

Keillor finds eager travel companions

By Monica Eng
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

If it was a usual Saturday afternoon at 5 p.m., they would be curled up on the couch with a glass of chardonnay listening to their favorite public radio show, while a slow-cooking gourmet meal (made with plenty of cilantro) perfumed the house.

But last Saturday night was different. It was a night on which they gladly left home, fighting fog as thick as oatmeal, to get to Medinah Temple, where they would not only be able to listen to "A Prairie Home Companion," but also watch the popular radio show performed live.

On the road trip from its usual venue at the World Theatre in St. Paul, Minn., "A Prairie Home Companion" came to Chicago for the second time in its history last weekend, drawing a sold-out crowd to see Garrison Keillor's well-worn formula of skits, songs and stories that tweak white middle-class life as much as they comfort it.

The stage was filled with mike stands, recording equipment, instruments, musicians, audience members and actors who played multiple parts and created sound effects by crushing styrofoam, clacking shoes and smashing



Accompanied by Pat Donohue on the guitar, Garrison Keillor warms up during a dress rehearsal Saturday. Tribune photo by Milbert Orlando Brown

wine glasses in a tank.

Joined by local heroes Studs Terkel, Mavis Staples and Celtic musicians John Williams, Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill, program host Keillor didn't play up a Chicago theme as much as he did during his '93 visit, but he did have fun with Terkel's reputation as a labor supporter and radio veteran during a couple of skits in which the octogenarian was recruited as an actor. During one, in which he played a

lively former radio host and animal trainer, he swears, "I am not now and never have been a member of the AARP."

And while the Irish trio fit right in with the show's subtle low-key flow, Staples' smoky and emotive "Down By the Riverside," "Precious Lord," and "Wade in the Water" failed to ignite the kind of fire they could have with a more interactive audience.

But when Keillor launched into his weekly extemporaneous

monologue: "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon ... " everything fell into place.

On this particular week he wove a tale about a Lake Wobegon outsider who wanted more than anything to feel part of a community.

And for the 4,500 or so listeners who left their disparate lives to gather with like-minded radio fans from across the Chicago area, it was a message that must have hit home.