

Do we realize what we mean?

By Richard Nunley

NEW LEBANON, N.Y.

IT'S BEEN a quiet week in the Berkshires, just as in Garrison Keillor's home town, Lake Wobegone. School resumed for most kids Tuesday or Wednesday, the leaves on a lot of trees changed color seemingly overnight, and on the roads there was a noticeable step-up in the number of cyclists and runners out training for the Josh Billings, as well as cars with canoes tied on the roof.

Garrison Keillor comes to mind because we went over to SPAC in Saratoga, N.Y., the Friday before Labor Day to see him do his one-man show of songs and monologues. The first 40 minutes were entertaining, but the next two hours were long ones indeed.

Thousands and thousands of people had come to hear him. But his gifts as a storyteller better suit the intimacy of a radio set or printed page than the mass-throng setting of an arts stadium. And they stand up best in relatively brief formats, not hours-long stage performances.

Still, it was interesting to see him in person, even though we didn't get home until quarter to one in the morning. He wore a tuxedo with no tie and bright red socks. Watching him through binoculars during his monologues, I couldn't make out whether he was reciting from memory or extemporizing.

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While telling his major story of the evening, a nearly hour-long baroquely involved account of small-time attempted fraud on the part of the manager of the Lake Wobegone Whippets, he paced back and forth across the front of the SPAC stage — which must be at least 100 feet wide — holding a black ball-shaped microphone to

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his lips and trailing a long black cord back and forth as he paced.

He seemed almost in a trance, his eyes either shut or very narrowly squinted, his husky voice magnified to giant proportions by the megawattage of SPAC's sound system, a final consonant taking on a sonic life of its own.

Whether he was reciting a memorized text or inventing the story on the spot, his performance was a tour de force — not a stumble, not an unplanned hesitation, not a digression along the way left not tied into the story by the end.

My guess is that it was some of both. I think he must have blocked out the main episodes and their order pretty carefully beforehand, and with that framework clearly in memory, spun out the actual wording on the spot, making use of ready-made ingredients the way Homer did.

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Perhaps his method is a modern instance of classical rhetoric, which trained the Roman orator to conceive of his discourse as a building, each room of which he imagined as furnished with the various points he wished to make. Then when the time came for him to stand in the rostrum and deliver, he would mentally move through the rooms in order, presenting an extempore account of the "contents" of each.

So although Keillor seemed to be awfully tired and to feel the performance as a whole was not going well, nevertheless the display of virtuosity was brilliant. The effect of a powerful work of imagination is to transform your own perception of experience for a while, and Keillor's stories certainly do that. That is why so many thousands of people turned out to hear him.

He arouses nostalgia, but it is not just nostalgia. In his unique way he brings reassurance that despite the constant barrage of

change in modern life and the world-upside-down upheavals that seem these days to follow one on the heels of another, we, though more knowing, are really not so different from earlier times and earlier lives back there in the innocence of small-town America. Goodness, kindness, humor, personal significance — we are assured these things endure.

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Last Saturday I went to Saratoga again, this time to talk en route about the Berkshires to a bus tour from a convention of the American Association for State and Local History to Arrowhead, The Mount, Tanglewood, and the old Richmond district school which the Richmond Historical Society has preserved and restored.

I had never done such a thing before and couldn't imagine how I could keep talking impromptu for an hour and a half, especially standing at the front of a swaying bus and riding backward.

I had jotted down in the back of my mind some topics and salient dates in the order of the geography we would be passing through, but could not imagine they would possibly last from Saratoga to Holmes Road. To my amazement, I kept talking almost all the way and had lots left unsaid as we pulled into Arrowhead. The old rhetorical method works!

But what impressed me was how fascinated those on the tour — from Wyoming, Minnesota, Indiana, Colorado, Maryland, Texas — were to actually be in the Berkshires, even though it was raining and Greylock was invisible, totally socked in.

They loved it, as if they found in the region something they were hungry for, something that mobilized their deep respect.

They made me look at our place — and us — with new eyes. Do we realize what we mean to others?