

Muncie makes the 'Prairie'

Garrison Keillor's popular public radio show visits Ball State

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The Star Press

MUNCIE — It was 2 hours and 45 minutes before the public radio program *A Prairie Home Companion* would go on the air live Saturday from Ball State University's Emens Auditorium.

Garrison Keillor, the show's host, was making some changes.

"I don't think I'll sing the end of that song," he said to keyboard player Richard Dworsky, leader of The Guy's All-Star Band.

Dworsky, without flinching, scribbled changes onto his sheet music. They moved on.

A towering man of serious expression, Keillor sang a few lines of *Down In the Valley* while attaching cufflinks to his tuxedo shirt. His ran his finger through his unruly hair.

Around him, technicians in jeans and T-shirts adjusted the snaking wires across the stage.

More folks with important-looking nametags were rushing about, handing out updated scripts, marking "stand here" spots on the stage with masking tape and testing ("check one-two-three") microphones.

Two men in headphones, armed with ringing cellular phones, checked levels and monitored a bank of red and green lights on one side of the stage. More men were in the back, experimenting with lighting. The background changed from green to an orange sunset to sky blue with a dusting of clouds. Spotlights darted across the performers.

The band was squeezed into a small space at center stage. A front of a farm house, a prairie home perhaps, provided the only



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backdrop.

A table cluttered with a telephone, bells and other props was set up stage right, where sounds effects guru Tom Keith worked his magic. An army of microphone stands stood at attention across the front of the stage.

An hour and 30 minutes to go. More changes.

Emily Shackleton, 11, was on stage. Last year's winner of the "Talent From Towns Under 2,000" contest was going over a few duets Keillor. Keillor plopped the bespectacled blonde on a stool; her feet dangled a few feet from the floor.

Her mother, Helen, and father, Randy, sat in the audience, beaming with pride. "My daughter hummed before she talked," Helen would say later.

The two ran through *Side By Side*. "We may or may not do this



ON LOCATION: Garrison Keillor (top) recites his part with Emily Shackleton during a rehearsal for *The Prairie Home Companion*. Keillor (left) used a cup to change his voice during another part of the rehearsal at Ball State University's Emens Auditorium.

song," Keillor said. "We'll see."

Next up was a stop-and-start version of *Wild Irish Rose*, in an effort to get the ending just right.

"He is so nice," Shackleton, of Biwabik, Minn. (pop. 1,087), said later. "He makes you feel comfortable. I'm not nervous at all when I'm up there."

Shackleton won the competition last year after recording her audition on an answering machine. "My parents listened to the show a lot," Shackleton said. "Since I won, I listen to it all the

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time now. He makes me laugh."

He was certainly making the reporters and photographers in the audience laugh during this rehearsal.

"Hardly a shutter moved when it was just me up here, but bring a pretty young girl up here and all the photographers get busy," he said.

An hour to go.

Sue Scott, Tim Russell, Keith and Keillor were going over commercials, such as "Adventures In Communication," where they made mock phone calls with the help of plastic cups, and messages from "our friends at the Ketchup Advisory Board."

Scott would read a page flawlessly and then let it drop to the floor. All the actors moved through the lines with ease; the word professional came to mind immediately.

You can tell Keillor and company did their homework. Muncie was mentioned more than a few times throughout the rehearsal — Ball glass jars, sweet corn and ketchup?

"[People in Muncie], they're normal," Russell said. "The most normal, because they eat ketchup..."

Keillor made suggestions to

performers concerning inflection and accents. "Let's run through one more," he said to his cohorts before leading into another commercial. "Am I crying too much on that one?" Scott asked of Keillor.

"No, it's fine," he said.

More commercials. More constructive criticism. More rewriting.

Fortunately, some rehearsals took place Friday night and Saturday morning. Except for the Newark Balkan Chorus. "We just got here this afternoon," Elly Barksdale, 14, said. "Our plane couldn't take off because of bad weather."

They made it and the a capella choir of young girls ages 10 to 16 from Newark, Vt. (pop. 354), were able to rehearse at 3 p.m. "I just can't believe we're here," she said. "This is so great."

The chorus was one of six finalists in the T-TUTT contest. And where would Barksdale put the Watertower trophy if she and her fellow singers won?

"We'll probably put it in the town clerk's office," she said. "It's a double-wide trailer. We'll let the whole town come and see it."

Forty minutes to go and the performers were still running over lines.

If past *A Prairie Home Companion* shows are any indication, everything will be ready to go by show time.

We hope.