

REVIEW

Keillor returns to St. Cloud

Famous raconteur pays a visit to his 'Old Friends' at Pioneer Place

Alyssa Zaczek St. Cloud Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Garrison Keillor's longtime friend Bud Heidgerken once told me Keillor was "an outsider looking in" on Central Minnesota — "because he was an Anoka boy."

I'm an outsider looking in, too. I'm a Chicago girl, as Heidgerken might put it.

As such, the Garrison Keillor mythology is largely lost on me. I'm not someone who grew up under the folksy spell of "A Prairie Home Companion;" I thought Lake Wobegon was a real place until I moved to St. Cloud three years ago.

All of this is to say that when it came to Keillor's show "Old Friends," which played Thursday night at Pioneer Place on Fifth in St. Cloud, I had virtually no expectations.

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Garrison Keillor performs with Richard Dworsky at the beginning of "Old Friends" Thursday at Pioneer Place on Fifth. DAVE SCHWARZ, DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

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Keillor built his brand on a keen understanding of Central Minnesota's people, but his lovingly satirical glimpses into this corner of the world were, with his guidance, transposed into something universal through "A Prairie Home Companion," the radio variety show that ran for 42 years, from 1974 to 2016.

"Old Friends" was billed as "sweet duets, poetry, 'News from Lake Wobegon' and friendly bickering," and so it was.

(In case you were curious, it had indeed been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, and the church basement Sweetheart's Dinner was all the better for the former emcee having had a stroke that robbed him of speech.)

The nearly sold-out show, Keillor's first in St. Cloud in years, was played to an audience mostly comprised of folks of A Certain Age. When Keillor made his entrance (no fanfare, no lead-up,) he was met with hearty applause.

Keillor, who is not particularly known for his singing talent but is noted for his genuine love of music, sang more than he spoke.

Backed by the wickedly talented former "Prairie Home" musical director Richard Dworsky on piano, Keillor pleasantly meandered from Gillian Welch's maudlin "Orphan Girl" (somewhat needlessly changed to "Orphan Child" in this case) to a limerick-esque ditty about the joys of being a sperm.

You may recall Keillor, who is still married to his wife of over 20 years, was alleged in 2017 to have exchanged sexual emails with an employee of a "Prairie Home," resulting in his firing from Minnesota Public Radio.

In that context, some of his content choices for this show felt ill-advised.

Yes, there was some of the bawdy-but-never-blue humor that longtime Keillor fans would recognize as typical — a joke or two about Ole and Lena's sex life, for example — but under the shadow of the allegations, other choices felt too bold.

Early in the show, he said he "still feels protective towards women ... and (he) realize(s) they don't want that anymore." He also pointedly described himself as "a feminist by the time (he) was 6 years old" due to the fact that he was



Garrison Keillor performs at his show, "Old Friends," at Pioneer Place on Fifth. DAVE SCHWARZ, DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

raised by a hockey-team-sized gaggle of aunts. But outside of Keillor's self-referential comments, many of the musical and literary selections for the show seemed to reflect a theme, of sorts.

There was a recitation of the Shakespeare sonnet that begins "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state." A performance of "Frankie and Johnny," an American murder ballad about a "man doing (a woman) wrong." Another recitation, this time of a Mary Oliver poem that begins, "You do not have to be good."

The last time Keillor played the area was at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in April 2017, before the misconduct allegations broke. It seems possible that, consciously or not, Keillor was using the safety of a forgiving Central Minnesota audience to work out some of his feelings about the allegations and their fallout.

But if one could overlook some of the uncomfortable friction within the content (and appeared most could, as Keillor was given rapt attention and warm applause by seemingly everyone in the audience,) there were small, humble joys to uncover.

The high points of the show were

Keillor's duets with singer Christine Di-Giallondaro, a former "Prairie Home" regular whose voice is so breathtakingly, effortlessly gorgeous that one can't help but be captivated by their performance. She sometimes outshone Keillor.

Another unexpected gem was the "singing intermission," during which the audience was encouraged to stand and sing a capella some American folk favorites. (And, of course, a few hymns. This is a Keillor show, after all.)

Her chemistry with Keillor was such that their interactions felt entirely unrehearsed, which was lovely in its own, slightly awkward way.

At one point, the pair performed a Catchup Advisory Board tune written specifically for the St. Cloud audience:

"In Central Minnesota, people love the snow; Pickups or Polaris get you where you need to go, whether in Paynesville or if you're in St. Joe," the pair sang to appreciative murmurs.

Keillor plays well to his audience because he knows who they are: the same folk he gently, admiringly pokes fun at for a living.

To this Millennial's sensibilities, some of Keillor's trademark curmudgeonly quips feel hackneyed. Yes, we get

it, young people are exhausting, what with their iPhones and AirPods and constant texting! And heaven forfend we say "No problem" instead of "You're welcome" when we complete a service for you.

But even I, an admittedly cynical twenty-something and an outsider, can understand why Keillor's shows continue to draw a major audience decades on.

Prior to seeing "Old Friends," I found myself wondering how, exactly, one might define Keillor. Is he a writer? A musician? A radio host or audio play actor? An "entertainer," whatever that nebulous word means?

Having now seen him live, I think he's all of the above. He's a storyteller, certainly. He's a musician insofar as anyone who sings in church is a musician. He's entertaining most of the time.

But more than any of those descriptions, in "Old Friends," Keillor is a conduit for the communal experience of being a Central Minnesotan.

And what a rare, unique experience it is.

This is the opinion of Times reporter Alyssa Zaczek. Follow Alyssa Zaczek on Twitter: @sttimesalyssa or email her at azaczek@stcloudtimes.com.