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REVIEW: *Ernie* City Theatre

"Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose; sometimes it rains."

By John Quinn

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It is unfortunate the weather dried up Thursday in time for the Tigers' game to proceed. The 10 to 1 drubbing by the Seattle Mariners sent streams of fans out of the stadium early. Wimps! While it's hard to continue referring to baseball as "America's Pastime" (that seems to be texting on Facebook now), it's comforting to know that respect for the traditional still exists in Detroit.

Thus we come to Detroit Free Press columnist Mitch Albom's fond tribute to a local legend; *Ernie*, a play in nine innings, commemorates the life and career of Ernie Harwell. Long known and beloved as the "Voice of the Tigers," Mr. Harwell gave America 60 years of distinguished service in broadcasting. Not only are we served a generous portion of baseball history, we learn why the gentle, unassuming man behind the microphone deserves such revered status.

The time is evening, Sept. 16, 2009. The place is an access tunnel inside Comerica Park. A reluctant Ernie Harwell has come to the stadium for one last thank you from

a grateful city – Ernie is dying of cancer. His backstage pacing is interrupted by a boy inexplicably clothed in knickers and po'boy hat who is more than just a routine fan. The exuberant pest coaxes Harwell to "make one last broadcast" and tell his life story.

Aeschylus is credited with adding the second actor to drama, thus turning the monotony of monologue into dialogue. Yet dialogue, too, is a fairly static form, but there's nothing static in *Ernie*. The reminiscence is fleshed out by a remarkable media design by Michigan State University's Alison Dobbins. With all due respect to the playwright, there are hard core fans who would think this wide-sourced collection of archival film and photos would be worth the price of admission on its own. Yet I would be hard pressed to find another production where script and media are so tightly integrated and interdependent.

"How do you make a play about an angel?" Albom wrote in a recent column. The answer: "It ain't easy." The play defies conventional dramatic norms of conflict and resolution, focusing instead on a life well lived and the sport that influenced it. *Ernie* is filled with special moments; funny, wistful, thoughtful, loving. At times it approaches poetry, most notably in retelling "The Shot Heard 'round the World," the game-ending hit in the 1951 post season play that won the New York Giants the National League pennant. A cadence develops between the characters as formal as the responses between priest and acolyte. We don't doubt for a minute that for the true believer, there's a little religion in the game.

Will David Young appears in the title role, and a tough job it is. He is on stage continuously and voices the lion's share of the script. In addition, he is portraying a real person and cultural icon – everybody knows Ernie, if only as a voice. His approach is not an imitation of Harwell; he does, though, give us that soft Georgia tone and inflection that carried such warmth and humor in broadcasts. Timothy "TJ" Corbett plays the mysterious boy, who acts as a pinch hit interviewer for the audience. While the Boy is inquisitive to the point of nosiness, busy to the point of manic, Corbett doesn't let the character get so loose that we're asking why even the patient Harwell won't simply dismiss him with a W.C. Fieldian "Get away, Boy, you bother me." Tony Caselli, artistic director of the Williamston Theatre, manages this team with the skill of a Sparky Anderson. The effect is clean, lean and absorbing.

On a personal note: Of the many images that stick with me is one that sums up Ernie – and *Ernie* – perfectly. In the film footage of that last tribute in Comerica Park there is a fan holding up a hand printed sign that reads simply, "What a person should be." Could any man want a better epitaph?

Everyone involved with *Ernie* agrees that this Detroit product is unlikely to be "exported." That's a pity; I think the roster of American plays can use a few more productions of this scale and tone. As affective a celebration of the life of a gentleman as this may be, he is, after all, OUR gentleman man. Perhaps we can look forward to its return in future springs – a new tradition as welcome as Harwell's traditional Opening Day greeting from *The Song of Solomon*.

"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle (dove) is heard in our land..."

SHOW DETAILS: *Ernie* continues at the City Theatre, 2301 Woodward Ave., Detroit, Thursday-Sunday through June 26. Tickets: \$20-\$25. For information: 313-471-6611 or www.olympiaentertainment.com.

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Show times

Thursday, April 28, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, April 29, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, April 30, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, May 1, 2011 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, May 5, 2011 at 5:30 pm
 Friday, May 6, 2011 at 8:00 pm
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 Sunday, May 8, 2011 at 2:00 pm
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 Friday, May 13, 2011 at 8:00 pm
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 Sunday, May 15, 2011 at 5:00 pm
 Thursday, May 19, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, May 20, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, May 21, 2011 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, May 22, 2011 at 2:00 pm

- 69 (Carl Craig)**
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- Dubfire**
- Fatboy Slim**
- Felix da Housecat**
- Flying Lotus**
- Gas Lamp Killer**
- Goldie**
- Green Velvet**
- James Zabiela**
- Kerri Chandler**
- Little Dragon**
- Loco Dice**
- Metro Area**
- MIMOSA**
- Richie Hawtin**
- Skrillex**
- Sven Väth**

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- Saturday, May 28, 2011 at 8:00 pm
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- Friday, June 3, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Saturday, June 4, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Sunday, June 5, 2011 at 2:00 pm
- Thursday, June 9, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Friday, June 10, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Saturday, June 11, 2011 at 4:00 pm
- Saturday, June 11, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Sunday, June 12, 2011 at 5:00 pm
- Thursday, June 16, 2011 at 5:30 pm
- Friday, June 17, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Saturday, June 18, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Sunday, June 19, 2011 at 2:00 pm
- Thursday, June 23, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Friday, June 24, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Saturday, June 25, 2011 at 8:00 pm
- Sunday, June 26, 2011 at 5:00 pm

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