

Garrison Keillor reflects on turning 70

■ Sold-out crowd at MU hears of a nerdy high school senior and a son who sang to his mother as she passed away.

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When you spend an evening with Garrison Keillor, as a sold-out crowd of more than 600 did at the Winter Center at Millersville University Thursday night (along with about 150 people in a live simulcast from the Ware Center in Lancaster), you have to be prepared for a wide range of emotions.

Keillor is a master at weaving stories together that will make you laugh one second and tear up the next. He can evoke nostalgia for a childhood in rural Minnesota that can hit you right in the gut as if it was your own experience and then add a song to the mix that comments so beautifully on that story it gives you goose bumps.

I'd say Keillor was in rare form Thursday night, but he is almost always in rare form. The two-hour



Andy Blackburn / Staff

Garrison Keillor speaks to a sold-out audience of more than 600 people Thursday in the Winter Center at Millersville University.

show, like so many of his performances, was wonderfully funny, sweetly nostalgic and filled with some profound ideas about life, death and the passage of time.

Rick Dworsky, the music director of Keillor's radio show, "Prairie Home Companion," and Rob Fisher, a Broadway conductor and frequent guest on "Prairie Home," both played pianos and keyboards during the show and singer Christine Di Giallonardo, who often ap-

pears with her sisters on the show, sang a number of songs with Keillor.

Their two voices sounded gorgeous together, adding a stunning beauty to a variety of songs.

Turning 70 was the theme of the two-hour show, as Keillor wondered how he'd gotten so old, reassured the audience that it wasn't too bad and looked back on his life from the perspective of those 70 years.

"I never planned to be this old," he explained. "I believed the true sign of an artist was to die young and become immortal."

But by the time he realized he hadn't done anything important enough to become immortal, he was too old to die young.

The evening was a wonderful elegy to life, to the joys and pains of being a nerdy high school senior, a dad, a son who had the honor to sing songs to his mother as she passed out of this life at the age of 97.

He sang snatches of some of those songs along with Di Giallonardo, and they were sadly beautiful, an emotion Keillor can evoke in the most perfect ways.

His mother died in the house Keillor grew up in, in the room that

had been his when he was a teenager. He weaved together the emotions of his mother's death with his memories of being young and nerdy and filled with unrequited love.

What makes Keillor such a treasure (He'd probably hate that description) is his ability to find humor in pathos, to dig for emotion in the midst of a joke, to articulate those passages in life with the perfect song or anecdote.

Not everything was deep.

He joked about his wife, Nanook of the North, and how cold she keeps their house; the indignity of having a toddler throw up in a fancy restaurant after eating too much deep fried calamari, and how awful their old shower was, going directly from "arctic waterfall to flaming brimstone from hell."

Dressed in a gray pin stripe suit, with a red tie, red socks and red sneakers, he reassured the audience that he was a cheerful guy, despite the fact "I don't look like a cheerful guy ... I have this face" — long pause — "it's a radio face."

But seeing the radio guy in person was a true treat, a wonderful evening of music, humor and life in all its 70 years.