

Listen up! Garrison Keillor's trucking into town

By **ELINOR J. BRECHER**
Herald Staff Writer

Sometime Thursday, an 18-wheeler with Minnesota plates will roll up to the Jackie Gleason Theater on Miami Beach, and driver Russ Ringsak will start unloading a fantasy.

Figuratively, there's a whole town aboard — Lake Wobegon — as well as a slightly seedy private eye named Guy Noir, a snooty French eatery called the Café Boeuf, and Bertha's Kitty Boutique, "for persons who care about cats."

Literally, there are huge speakers, giant boxes of cable, broadcast consoles, Oriental rugs, musical instruments, sound-effects props . . . and several thousand yards of duct tape.

These are the essential elements of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the St. Paul-based public radio show set to air live, from 6 to 8 p.m. on Saturday.

Two million listeners will be tuning in to nearly 400 stations, including WLRN-91.3 FM in Miami, where the show has been sold out for weeks.

Host Garrison Keillor — who is to the fantasy factor what the duct tape is to the equipment — arrives Friday, several weeks into *PHC*'s 10-stop summer road trip, laptop in hand.

Although the next night's comedy skits, commercials by fictional sponsors, musical numbers and banter will flow as smoothly as the beer down at Lake Wobegon's Sidetrack Tap, Keillor will be writing, revising and re-revising the script until the houselights dim, and Rich Dworsky and Guy's All-Star Shoe Band launch into a familiar refrain:

"Oh hear that old piano, from

PLEASE SEE KEILLOR, 21

Keillor's traveling show bringing old-time radio to life

KEILLOR, FROM 11

down the avenue.
"I smell the onions, I look around for you."
"That sweet old someone, coming through the door."
"It's Saturday and, the band is playing."
"Honey could you ask for more?"

A 'scary genius'

"The day before the show, about 13 minutes of the two hours are scripted," says Miami Herald humorist Dave Barry, a veteran of two previous Keillor productions. "Garrison's a scary genius who's still changing it during the show. The monologue sounds like he's been practicing for weeks."
"He has an incredibly skilled group of people, unbelievably talented performers who trust him completely, and it comes out sounding great."
Barry, who appeared on Keillor's *American Radio Company of the Air* — a short-lived, New York-based variant of *PHC* in the early '90s — is one of two local acts drafted for Saturday night's event.

The other: Miami Beach percussionist Johnny Conga and his five-member Roots of Rhythm band.

Now in its 23rd year, *PHC* is more than a decade past its peak: In 1983, according to Arbitron, the ratings service, it boasted five million listeners.
Still, in the hands of a masterful yarn spinner, the show remains one of public radio's strongest and steadiest draws.

Keillor, declares Bob Edwards, host of National Public Radio's morning news show, *Morning Edition*, is "our Thurber. He's our Twain. A lot of people are doing humor, he does wit, which is smarter than humor."

Edwards, who grew up listening to radio serials like *The Lone Ranger* and *Ozzie and Harriet* — as well as his grandmother's soap operas — doesn't think Keillor is just about nostalgia, though the format harks back to a time when low-tech "treasure of the mind" entertainment captured a nation's imagination.

"What transports you is the idea of long-form radio, live-onstage, with an audience, though some of the music is intentionally [nostalgic]," says Edwards, who last year played a cowboy on a show Keillor taped for public radio fund-raising.

Keillor certainly has been a fund-raising boon to public radio in South Florida, returning to the market in 1995 after a seven-year absence.

Overshadowed by the weekly *Car Talk* — "That's the one that's turning people on to public radio now," says WLRN's development director, Pat Combine



GONE TO LAKE WOBEGON: Garrison Keillor, right, and some of the cast of *A Prairie Home Companion*.

— *PHC* nonetheless raised \$8,000 more than the \$22,000 it cost WLRN last year.

