

Garrison Keillor

Storyteller brings Lake Wobegon to Baton Rouge

By Robin Miller
Staff reporter

BATON ROUGE — You have this theater to yourself, save a photographer or two. Otherwise, this place is yours, and this show is being performed especially for you. Or so it seems.

It doesn't matter. You're happy, sitting in the front row, passing the time telling stories with your friend, waiting for the master storyteller to step onstage.

Oh, your stories are different from the storyteller's. They take place in McComb, Miss., instead of Lake Wobegon, Minn., and some of the characters lack the common sense of Clarence and Arlene Bunsen, but they're fun just the same.

Your friend tells of one character, a receptionist, who immediately has your eyes tearing in laughter.

The stories roll one after another.

There was the time the receptionist walked up to the best-selling novelist's 19th century mansion in New Orleans' Garden District, knocked on the door and said, "I heard a famous writer lived here, and I thought I'd check it out."

There was also the occasion when she decided to watch the network television premiere of "The Silence of the Lambs" because "it won all of those Academies."

Ahem, not Academy Awards. Just "Academies."

She watched the movie at a friend's house and was afraid to get out of her car upon returning home. She feared one of the movie's villains — the dead villain at that — would jump out from nowhere and skin her.

Then there was the biggie — the day she announced to everyone at work that she had hemorrhoids.

Ah, the memories. The stories keep you laughing no matter how many times you and your friend share them. But that's the trouble — you've heard them all before.

You want new stories, stories that originate from gossip at the Chatterbox Cafe. Stories of hap-

penings at Bunsen Motors, Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church and Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church.

You want to hear about small-town Minnesota guilt, overreaction and just plain silliness. And if the opportunity arises, you really wouldn't mind hearing the school fight song:

We're going to fight, fight, fight for Wobegon

And be strong and resolute.

And our mighty foes will fall down in rous.

When we poke 'em in the snoot!

(Rah! Rah!)

Sung by your storyteller, of course. It just wouldn't sound right sung by anyone else. The stories, too, would lack that understanding, that certain familiarity only he could project.

So you wait, trading McComb stories with your friend while Marcia Ball and her band warms up onstage with Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys. They'll be the musical acts in this night's show, a broadcast that will reach out nationwide to listeners of National Public Radio.

This broadcast will originate from Louisiana's capital city in celebration of the 15th anniversary of its public radio station, WRKF.

Which brings up a thought. This show was already five years old when WRKF was established.

It was already finding its way to millions of listeners through live performances on Saturday evenings to become their prairie home companion.

"A Prairie Home Companion." The name sticks with you as it has for others. It doesn't matter when you first heard it or where, you become hooked.

Perhaps that's why tonight's performance here in the Centroplex Theatre for the Performing Arts is sold out. For now, you have it all to yourself. Well, that is, you and your friend. And a few photographers.

You settle into your seat and listen to the Louisiana-flavored music. The "on the air" sign on the right side of the stage is off for now. This is only the dress rehearsal.

The music suddenly stops, yet the bands exit the stage and yet



Robin Miller — Staff reporter

Garrison Keillor (right) stands in red-socked feet to rehearse a skit for "A Prairie Home Companion" inside Baton Rouge's Centroplex Theatre for the Performing Arts. Rehearsing with him are (left to right) troupe members Tom Keith, Alice Playten and Tim Russell.

another hand enters. This is the small musical group that backs all of "A Prairie Home Companion's" performances, whether home in the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., its former home in New York's Town Hall or here.

Musical arranger Richard Dworsky sits at the piano and runs the group through several backup pieces. He doesn't seem to fit this show's trademark meekness, yet he fits it perfectly.

Long hair topped by a baseball cap, jeans, loose shirt — he looks more like an MTV roadie than what you would perceive to be the appearance of a Minnesota Public Radio regular. He's almost

too cool.

Perhaps you've been thinking too much of Lake Wobegon, your storyteller's mythical town of down home innocence where "the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average." Maybe you expected all of the regulars to look conservatively subdued, just as the storyteller will appear tonight in his tuxedo and red bow tie.

Still, you know your storyteller's appearance is an illusion. If he were as placid as he appears, he would be blind to the humor behind the main street veneer of Lake Wobegon. It seems that's the way he wants it;

his calm appearance being overshadowed by his incredible insight, making his humor even more noticeable.

You realize that this is why you welcome Dworsky's appearance. He's from chilly Minnesota, but he looks more Louisiana, like home. Especially with the drums of Baton Rouge's Spanish Town Mardi Gras parade echoing over the crowd's roar outside.

This calls your attention to the musicians. They're smiling, enjoying South Louisiana's late February warmth. Some of them are wearing glittery, plastic strands of beads, probably thrown by Spanish Town. ■ Please see WOBEGON, C-3

Sounding off is his business

By Robin Miller
Staff reporter

BATON ROUGE — Sometimes they tell him to bark like a dog.

