

Keillor blends familiarity with local surprises

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A live version of "Radio Days" came to Hartford Saturday night as Garrison Keillor and his cast of merry pranksters and musicians presented "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Bushnell.

Keillor, dressed in trademark dark suit, red bow tie and socks, pushed back his forelock as he showed his master storytelling and emcee abilities. The 65-year-old Bushnell seemed the perfect setting for a live radio production that harkens back to big bands and pre-television times when families would gather round the Emerson and hear magic sounds in a darkened living room.

The deep radio voice of Keillor spins its own spell, asking listeners to paint pictures in their heads as he tells stories of a big lunkfish named Fred or the hapless detective Guy Noir. Keillor is a kind of hipster doofus. You know he is sophisticated with his bobbing and weaving storylines, yet he is often the butt of his own jokes. A kind of Forrest Gumpian Everyman with a little more savvy.

An audience — especially one raised on television sitcoms — loves predictability and fans of Lake Wo-

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begon, Powdermilk Biscuits, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church and The Guy's Shoe All-Star Band, reveled in the familiarity. Keillor is a smooth operator, seducing with basso profundo knowledge of how to work the crowd. He won over all by doing his homework, throwing in local references to the beauty of Bushnell Park, the fantastical architecture of the domed state Capitol, and the mythical perfection of the UConn women's basketball team. And he made jokes at our Insurance Capital expense doing an advertisement for Connecticut Life and Disaster Co.

Those of a certain age cannot help but compare Keillor to the old Ed Sullivan show, which began as the Toast of the Town and translated into a Sunday night ritual of vaudeville on television. Keillor and company have that same effect. He presents a variety of acts with gentle good humor and quiet intelligence. Saturday he treated the crowd to the magnificent violin per-



■ Keillor

formance of Chee-Yun of New York by way of Seoul, Korea. The slim young woman moved some to tears as she played the exquisite "Masseenet Air On A Theme by Thais." She dedicated a spirited arrangement of "America" from "West Side Story" to her new country; she recently became an American citizen. And she accompanied Keillor to a sweet rendition of Irving Berlin's "What'll I Do?" Other featured players were Paul Rishell, a blues singer and guitarist and Annie Raines, an accomplished harmonica player, both from Boston. They are members of the John Sebastian Jug Band, and their collaboration was fine indeed, especially on a slow interpretation of Jerry Lee Lewis' "Oh Baby" which was Southern fried broken heart.

But best of all was the quiet good humor of Keillor as he told the news of Lake Wobegon; taking the ordinary and making it wry. This week's topic was high school graduation and he charmed the crowd with the story of a boring speaker — the school superintendent — who "explored the terror the crowd feels when they know it's an ad-libbed speech."

Keillor inspired no such terror, just warmth and admiration from a crowd that appreciated his fine ad-lib talent.