"I think the show is as good as it ever was," says Barry. "Maybe it's not the rage it once was — it was faddishly popular in the late '80s, before Keillor went off to New York — but he's incredibly consistent and the best platform there is for live music," be it gospel, blues, jazz, folk, bluegrass, barbershop, country, ethnic or classical.

Keillor, 55, who has won a Grammy and a George Foster Peabody Award, doesn't do interviews while on the road. Producer Christine Tschida says he chose Miami and a handful of other locales from among 400 cities that requested him. Last night he broadcast from the Blossom Music Festival in Ohio.

From 8 to 80

The heart of Keillor's audience is well-educated, upper-income boomers, though Tschida says, "We get letters from listeners 8 to 80. We cut a wide swath. And Garrison loves the idea that we can do both snot jokes and hymns."

She says he won't have time to see much of South Florida following the show and an invitation-only reception at the Ritz Plaza Hotel on South Beach, but "he appreciates a good restaurant and nice wine," and probably will have dinner out.

Saturday night before air time, Keillor will appear onstage for a warm-up. Tschida says he'll talk to the audience, sing and ask the band to play a few tunes before the rest of the country joins him and his supporting cast: actors Sue Scott and Tim Russell.

Tom Keith, *PHC*'s sound effects man, has been with Keillor almost since the show's beginning.

"We met when he was doing a morning radio show in St. Paul," Keith recalls. "I was the engineer. It was six to nine in the

morning and I was the only other person in the building. So when he had a script with Lake Wobegon characters, he'd ask me to read."

Now Keith provides a plethora of sounds, from barking dogs to breaking glass to footsteps through the snow (squeezing a box of cornstarch) to sea gulls, automobile brakes and wine pouring from a bottle.

Recently, he was called upon to simulate the binding of the giant Cyclops in *The Odyssey*.

"It was not as squishy and liquidy as I'd hoped," laments Keith, who produced the sounds with his mouth.

Keillor's monologue, during the show's final half hour, is its most popular feature.
In a rich, nasal baritone, the author of several novels recounts "the news from Lake Wobegon: the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve," off the cuff.

Running about 15 minutes, it's a frequently hilarious, sometimes poignant, always wry and ironic chronicle of the misadventures of resident Lutherans, Norwegian bachelor farmers, the hapless Lake Wobegon Whippets baseball team and eccentric house pets.

Rocky home life

Keillor's personal life, however, has been less than idyllic. His 11-year first marriage ended in divorce in the mid-1970s. Son Jason now is part of the show's crew.

'We get letters from listeners 8 to 80.'

CHRISTINE TSCHIDA
producer, *Prairie Home Companion*

country home and a Manhattan apartment.

During a recent show, he referred to the Skarvede debacle for the first time, commenting that he'd explain, once he got to the point at which it started to be funny.

In 1990 he created the *American Radio Company of the Air*, broadcast from New York. Then, in 1993, he moved back to Minnesota and reinstated *PHC* at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater.

Keillor's radio career began on the illusion that he is still married to the Dane he married some years ago. The truth is that the marriage ended two years ago, when you moved in with another woman."

That would be violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, his third wife, with whom he shares a Wisconsin

"A show like this could happen and be accepted only because of Garrison's vision, and because of public radio's decision to take a flyer on it," says Tschida. "Nobody was going to listen to radio on a Saturday evening. It flew in the face of all the data and grabbed an audience."

"It has given a terrific base of membership for the local stations, and it's really important that he has stayed. Believe me, there have been plenty of opportunities for him to go commercial." Indeed, his books, shows and related *PHC* merchandise reportedly made him a millionaire years ago.

Keillor, says Dave Barry, "is almost scary quiet" before the show. But "when it's finally over, and he can drink a martini, he loosens up. He's a funny guy."

However, Keillor has a reputation for being brusque and difficult offstage.

"I've heard that," Barry acknowledges, "but I found him really gracious and generous. He wants to make the show work and you to look good."

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