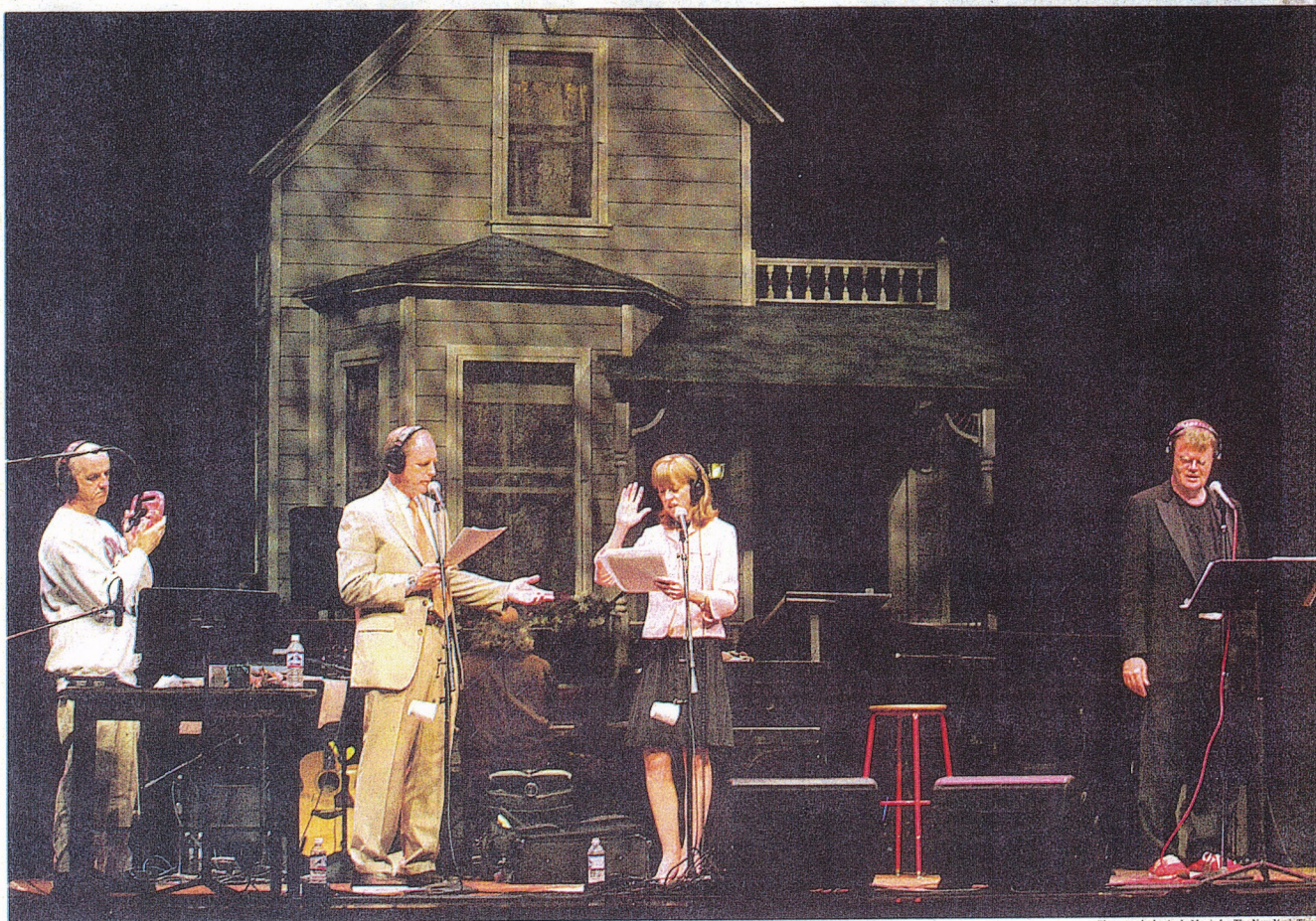


TELEVISION/RADIO

"Prairie Home Companion" cast members, left to right, Tom Keith, Tim Russell, Sue Scott and Garrison Keillor, at the Overture Center Theatre in Madison, Wis., recently. Below, Sue Scott, in her dressing room.



Photographs by Andy Muntz for The New York Times

She Speaks Fluent Prairie

Playing all Lake Wobegon's women, Sue Scott has become the voice of the heartland for her big-city fans.

By JOANNE KAUFMAN

IT'S a little after 3 p.m. on a Saturday in early April, and Sue Scott, as a "Prairie Home Companion" production assistant explains, "is doing her homework."

Ms. Scott, the show's sole female cast member, is cramming for the 6 p.m. performance, which involves getting in touch with the array of alter egos she plays on the weekly radio variety show. Ms. Scott, 48, who is in the middle of her 13th season, is known to the show's listeners as the aptly named Sugar, the sweet if unrestrained outer-borough-born girlfriend of Guy Noir, private detective. She is also Marlene Brower, a blue-collar Minnesotan who works as a spokeswoman for the duct tape industry and says "ja" more often than the farmer's daughter, and Marlene's successor, the super-model valley girl Cynthia Maxwell. In addition, she's the fearsome and officious, full-of-herself psychologist Judith Flexner, a characterization inspired by the late astronomer Carl Sagan. And she is middle-American everywife Barb — "These are the good years for Jim and me" — in the faux public service spots sponsored by "The Catsup Board."

