

OK, guys, listen up

Your chronicler, Garrison Keillor, is coming to town

By JAMES NOLD JR., Special Writer

GUYS, YOUR long years in the vineyards and machine shops of obscurity have ended. The bard who will celebrate you has arrived and has begun to sing your song. "The Story of Guys" is Garrison Keillor's new book and, not coincidentally, his latest touring stage show, which comes Wednesday to Whitney Hall in the Kentucky Center for the Arts.

"Years ago, manhood was an opportunity for achievement, and now it is a problem to be overcome," Keillor writes in the introduction to his book. "Plato, St. Francis, Michelangelo, Mozart, Leonardo da Vinci, Vince Lombardi, Van Gogh — you don't find guys of that caliber today, and if there are any, they are not painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or composing 'Don Giovanni.' They are trying to be Mr. O.K. All-Rite . . . a guy who women consider Acceptable.

"Being all-rite is a dismal way to spend your life, and guys are not equipped for it anyway."

Keillor's tongue-in-cheek suggestion is to

If you go . . .

Garrison Keillor will appear at the Kentucky Center for the Arts on Wednesday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$18.50, \$24.50 and \$27.50; \$14.50 for students and senior citizens. Call 584-7777 or, toll-free, (800) 775-7777.

let women "take over business and government and manage society and finance and let guys be artists and hoboes. We are delicate as roses in winter and need to be wrapped in warmth or else we die."

What led the rather gentle Keillor — the man who would seem to be the voice of Mr. O.K. All-Rite — to go on the defensive?

"Guys have been reluctant to write about themselves as a gender," Keillor said in a telephone interview from his home in Wisconsin. "Feeling that my gender has been under attack for the last 10 or 15 years, I wanted to raise the flag — not on behalf of men, but on behalf of guys."

The difference? "I think guys are . . . basically men with a sense of humor."

Across the telephone lines, Keillor's voice sounds thinner than the one millions know from his radio shows, "A Prairie Home Companion" and "The American Radio Company" — hard as it is to believe that Keillor could produce tones more reticent than these that have told the world about Lake Wobegon for the past two decades.

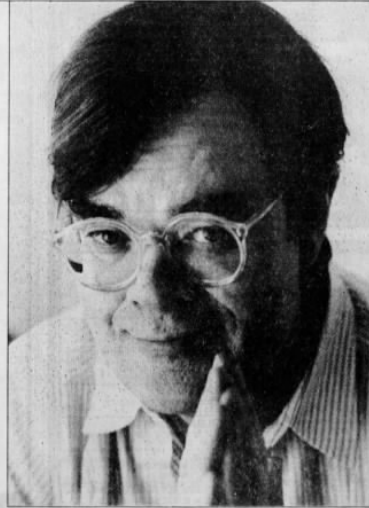
But that only reinforces the fact that, however shy his stage manner may be, Keillor is a performer.

As he talks about the state of guyhood, though, Keillor doesn't sound that much like a performer, or a humorist either.

Guy life, he said, is marked by "a pervasive sadness . . . a kind of melancholy that results from examining the facts: We can see the horizon, and we know that nothing good is going to come over it, and we know that today is going to be like every other day."

But it's that experience of sadness that

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Garrison Keillor: Manhood has become "a problem to be overcome."

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gives guys the ability to appreciate jokes, and Keillor contends that because of it men are the "keepers of the flame of American comedy... a noble task."

"If we depended on women for comedy, Joyce Brothers would be the funniest person in America," he said. "I'm glad I don't live in that world, myself. Women are creatures of some earnestness and, in my experience, somewhat literal-minded."

The passage of tortured, ludicrous longing known as the middle crisis is at the center of the guy experience as Keillor defines it.

Guys are marked by "a great restlessness" that once fueled the country's westward expansion but is largely frustrated these days.

"There's no way to express this now," Keillor said. "We can change apartments, I guess; go out on the freeway and drive faster for shorter periods of time."

But men settle down much too young, and when middle age approaches, they go through a convulsive crisis, and wonder what our lives are about, and go off and do something truly stupid."

What were Keillor's stupid actions? "I have done things of astounding foolishness, but I'm not sure I'm ready to repent of them yet," Keillor said. In fact, he said that he was in just such a state of convulsive crisis when he began "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974.

"The Story of Guys" is filled with guys struggling to deal with various ridiculous circumstances:

■ Dionysus, god of revelry and wine, turns 50 and discovers that orgies now leave his head feeling "like a lag bolt was screwed in the side of it."

■ The cowboy Lonesome Shorty rides the range, his bags bulging with his amaryllis-pattern chaps, longing for town when he's on the trail, banking to roam when he's settled down.

■ The father of Dionysus, Zeus, dodging divorce threats from his wife, Hera, takes the human form of a Lutheran minister in order to make time with the man's beautiful wife — only to discover forms of humiliation and impotence unknown to deities.

Keillor's stories have moved well beyond the simple working out of a humorous premise that marked his early New Yorker magazine pieces. He now delights in taking his narrative through the most sudden, arbitrary — but satisfying — twists.

"That comes from a sense of freedom that one can leap mountains in terms of logic and swing on ropes and travel across terrain in new ways," he said. "A story is not a straight-ahead hike on foot — one can wish oneself ahead."

In the stage version of "The Story of Guys," Keillor — accompanied by his longtime duet partner Kate MacKenzie and pianist Richard Dworsky — will sing songs and tell stories about the gender into which he was born.

Many of the stories in the stage show and book should be familiar to Keillor's radio listeners. They were adapted to (or in some cases adapted from) "Lonesome Radio Theater," the weekly selection of "true stories from the lives of men" featured on "American Radio Company."

Ironically, one of the major differences in Keillor's radio show this season — as it changes its name back to "A Prairie Home Companion" — is to drop "Lonesome Radio Theater" and in general de-emphasize drama in favor of music.

"Radio drama doesn't work for me," he said. He found it "laborious" at times over the past season. "For one thing, radio acting is a lot art."

In addition to the new run of "Prairie Home," Keillor is working on a number of other projects, including a novel about the Lake Wobegon girls' basketball team's trip to Europe; a book for young people about a little girl who grows up playing the violin; and a screenplay based on his classic monologues about a teen-ager's trip to see a rock concert in the big city.