

Local

Garrison Keillor captivates crowd at SPAC finale

By Matthew Crowley
Staff Writer

Review

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Storyteller Garrison Keillor gave the Saratoga Performing Arts Center a fitting send-off Friday with a night as graceful and gentle as a summer sunset.

The show by Keillor, famous for his weekly syndicated radio variety program, was the final special event of SPAC's 1995 summer season and quite unlike any other SPAC show this summer.

Since June, SPAC has featured the rare and amazing. Superb athletes glided through amazing steps in the ballet. World-class musicians played symphonic music in the Philadelphia Orchestra. Rock bands brought throngs of screaming fans for nights of standing and stomping.

Keillor's methods were simple: He used everyday words and adjectives, the same entertainment tools people have used for centuries, back before people thought they needed television, video and multimedia for fun.

"We're going to show you some slides now," Keillor said early in his two-hour performance. "But because I'm in the radio business, we're going to skip the video portion."

A nearly-full amphitheater and generously occupied lawn, which seemed to contain many middle-aged fans, sat riveted as Keillor spoke. Even when the monologues lasted past 20 minutes, nobody nodded off; there was hardly a sneeze or a snifle.

Keillor's presence is mammoth. He stands 6-feet-4, but his moves were understated. Often he rocked on his heels, or walked or sat. He came out singing, using poetic license to change a song about the rivers of Babylon to a ditty about Lake Wobegon, his fictitious small town somewhere in Minnesota.

Lake Wobegon and its inhabitants have made Keillor famous. Weekly, he's shared Lake Wobegon tales on his weekly National Public Radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor expressed his humor in music for much of his two-hour show. Once, he joined one member of his entourage-du-jour, the Saratoga Festival Orchestra, in a song about how Lutherans in Minnesota never admitted to liking or disliking anything in life and, apparently, beyond.

Keillor asked his dust partner how her parents are, but learned they'd died. The partner reported her parents still couldn't decide if they like it; death is so-so.

Keillor incorporated the local region into his show. He tried to mention WAMC, the Albany station that carries his show, but said "WMAA."

"Lake Wobegon wanted to become a spa town like Saratoga," he said. "But the water didn't smell bad enough."

Saratoga was also the subject of an impromptu song that Keillor said he'd written Friday afternoon, just for the show. He remarked at how quiet Saratoga has become since the Saratoga Race Course closed last Monday, bringing laughter from the audience.

"Now that the tourists have gone, how peaceful is the town," Keillor sang. "Now that the tourists have gone, the prices can come down."

Keillor kept fans laughing, wondering what instrument Jesus Christ might play were he a Lutheran. Instrument by instrument, he went through conductor Phillip Brunelle's orchestra, deciding which instrument were suitable.

Basoons, he decided were too ridiculous. Bassoon music was a clear signal someone was watching cartoons.

Oboes were too sexy, he said, oboe music in movies usually indicated some woman would soon remove her shirt.

Harp, he decided, were fit for Lutherans. They were for nice people. Percussion instruments would also work for Lutherans; they sat in the back and waited forever for a few seconds to play.

Keillor sent the crowd home after a song about a cat. The cat had left home, become a star in commercial cat food, but had eventually come home.

The story could have been about Keillor himself. In 1987, he left his home in Minnesota, ending a long relationship and stopping "Prairie Home Companion" after a 14-year run. Minnesotans were slow to forgive Keillor for leaving a lover who'd made him famous, for another lover.

In 1991, though, Minnesota welcomed Keillor back, just as Keillor welcomed back his fictitious cat.

And Friday's fans everywhere, from down in front to far away on the lawn were happy to have Lake Wobegon's prodigal son back at storytelling.

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