



Gene GREY

Keillor weaves magic in your mind

ITHACA — The Bailey Hall stage was a clutter of wires and electronic gizmos. A band was off in one corner, a clutch of audio equipment in another. Three actors stood patiently at microphones, scripts held in their hands. Garrison Keillor, tall, lanky, rickless and with an open coat showing a definite paunch, decided to rehearse the audience of 2,000 gawkers in an impromptu version of *Amazing Grace*.

"Why don't you in front turn and face those in back," Keillor suggested. "I think we can create a cone of sound right in the middle of the hall."

The song didn't make the cut for the on-air broadcast, but it did show that as a laid-back performer, Keillor makes Perry Como look like Don Rickles.

A week ago Saturday, Keillor brought his show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, to Cornell University's Bailey Hall. What two audiences got to see was a rehearsal and then the actual performance of his weekly radio program, which is broadcast live to more than 400 public radio stations, including WSKG, which sponsored the appearance.

Not usual radio fare

In an age when most radio is formatted rock lists, "music of your life" exercises in nostalgia or empty chatter, Keillor offers a real throwback: radio of character, live music and inventive chatter.

While his radio persona has always struck me as a con — corn, New Age steamed instead of cooked — he is obviously on to something. He has created perhaps the most popular program on public radio and has kept it going for 20 years.

Watching the rehearsal and then listening to the show as I drove home, I found that he really is able to create an entire world, bound by Lake Wobegon, his fictional Minnesota home, and his audience's fertile imagination.

Pictures in your head

Listening to his kind of radio show isn't passive like watching television; it is interactive. It takes two: Keillor and you. To quote an old cliché, radio, at least Keillor's radio, is a theater of the mind.

While listening to him tell his version of Ulysses, set in Ithaca, naturally, the listener really sees the ships tossed at sea (the sound created by simply rubbing a balloon), Cyclops having his eye poked out (crinkling a plastic plate) and the bawling of sheep (actors bawling). His trio of brilliant radio actors — Tom Keith, Tim Russell and Sue Scott — bring to mind the wonderful casts that Stan Freberg used to gather at CBS in the last days of commercial network radio. And no finer compliment could be given the Keillor cast.

I don't know exactly when I became a fan of *A Prairie Home Companion*. It may have been one Sunday afternoon when, half dozing, I heard coming from my radio not brittle, trash, loud noises, but a voice speaking calmly. It wasn't an excited voice trying to sell me something; it was simply a voice telling a not-terribly-momentous story. It was a captivating voice.

It was Garrison Keillor's voice, and he turns words and sounds into pictures in your head.