

# Keillor struggles to keep to keep revived 'Prairie Home' fires burning

By Noel Holston  
Staff Writer

Garrison Keillor revived "A Prairie Home Companion" Saturday night, but that's not to say he resuscitated the show.

His first radio outing under the "Prairie Home" banner in more than six years was marked by a curiously low energy level. Maybe Keillor was tired, but he didn't seem as happy to be here as he said he was. The audience at St. Paul's World Theater was oddly subdued, too.

I really thought there would be spontaneous applause when Keillor said

the words "A Prairie Home Companion" the first time — or later, when he announced that it had been "a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." Maybe folks were trying to be polite, so as not to disturb the rhythm of the show that was being broadcast live, but they were very quiet.

Not that there was that much rhythm to disturb.

Filling two hours of airtime without some of the longer recurring features of "American Radio Company," Keillor's program of the past four years, meant using lots of smaller

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features that gave yesterday's broadcast a disjointed feel. It jumped from mock commercials to songs to poems and back without ever reestablishing the show's identity or sense of place.

Keillor has said that he wants music at the forefront again, and indeed, there was a lot of music. But while all of it could be described as highly professional, not much caught fire.

Guitarist Leo Kottke's selections, though virtuosic, tended to reinforce the low-spark atmosphere, as did Peter Ostroushko's nimble turns on fiddle and mandolin. Guest singer Tish Hinojosa came closest to igniting the show when she sang a poignant Spanish ballad she learned as a child. Her own songs, which had more the ring of everyday country-pop, received polite ovations. It was nothing like the electricity that country icon Lyle Lovett generated when he appeared on one of the last "Radio Company" broadcasts a few months ago.

Keillor sang, too: "Polly Wolly Doodle," the Beatles' "I Will," Bob Dylan's "On a Night Like This," some comedy originals. He didn't sing any gospel music, which is what he sings best.

A couple of times, Keillor came across like a lawyer whose own witnesses surprised him in court. His attempt to talk to Hinojosa about tortillas ended up bordering on ethnic stereotyping, and he seemed caught off guard when he asked Ostroushko about the National League pennant race and the musician took a slashing chop-chop at the Atlanta Braves.

Considering the caustic letter to the editor of the Star Tribune last week by Keillor's estranged wife, it was hard to overlook his references to marital problems, including a song-sketch about going to Wyoming, where a man could get some peace. "You're angry and bitter, with corn flakes for brains," he sang to the harpy wife (played by Sue Scott), "and that's why I'm heading for the Great Western Plains."

Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue was thin and jokey compared with his richer, more resonating stories. It was actually three anecdotes, and the last one especially seemed to be a veiled reference to his return to Minnesota and the "Prairie Home" format. Its central image was that of Lake Wobegonians rushing into the parade path to try to save the "flimsy, fictional" floats from being torn apart and carried off by a big, gusting wind.

Keillor made several other allusions to his return to *his* prairie home in the broadcast, including: "Man is not condemned to a life of innovation."

Nobody's looking for innovation here, just a heartfelt return to form.

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