

'Ernie' opening night brings cheers and tears



Written by

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Fans, friends and family laughed out loud and shed some tears Thursday at the sold-out opening night of Mitch Albom's play "Ernie" at the City Theatre in downtown Detroit.

Inspired by the life of legendary Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell, Albom's two-man play had about 400 people standing on their feet cheering following the 85-minute performance.

"It's been almost a year (since Harwell passed) — we miss him so much," said Gary Spicer, Harwell's attorney and friend of more than 30 years. "Mitch did such a great job with the story — it's really challenging to try and get all those different components of Ernie's life into an 80-minute play."

Although Harwell's widow, Lulu Harwell, didn't attend the event, which included a VIP red carpet opening reception and meet-and-greet with the show's stars and production crew, many longtime Harwell supporters and Tigers greats were in the house.

Mike and Marian Ilitch — whose Olympia Entertainment owns the City Theatre — and their children Chris Ilitch and Lisa Ilitch-Murray were in attendance. Mike Ilitch owns the Tigers. Former Tigers Dan Petry and Frank Tanana also were on hand to celebrate Harwell's legacy. So were local news media leaders such as Devin Scillian of WDIV-TV (Channel 4) and Albom's WJR-AM (760) colleagues Paul W. Smith, Frank Beckmann and Warren Pierce.

Bill Harwell, Ernie's 67-year-old son, said Thursday's performance was special for his family. Bill said his mother, who will turn 92 in July, is doing well but opted out of the play's opening night because she "really doesn't like the spotlight."

"This is very emotional for us," Bill Harwell added. "It's really a special relationship Detroit's fans have."

He added that he is "really touched" at how Albom honored his father.

Albom described the play as a challenge to write for the stage because there wasn't any built-in conflict to create the tension and drama typical of most shows. It stars veteran Detroit stage actor Will David



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Young as Harwell and newcomer T.J. Corbett as “the boy” — a mysterious figure who sparks Harwell’s memories during the night of his farewell speech at Comerica Park.

With Young dressed in tan slacks, a navy blue sports jacket and one of Harwell’s signature hats, and Corbett in brown knickers and a coat representing the late broadcaster’s youth, “Ernie” unfolds with nine chapters of Harwell’s life, symbolizing baseball’s nine innings. The first inning begins in the tunnel where the players take the field the night the then-91-year-old Harwell gave his farewell.

Three video screens back the two actors, with actual Harwell calls and Major League Baseball highlights used to complement the on-stage action. Earning loud cheers were Tigers moments like the 1968 World Series champs helping ease racial tensions in Detroit, the famed rookie season of pitcher Mark (the Bird) Fidrych and Kirk Gibson’s iconic ’84 World Series home run.

Young’s experience on stage and his warm portrayal of the Georgia-bred Harwell — complete with a bit of a lisp at the beginning and an explanation for his “Ti-gaz” pronunciation — received plenty of laughs. And Young’s Sparky Anderson stories — and his grumbling impression of the late manager eating cornflakes — received uproarious responses.

The script also taps into Harwell’s faith, his American spirit and his love for Lulu.

As the two-man show entered its final inning, as the broadcast of his life was coming to a close, a choked-up audience watched on as Young addressed the “Tigers fans — the greatest fans of all” one

last time.

“I miss him so much,” said attendee Paul Carey, Harwell’s broadcasting partner of 19 years. “I think of him every day.”

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