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Will Jones after last night

The evening was billed as "A Prairie Home Entertainment," and a better label is hard to fine.

Basically, I suppose, it was a poetry reading, since it grew out of some evenings of poetry reading staged by Garrison Keillor and his friends.

On the other hand, it had some of the qualities of a personal appearance by a radio star—a package put together so that all the folks out there in radio-land could come to the local auditorium and see the face that belongs to the voice that entertains them through their breakfast every morning.

Here was public radio's Keillor dressed in glittered-up bib overalls doing a song in the style of The Old Scout, or doing a sex lecture in the manner of Harley Peters, U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Sex Agent. But squinch up your eyes a little bit, and it could have been the 1930s with Gene and Glenn at the American Legion Hall doing the voices of Jake and Lena.

Whatever it was, Keillor with friends Tom Arndt, Gregory Bitz and Robin Raygor did it in front of two jam-packed seatings in the Walker Art Center auditorium Saturday night. Even with overflow fans squatting on foam pillows strewn on the stage, many were turned away. To soothe the disappointed ones, the Walker staff promptly announced a Return Engagement In Response To Public Demand, set for 8 p.m. next Saturday.

An evening of humor, not comedy

It was not an evening of comedy, but of humor, and a ready audience showed its appreciation at being allowed to look in on a gathering of humorists at work.

The major effort of the evening was an appearance by Ronny and the Apostrophes, the ultimate Rock Group staging the ultimate Rock Opera. Keillor narrated as his friends played, and sang of the miseries of the hero, Marshall, an oral surgeon renowned for his success in treating the dread white-gum disease, who became a drunk and a derelict. Only when his dear wife Irene came down with white gums herself was he moved to pull himself together and be reclaimed by proper society, then to face further operatic tragedy.

Keillor's solo efforts included a by-popular-request rendition of his own song, "My Mailbox Is Empty," and the already mentioned sex lecture, in which he held forth for perhaps 10 minutes or so, with slides and scholarly notes, on the subject of the penis, an exercise whose hilarious pathos was exceeded only by its lack of prurience.

Bitz and Raygor read short, funny poems, and Bitz did a longer one illustrated with slides.

Several audience members speculated that there perhaps hadn't been anything like it since the days when Mark Twain marketed his own humor in person. Such enthusiasts were perhaps influenced by Keillor's affectation of a white linen suit. It's a little hard to explain, but a good time was had by all.