Other times they tell him to make the sound of passing cars.

This time he'll have to sound like a chicken.

Not any chicken. Boudin the cigarette-smoking, fighting chicken.

Tom Keith doesn't seem fazed. He's ready for anything handed to him. He even seems to be looking forward to taking on the personality of Boudin, a character who has lines, yet can say nothing.

"Oh believe me, there isn't any school you can go to to learn this," Keith says, glancing toward the stage. His sound effects closet is intact and ready for the night's show. "I really don't know what Garrison is going to need until the Friday before the show. I usually have it, but if I don't, I'll ask someone where the nearest hardware

store is, then I'll ride over and get it."

The Garrison to whom he refers is Garrison Keillor, founder and executive producer of "A Prairie Home Companion," a live radio broadcast with a variety show format based in St. Paul, Minn.

The show was first aired July 6, 1974, on Minnesota Public Radio. Keillor developed the idea for a live broadcast after writing a magazine article on the Grand Ole Opry.

The show is now in its 20th year and broadcast nationwide over at least 300 National Public Radio stations.

The show moved from Minnesota to New York in 1989, where it took on a bigger format and changed its name to the "American Radio Company." There were a few years of hiatus, some live appearances on the Disney Channel and some recordings made.

Then the show returned home under its original name. Now its ■ Please see SOUNDING, C-3



Robin Miller — Staff reporter

Tom Keith (right) gets help from a stage hand during "A Prairie Home Companion" skit. Keith is in charge of sound effects for the show and has been working with its founder, Garrison Keillor, for 21 years.

Wobegon

Continued from C-1

"When's he coming?" your friend asks, interrupting your stream of consciousness. She's anxious for the arrival of the storyteller, too.

You shrug, becoming restless, wringing your hands; then you look back at the stage. Suddenly your storyteller is there, standing by the script-filled music stand, calmly giving directions.

Some things are as you expect. His straight hair is swept fearlessly to the side, round glasses propped staidly on his pug nose.

The surprise comes when looking at his attire. You never expected to see the white T-shirt tucked in rumpled suit pants. You can't help laughing when he sits atop a stool to remove his shoes to reveal a pair of red socks, eyes passively sweeping past empty theater seats.

Your friend takes a closer look. The socks are worn at the toes, and the storyteller doesn't care. In fact, he seems to prefer it that way.

So unassuming, so unfazed. The people of Lake Wobegon would be shocked to see one of their own being so, well, so inappropriate.

Your friend laughs, finding this almost as funny as the hem-orrhoid bedeviled receptionist. Not that the storyteller is anything like the receptionist. His nonchalant nature just produces laughter from the same source, somewhere deep down that when reached, can transform the normal into the absurd. Or vice versa.

Just like the storyteller's tales. You know it's only natural for the storyteller to appear rumpled. He arrived in Baton Rouge Friday morning, went to his hotel and began writing the show's script. He went over the show with his group that night and the next morning — this morning, in fact — he made revisions.

Then he came here. "A Prairie Home Companion's 1994-95 season

Continued from C-1

making a 20th anniversary tour around the country, and Keith is along for the ride.

"Garrison is the one who got me into it," he says, sitting now in one of the theater's empty seats away from the noise and confusion onstage. "I've been working with him for 21 years. I used to mix sound for the show, then he wanted me to start doing vocal sound effects. After awhile, he started giving me lines."

Keith is quiet, seemingly filled with the Minnesota reservation keitler has personified through stories of the mythical Lake Wobegon. Yet Keith is anything but reserved.

He co-hosts a morning radio program on Minnesota Public Radio Monday through Friday, making his personality with an alter ego named Jim Ed Poole, and this night, in Baton Rouge's Centreprix Theater for the Performing Arts, he'll be Boudin the Chicken, fighting for the honor of Guy Noir, Radio Detective.

Keith smiles, his hair tied back in a ponytail, the end just touching the collar of his gray sweatshirt, the word "Radio" emblazoned across the front.

"Well, let's see," he says. "Our show in the mornings is just called 'The Morning Show.' My co-host's name is Dale Connelly — we just couldn't come up with anything creative for the name."

"We play a variety of music. Sometimes it's big band, other times it's classical. We'll also play music by the people who will be on the show tonight — Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys and Marcia Ball."

This night's performance will be no different for him. The audience may be a little more spirited since it is composed mostly of Louisianians.

