

■ **THE NEW HOST:** Even the cast members who rehearsed with him



THILE

earlier in the week had to address the elephant — or rather the skinny mandolin player — in the room Saturday at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, when Chris Thile helmed his first show as Garrison Keillor's named replacement on "A Prairie Home Companion."

"You don't look like the host," actor Tim Russell said in a skit about Thile visiting the backstage area. "The host is a long-faced galoot. You're kind of young and fair."

Though not as sharp as the physical contrast between Thile and Keillor, the differences heard over the airwaves in Saturday's Thile-led episode of "Prairie Home" were easily discernible as Minnesota's famed public radio show enters a new era.

Keillor will be back as host Feb. 13 and remain center stage until Thile permanently takes over next fall. Even then, the "Prairie Home" patriarch will still be involved as a producer and probably a co-writer.