

For the period: June 4-10, 2013

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REVIEW: "Ernie"

City Theatre

Cheers and tears and baseball years

By Michael H. Margolin

Posted: June 7, 2013 at 11:45 p.m.

After the new-fangled route into the Foxtown parking structure (under renovation) and settling down on the sprung spring in the City Theatre seat and calming your startle response from the two banks of klieg lights suddenly flashing the auditorium, then you can just focus on 90 minutes of sentiment, laughs, some good memories and a helluva two man acting team.

"Ernie" is an homage to Ernie Harwell, the "Voice of the Tigers". In this, its third outing, already seen by 44,000 and this five week run extended to 10, this show is not minor league.

As I was growing up, I remember the voice of Harwell on the radio. That was more real to me than going to a game: My first took place in the '70s when my best man and his wife, Margaret, later to become my son's godparents, took my new wife and I to a game at Tiger Stadium.

A few years ago, I saw my second game from an Ilitch Box when a swarm of gnats flew in to Comerica Park, and my third, just a few seasons ago when Margaret took me and my grandson to Comerica Park.

But these three generational events, heady as they are, still barely hold a candle to the youthful memories of Harwell's voice and his words feeding my imagination as he described, in near gravel tones, the action in Tiger Stadium.

Mitch Albom's play celebrates those moments in this adept work: In a tunnel inside Comerica Park (Kirk Domer's pitch-perfect set, and Daniel C. Walker's strong lighting design), on Sept. 16, 2009, just before Harwell makes his final goodbye speech to his world of fans, it is raining. As he says, "In baseball, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, and sometimes it rains."

Along with Harwell, a young man appears, garbed more like a kid in the 1920s (played with great verve and enthusiasm by Timothy "TJ" Corbett) and Harwell is a bit muddled: "Are you...?" he queries, but soon he begins to accept this phantom as real flesh and blood – to my mind the avatar for Mitch Albom as the interlocutor, the biographer – as indeed he was, gathering material for the play during Harwell's final days. Harwell died in May 2010.

Three large screens at the rear of the stage become projections of Harwell's memories about his career (in a splendid video design by Alison Dobbins) – look, there's Ted Williams, Ernie and his bride, Lulu, looking like Donna Reed and Babe Ruth (asking for an autograph from Ruth, Harwell had no paper to offer so he got it on his shoe – which he lost.) So, this is a play about memory, mostly the good ones, and often the funny ones, and once in a while, maybe the wishful ones: Of the Tigers World Series win in 1968, Albom has Harwell say that of the (Detroit, 1967) racial tension and the riot, baseball was the healer. No, not really.

The playskims the surface of an extraordinary career, beginning in Atlanta as a boy, his speech problems, his early years in broadcasting, and, finally, his Tiger years and some of his favorite sayings, quoted during the show. Ninety minutes is hardly enough to encapsulate the sportscaster who is memorialized in the Cooperstown Hall of Baseball Fame, but as Bette Davis famously said, "Why ask for the moon when you have the stars?"

Between the screens and the two men moving around the stage (under the ever resourceful dab hand of director Tony Caselli) as they encounter the past and the peak moments, the Most Valuable Player award goes to the peripatetic actor, Will David Young.

Young who has given many wonderful performances in Southeast Michigan from The Purple Rose Theatre to Planet Ant, enlarges and enlivens the memory of Harwell. His voice is somewhat similar, though deeper and twangier, but no matter, for it blends right into our aural memories and if you close your eyes and just listen you might be transported back to the brown carpet in your parents' living room, lying on your stomach, the voice of Harwell coming out of the speaker of the console radio – set to WJR – with your handwritten scorecard for the players you admired and the moment when the distant crack of the bat would kick off Harwell's voice, rising and saying, "This one is looong gone" as you pictured that small white speck soaring above the greensward and up, up into the stands.

SHOW DETAILS: "Ernie" continues at the City Theatre, 2301 Woodward Ave., Detroit, Through Aug. 11. Running time: 90 minutes. Tickets: \$20-\$25; \$50 June 19 benefit for the Shawn Burr Foundation. For information: 800-745-3000 or www.olympiaentertainment.com.

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Performance Information

Show times

Thursday, June 6, 2013 at 7:30 pm
 Friday, June 7, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, June 8, 2013 at 2:00 pm
 Saturday, June 8, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, June 9, 2013 at 5:00 pm
 Thursday, June 13, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, June 14, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, June 15, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, June 15, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, June 16, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Wednesday, June 19, 2013 at 7:30 pm
 Thursday, June 20, 2013 at 5:30 pm

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 Saturday, June 22, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, June 22, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, June 23, 2013 at 5:00 pm
 Thursday, June 27, 2013 at 5:30 pm
 Friday, June 28, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, June 29, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, June 29, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, June 30, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Friday, July 5, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Friday, July 5, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, July 6, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, July 6, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, July 7, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Thursday, July 11, 2013 at 5:30 pm
 Friday, July 12, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, July 13, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, July 13, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, July 14, 2013 at 5:00 pm
 Wednesday, July 17, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Thursday, July 18, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, July 19, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, July 21, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Thursday, July 25, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, July 26, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, July 27, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, July 27, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, July 28, 2013 at 3:00 pm
 Thursday, August 1, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, August 2, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, August 3, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, August 3, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, August 4, 2013 at 5:00 pm
 Wednesday, August 7, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Thursday, August 8, 2013 at 5:30 pm
 Friday, August 9, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, August 10, 2013 at 4:00 pm
 Saturday, August 10, 2013 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, August 11, 2013 at 3:00 pm

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