The timing is just right, too. The show has been brought to Baton Rouge in celebration of the



Robin Miller — Staff reporter

Garrison Keillor sits on a stool to take his shoes off during the dress rehearsal for "A Prairie Home Companion" in Baton Rouge Feb. 25. The show was brought to Baton Rouge in celebration of public radio station WKRF's 15th anniversary.

begin Oct. 1, opening with a 20th anniversary show in the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. Following that performance are 18 more shows in St. Paul and 16 in the road. The show came to Baton Rouge 10 years ago. WKRF's timing was perfect this year, the Saturday before Mardi Gras.

He's been telling the news of Lake Wobegon since July 6, 1974. There have been a few years of hiatus in between, but the town never stopped bustling. It just continued in everyday routine, stockpiling tales for the storyteller.

Many of the stories have since been recorded, a lot of them compiled into books. *We are STILL Married*, *Happy to Be Here*, *Lake Wobegon Days*, *Leaving Home*

16th anniversary of WKRF, Baton Rouge's public radio station. The day falls on the Saturday before Mardi Gras. Keith traveled from St. Paul on Friday to make the show.

"That's usually my schedule," he says. "I'll do the show in St. Paul Monday through Friday, then fly to wherever Garrison is doing the show that weekend. It's a tough schedule. We'll do three weeks on the road, then we'll have a week off."

"A Prairie Home Companion's 1994-95 season began Oct. 1 in St. Paul. It runs through July 1 and the schedule includes 18 home shows and 16

on the road.

Keith, draped in Minnesota quietness, makes his way backstage for a dinner break. From there, it's straight into the 5 p.m. live broadcast and Boudin the Chicken.

He appears onstage for the performance completely transformed, sweatshirt gone, vest and tie in place. When time comes for the chicken to make his appearance, there are whispers in the audience.

"He stole the show in that skit," one woman whispers. And he did.

Boudin will meet later with Guy Noir who will set him up in a round against the fighting chick, on *Battling Betty*.

If Boudin wins, Guy gets to marry the sister of *Battling Betty's* owner. If Betty wins, then Guy must cash out \$1,000 — all of the money he won on the gambling boat on which he came to Baton Rouge.

The storyteller, along with the rest of the troupe, actors Tim Russell and Alice Playten, also run through a Louisiana-style installment of "Life With the Cowboys," where its macho characters learn that tears really can come to their eyes after eating crawfish doused in Tabasco sauce, and a series of northern-er's misinformed perception of the South.

Your stomach hurts from laughing as the troupe goes through the entire gamut of Tennessee Williams characters while Keith makes snorting pig noises.

Everything is so engaging, so smooth. You could sit in here and watch them all day. Yet something is missing.

You haven't heard the news from Lake Wobegon. That has to wait until tonight.

The storyteller and his crew disappear backstage to eat and change. They have less than an hour before the show.

The theater fills quickly, people of all ages, all talking in an excited hush.

"The 'air' sign's red letters are glowing in the dark, and the show begins. The storyteller, now dressed in his tuxedo and red tie, takes the stage, a strand of Mardi Gras beads around his neck, feet still clad in red socks.

There's music, there are the skits, there's even the storyteller's description of Louisiana and Mardi Gras to his radio audience.

Then there's the news from Lake Wobegon.

The audience's cheers cause goosebumps. You're excited, too.

He tells of the pastor who accidentally dumps the fender of a new car owned by one of his parishioners, the boy who smushed the fashion store's front window when throwing chunks of ice at his friend and the sheriff's leftover guilt from boyhood when he hurled a water balloon at the hand-dryer.

The cheering doesn't stop there. Both Marcia Ball and Steve Riley take the stage with the show's band to pump out a Mardi Gras tune. The storyteller joins in the singing and troupe

members throw Mardi Gras beads to the audience.

It's a party inside the theater. You can only imagine what listeners on the outside are thinking. Minnesota, meet Louisiana.

Mardi Gras.

The theater clears as fast as it filled, but you stand outside the front doors talking over the show with friends. It isn't long before a tall, lanky figure passes you, heading for a reception a few yards away at the Old State

Capitol.

"Hey, I enjoyed your show," someone from afar yells.

You realize the lanky person is the storyteller. He smiles, then waves in the direction of the far-away voice.

Then it hits you, how privileged you've been. To see this in action, to see it live.

To spend the afternoon with the storyteller, to spend Mardi Gras in Lake Wobegon with Garrison Keillor.

Contacting Editors, Reporters

The Features staff covers news about health and medicine, food, fashion, entertainment, etc., in central Louisiana. The department can be reached at (318) 487-6341 between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. (Long distance callers may call toll-free at 1-800-223-8391.) Numbers for the Sports and Metro departments can be found on Sections 8 and C2.

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Managing Editor 487-6370
Asst. Managing Editor 487-6372
Features Editor 487-6341

Contacting reporters

Features staff members and the news subjects they primarily deal with are:
Jim Dwyer, food 487-6344
Mary Ann Anderson 487-6342
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