All these, and sundry harried waitresses, haridans, hookers and harpies, sirens, sleazes, sob sisters and sexpots — the kind of woman whose jeans are so tight you can read the numbers on

her driver's license. Accents? Ms. Scott's got a million of them, from the Deep South to the frozen North. But today she will be playing them at Town Hall in New York City, for a grateful audience of culture consumers. Though just part of the four-and-half-million fans nationwide, this demographic has shown itself to be so devoted to the show that the whole cast now swings through town each year for a monthlong victory lap, playing to sold-out houses and grateful applause.

That is curious, and not just because television variety shows were supposed to have died out in the late 70's. The show, created three decades ago by Garrison Keillor and broadcast most of the year from Minneapolis, is a gingham grab bag of skits ("Guy Noir, Private Eye," "Lives of the Cowboys"), songs and, of course, the news from Lake Wobegon. While the skits often wink at the insularity of small-town life, they do so from the privileged position of insiders, and the talent featured on its musical segments skews far toward the realm of banjos, fiddles and spoons. It can sometimes seem like a last, loving redoubt for rural culture, a show that takes its sweet time while the rest of the media universe charges ever forward. And it sustains that impression despite occasional cameos from big-city stars like Sarah Jessica Parker, Al Franken and the soprano Renée Fleming.

Figuring out how to play to the coasts without ridiculing the heartland can be a difficult balancing act. But Mr. Keillor gives Ms. Scott free rein to create her characters — "whatever it is I hear when I read the script," she says. "I pulled Sugar out of the hat, based on everything from Gracie Allen to old movies and Broadway shows."

Ms. Scott, the second of three children, grew up in Tucson, where her mother was a homemaker, and her father a Methodist minister. "A liberal activist minister," clarifies Ms. Scott, who was a cheerleader, a flutist in the high school band and lead in the plays.

Set on majoring in anthropology at the University of Arizona, Ms. Scott took a theater class at the urging of her high school drama teacher and was hooked. After graduation, New York was her destination, following a stopover in Minneapolis where some friends had reported luck in nailing stage and commercial work.

She had similar good fortune, never looked back and came to think of it, never moved east. A theater role led to gigs on Minnesota Public Radio, which had been home to "Prairie Home Companion" until Mr. Keillor decided, in the late 80's, to move to New York and write full time. When he thought matters a few years later and returned to Minneapolis and to the Minnesota Public Radio microphone, "all the producers at the station knew who I was," Ms. Scott says. "But they told me: 'You're on your own. It's not an automatic in. Garrison needs to like you, Garrison needs to cast you, Garrison needs to hire you.'"

He did, he did, he did. There was a cast party after Ms. Scott's first show, and Mr. Keillor approached Ron Peluso, the actress's husband and the artistic director of the History Theater in St. Paul, to offer congratulations. "He told him I had the Minnesota 'o,' but that I really had the 'r,'" says Ms. Scott.

"And my husband said 'Yeah, and she's not even from here.' Garrison had forgotten about my being from Tucson, and he said 'She's not from Minnesota?' When I heard that I thought 'Okay, my first week is my last week.'"

Not a chance. "Sue Scott is my daughter's hero," Mr. Keillor wrote in an e-mail message. "She is 7, and in some ways so is Sue Scott. She is vibrant, Ethel Merman, Katharine Hepburn, Cherry Jones, Sue Scott — if you see them you know it's them."

Soon, it appears, more and more people will be seeing Ms. Scott. "Prairie Home Companion" is expanding its field of operations to include mid-week "concert versions" that are not intended for broadcast, and next month Robert Altman will begin shooting a movie based on the show. The cast includes Kevin Kline, Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Lindsay Lohan, Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly — and Ms. Scott. "We were told originally we'd be playing ourselves, but it changes constantly," said Ms. Scott.

But she's not quite sure how she feels about the prospect of a higher profile. "I kind of watch what Garrison goes through," Ms. Scott said, "people approaching him in a restaurant while he's mid-bite and assuming he'll drop what he's doing and take a picture with them. I don't have to go through that."

"One time after a Town Hall show, Tim and I went to a restaurant around the corner. It wasn't very crowded, but there was a big table of people who were celebrating a birthday and had been to the broadcast. They recognized us and were sending over food and birthday cake and asking for pictures and autographs."

Meanwhile, across the room sat Nathan Lane, whose presence went unnoticed and unheralded. The evening progressed. More cake, more requests for autographs. "And Nathan was staring at us," said Ms. Scott, "and I'm sure he was thinking 'Who are these people?'"

She shrugged and headed back onstage to rehearse a "Guy Noir" segment that has her cast as a self-centered Manhattanite. "She's pushy, but I chose not to give her a big thick New York accent, which would be the expected thing," Ms. Scott explained. "Now that I've said the part out loud, I may make some changes in tone and emphasis. But Garrison hasn't corrected me."

"No news is good news."