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Entertainment

On the road

'Prairie Home Companion' host shows off wry satire



Garrison Keillor: 'The world's tallest radio comedian'

By DAN TAYLOR
SAN FRANCISCO — Half a dozen musicians wandered around the half-lit stage. In the center, one man who stood a head taller than the rest seemed to be thinking about something.

His name is Garrison Keillor (pronounced "Keeler"), and he's the creator and host of the radio cult hit "A Prairie Home Companion," first heard on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974 and now distributed by American Public Radio to 260 stations nationwide.

The series, heard every Saturday at 6 p.m. KQED, 88.5 FM, and 3 p.m. KALW, 91.7 FM, is both a wry satire of, and loving tribute to, Keillor's native Midwest. It's a live variety show, set in the fictional small town of Lake Wobegon and brought to you by such make-believe sponsors as Bob's Bank, Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Art's Bait and Night O'Rest Tourist Cabins.

Keillor, his band and his guest stars had gathered to rehearse Thursday afternoon in the Warfield Theater for two live shows, held Friday and Saturday and sold out just hours after the shows were announced last month.

Reporters wandered in to interview "The World's Tallest Radio Comedian," as Keillor bills himself. All of them forgot to ask just how tall he is. He looks about 6 feet, 4 inches tall, but it wouldn't

matter if his height were 4 feet, 6 inches. After all, how many radio comedians are there these days?

Keillor stepped up to the microphone and said "Um." He paused, and seemed painfully shy. His massive forehead, shaggy eyebrows and old-fashioned eyeglasses made him look somber. Thunderously unassuming in a red-and-white sweater and gray corduroy pants, he appeared less formal than the photographers in blue jeans who crowded near him.

He began to introduce his guest stars, including longtime Sonoma County favorite, singer Kate Wolf. "Wolf, without an 'e,'" Keillor said. Wolf explained she now lives in west Marin County. "Where the cows are," Keillor said.

Keillor wandered to the edge of the stage and began to field questions from the reporters, often pausing before he answered. Tired from his trip to the city the night before, but a writer first and always, Keillor labored to frame spontaneous answers as wistfully witty as his radio show or his first book, "Happy to Be Here."

How much did this road version of the radio show cost to produce? "It cost a lot. I don't know how much. My economic values go back to the early '60s when I first started making money, so I still believe a one-bedroom apartment should cost \$125 a month. If I

knew how much we were paying for this theater, it would put me off doing the show."

Had he been to San Francisco before? Yes, in 1974, when he came out from St. Paul by train. "I came out on money I earned writing a story for the New York-er about the Grand Ole Opry," which led to his creation of "Prairie Home Companion."

"In the men's room at the Portland train station," he added,

"I lost the manuscript for my first story about Lake Wobegon." Now he has finished his second book soon to be published, devoted to growing up in Lake Wobegon.

In the hallway, on his way to the coffee pot, Keillor paused to explain why Midwesterners don't mind his satire. "They make fun of themselves. I say very little about them they could not have conceivably said about themselves."

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