

Keillor Has Quiet Week in (Salt) Lake Woebegon

By Brandon Griggs
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Garrison Keillor strolled onto the Abravanel Hall stage Saturday afternoon and turned to survey the 260 red-jacketed, pink-bloused members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir seated behind him.

"It's a pleasure to be here with this gorgeous choir that sounds even a little bit better than it did when I was a child," he said, cradling his microphone. "And I'm pleased to see you're wearing the colors of my high school back in Minnesota."

With that, Keillor removed his tie and loosened his collar. A quartet to Keillor's right struck up a familiar theme. To Keillor's left, a red "ON AIR" sign lighted up. And "A Prairie Home Companion" beamed live from Salt Lake City to nearly 2 million radio listeners around the country.

Keillor has appeared several times in Salt Lake City, most recently at Kingsbury Hall on the University of Utah campus. But this live performance of his signature show, broadcast from Utah on 325 radio stations nationwide, was a first.

Ambling about the stage in an ill-fitting gray suit, Keillor ran the two-hour show like a low-key ringmaster, introducing guests, warbling ditties and leading comedy sketches with an endearing brand of gallant awkwardness. He even remembered to plug KUER, the Salt Lake City public-radio station that broadcasts his program each week.

Keillor reserved special affection for the musical institution whose records he enjoyed as a boy growing up in tiny Anoka, Minn. Keillor recited a story of how his father once brought home a new stereo phonograph, along with three record albums. One of those albums was by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

"He put it on, and we listened to it, dumbfounded," Keillor said. Compared to the motley choir at the Keillors' neighborhood church, "the Mormons



Rick Egan/The Salt Lake Tribune

Garrison Keillor makes plenty of faces rehearsing for his first live S.L. performance Saturday.

sounded almost as if they came from another world. We bought their records . . . and we played them often, especially on Sunday after dinner, while cleaning up in the kitchen."

Keillor introduced the Tabernacle Choir with a 10-minute version of Mormon history, then listened, eyes closed, as the choir sang four hymns. Under the direction of Jerold Ottley, the choir closed with a rousing rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" that brought the sold-out audience alive.

After a short intermission, Keillor returned to an empty stage to perform several sketches with his comedy troupe and sing a curious song in German.

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Keillor Endearing to S.L. Audience

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Then, as the lights darkened, Keillor took the microphone and softly spoke eight familiar words.

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," he said, launching into his trademark weekly monologue about the fictional hamlet in rural Minnesota. There was a burst of recognition from the audience, which then hunkered down in its seats for the story that was sure to follow.

During the next 25 minutes, Keillor wandered the stage, followed by a lone spotlight, reciting his soliloquy without notes. In his monologue, he somehow managed to weave the town's Toast & Jelly Days Carnival, a baseball game, a lover's quarrel and a Jell-O mold contest into a funny, sharply observed slice of small-town Americana.

Keillor got one of his biggest laughs describing the Lake Wobe-

gon town doctor, an obese chain smoker.

"When he talks to you about your health, he gets your attention," he said in his deep, resonant voice. "It's sort of like when the town drunk tells you you've been drinking too much."

While his storytelling skills remain sharp, Keillor had less success with hit-or-miss comedy sketches that poked fun at Newt Gingrich and "The Bridges of Madison County." Still, it was a treat to watch sound-effects whiz Tom Keith and his endless bag of aural tricks, including a zany zoo-ful of animal calls.

In addition to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Keillor was joined onstage by Ranch Romance, a sequined, tuxedo-clad Western swing quartet that performed three sprightly numbers.

The show raced along until 6 p.m., when the "ON AIR" light blinked off and Keillor left the stage to a thunderous ovation. He returned to give the audience one last treat: a frisky version of "Cat, You Better Come Home," a song that also happens to be the title of a children's book he has written.

"See you again sometime soon," Keillor mumbled shyly. He waved. And he was gone.