

On the radio

By Eric Zorn

'Prairie Home' is radio as it was

IN MODERN TERMS, all the fuss and bother is a lot over one little radio program.

When "A Prairie Home Companion," a wry, quirky variety show that is performed in front of a live audience, visited Chicago for the first time this last weekend for three shows, a 20-person, three-vehicle entourage from Minnesota Public Radio brought curtains, speakers, pennants, souvenirs and crates of electronic equipment that took them two days just to set up in the Studebaker Theater. It was as if the crew were working for one of those touring rock bands; they had roadies [some in slick nylon jackets], a veritable forest of microphones and technicians watching squiggly lines on sound monitoring devices so hopelessly complicated only a few people in the world really understand them.

IN RADIO, this is extraordinary. For many years now radio programs generally have been safely ensconced in the polite, acoustically pure vacuum of the studio, where everything from talk to music takes place behind large plate glass. Live-audience radio variety shows haven't seen light in this town since the old days, and when you see the effort, expense and coordination that go into presenting what is actually a very simple

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Tempo

'Prairie Home Companion' on the road shows the best of radio as it was

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show, "A Prairie Home Companion," you see why.

The comedy-variety program, which airs at 6 p.m. Saturdays on WBEZ (81.5 FM), leaves its home base in St. Paul, Minn., once or twice a year to play in auditoriums in various parts of the country, something no other program does. Each show is a concert. Each show is a drama. Each show barely breaks even. Each show is almost completely different.

"We are busy all day every day when we're touring," says producer Margaret Moos. "That's one of the reasons we usually only go out for a short time."

The current Midwestern swing, including stops in Madison, Wis., Chicago and Interlochen, Mich., will last only 11 days. Moos spends her time before shows conferring with the show's traveling folk musicians, coordinating last-minute adjustments with the sound equipment, watching the auditorium fill up [they

always, always sell out] and keeping tabs on Garrison Keillor, the somewhat eccentric star of the show.

At least an hour before the show Keillor is ready, done up nattily in a tan suit, and pacing slowly back and forth behind the large black backdrop his crew hags from town to town. His pacing does not seem to result from nervous energy—indeed one doubts the man has a drop of adrenalin in his whole body—or boredom, but from the sort of distracted nonchalance you see at parties when a really shy person ambles slowly from the punch bowl to the crackers and back again so as not to be too conspicuous.

HE SPEAKS up occasionally, remarking that the Studebaker Theater reminds him of a slightly less rundown World Theater in St. Paul whence he has originated the show since 1974, when it was a modest, local endeavor. Every so often he lights a cigarette, pushes his ovalish horn-rimmed glasses up his nose and

rocks on his heels. Five minutes before showtime the musicians finish tuning the fiddles, banjos and guitars to the piano, the technicians run their final tests and the only sign that Keillor's utter repose has slipped is, in his words, "I seem to be sweating."

"He's really in a trance, especially just before he goes on," explains Moos. "He's concentrating very hard about what he's going to say; sometimes you can wave a hand in front of his face and he doesn't even notice."

With the house lights still up, Keillor slips onstage to introduce himself and sing his theme song:

"Hello love... oh... hello love."

Keillor is the host, sole writer and guiding light of "A Prairie Home Companion," a program that now airs on close to 300 National Public Radio outlets nationwide. Even a serious, sometimes rather wiffling, bitter-sweet gentlemans of 40 who is hailed by critics as a comedic genius and innovator in American entertainment.

PART FICTION, part fact, "Prairie Home" is the program that has single-handedly kept the parenthesis industry in business, as it seems impossible to describe the inventions of Keillor's mind without a generous supply of them: He sets the program in fictional Lake Wobegon, Minn., "where all the women are strong, all the men good looking and all the children above average" and his main "spouse" (there are no real ads on National Public Radio, on which he is syndicated) is Powdermilk Biscuits ("Heavens, they're tasty and expeditious... they give shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done. It's sort of magical, you see."


The denizens of this town (such as Father Emil, pastor of our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church and Harold Star, publisher of the Lake Wobegon Harold Star) and other bizarre sponsor (Halja's Frosty Good Grocery, Ajax Hot Sauce and Bertha's Kitty Boutique) comprise Keillor's Yoknapatawpha (the fictional county in which William Faulkner set most of his novels), and he seems able to improvise endlessly on humorous yet commonplace going-on in the neck of the woods that exists only at the top of his neck.

Keillor's program is as much a celebration of old-style, small-time radio programs as it is a gentle parody. As such it has acquired something of a cult following, with an estimated 1 million listeners a week, many of them in big cities where, Keillor says, "people never had their own Lake Wobegon." The Chicago live audience was an older, upscale crowd of the sort you'd expect to see at the symphony or opera—as well dressed as Keillor himself. They clapped along brightly to bluegrass music, grew hushed as Keillor's breathy, hypnotic voice described his own sense of wonder at seeing great paintings at the Chicago Art Institute and gave him ovations that literally shook sprinklings of plaster loose from the aged ceiling of the Studebaker.

IN THE WINGS, Studs Terkel, a special guest earlier in the show, saw in the audience response not only proof that innovative radio programs have a place in the mass market, but also that people are looking for a different kind of humor.

"This is a literate, intelligent, gentele audience, and they appreciate how brilliant, how subtle Garrison is," he says.

"You know, when WBEZ announced these performances here, the demand for tickets was incredible. And you know something else? I'll bet Ticketron has never even heard of Garrison Keillor!"



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