show to the Louisville Palace tomorrow night for a sold-out live broadcast.

By Andrew Adler
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The Courier-Journal

You may be tempted to regard "A Prairie Home Companion" as nothing more than an ongoing celebration of creator Garrison Keillor. But that would be a serious error.

The hugely popular weekly radio show, which comes to the Palace Theatre tomorrow night for a single, sold-out live broadcast, depends on a tight ensemble of musicians, sound-effects wizards and character actors. People like the frankly irrepressible Sue Scott.

Now entering her 17th year as a "PHC" cast member, Scott, 52, is adept at playing pesky children and feisty grandmas, *femmes fatales* and myriad variations thereof. A native of Tucson, Ariz., who built a career in theater and commercial voice-overs,

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'A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION'

WITH: Garrison Keillor plus guest artists Patty Loveless and Brigid Kaelin.
WHEN: 5:45 p.m. tomorrow.
WHERE: The Louisville Palace
TICKETS: Sold out
MORE INFORMATION: (502) 583-4555, or www.louisvillepalace.com, www.prairiehome.publicradio.org.

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she has an ear for the defining (and sometimes-arcaic) elements that separate characters from caricatures.

"Part of it is that I'm a mimic — I can mimic you if I know you," Scott said in a recent phone interview from her home in the Minneapolis area, where the temperature stood at a delightful 11 degrees below zero. "Once I get to know you, I can pick up personality traits and body language."

Indeed, while Scott isn't literally a voice impersonator (she cedes that particular expertise to her longtime "PHC" performing partner, Tim Russell), she prides herself at shaping complete alternate personas.

Take, for example, Hillary Clinton: "I was really concerned about sounding like her," Scott recalled, "but then I realized that if I pick up her patterns, her phrasing, her physical and vocal style, I was convincing people."

While calling herself "a card-carrying bleeding-heart liberal" — akin to Keillor's own oft-expressed perspective — Scott says that "PHC" doesn't get too wrapped up in politics. The show's appeal, evident from its humble beginnings in Minneapolis some 35 years ago, lies in its canny evocations of radio's Platinum Age.

Robert Altman's 2006 film treatment, which riffed on the notion of a "PHC" look-alike facing imminent demise — confirmed that the show had achieved iconic status.

American Public Media, which distributes "PHC," estimates that about 4 million listeners tune in each week to catch up on the adventures of Guy Noir and the doings

from Lake Wobegon. An hourlong condensed version is heard in Britain, and "PHC's" marketing/merchandising has a reach that would do the New York Yankees proud.

Still, the show is fundamentally, unabashedly about old-fashioned entertainment. And although it's a radio program, much of its appeal comes from the fact that it's performed live, in front of thousands of people.

"We can't do it without an audience," Scott emphasized. "We are fed by the audience."

Keillor and staff writer Laura Buchholz flavor their scripts with local references, typically tweaking content until the day before a performance.

"Garrison is not a big proponent of lots and lots of rehearsal," Scott acknowledged. "He wants to write based on whatever is happening in pop culture or current events — to be very, very fresh."

Each year "PHC" does 33 or 34 shows, Scott says, including close to a dozen at Minneapolis' historic Fitzgerald Theatre and another seven or eight during an annual stop at New York City's Town Hall. "PHC" has toured widely across the U.S., often playing outdoors in warm-weather venues like the Hollywood Bowl — where the event sold about 17,000 of 18,000 available seats.

"Our staff was lamenting that we didn't sell out," Scott remembered, "and the Hollywood Bowl people were saying, 'We don't believe there are 17,000 people here to see a radio show.'"

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