

Mitch Albom's 'Ernie' tells legendary broadcaster's life

BRIDGETTE REDMAN, For the Lansing State Journal

12:10 a.m. EDT August 18, 2015



It's a perfect pairing. Ernie Harwell, the voice of the Tigers, and Mitch Albom, the scribe of Detroit sports.

Both masters of their crafts, the two worked together throughout the years Harwell's summer broadcasts for the Detroit Tigers.

This week Albom's play about Harwell's life "Ernie" is coming to the Wharton Center for five performances. The play opened five years ago in Detroit and has played every summer since. While places like New York

(Photo: Courtesy image)

and Missouri have wanted the play, Albom has refused.

"I've been pretty stubborn about not moving it," Albom said. "My attitude has been if you want to see it, come to Detroit, but that's big-headed for Michigan. Ernie belonged to Michigan — (and) anywhere there was a Tiger fan. We're very happy to bring it to East Lansing."

Albom will be present at Wednesday's opening, doing a meet and greet with people who buy VIP tickets before the show and a talk back for all the audience after the show.

A year and a half before Harwell died of cancer in May of 2010 at age 92, he asked Albom if he would be interested in writing a movie about his life. When his health took a turn for the worse, that collaboration was put on hold. After Harwell's death, Albom returned to the idea.

"The summer after he passed away, I was sitting in my basement and felt bad. He'd never asked me anything before," said Albom. "I didn't think a movie was the right way to go. Movies are about action and sex, but a play was about dialog, and Ernie's life was about dialog. I just stayed with it until I thought I had something."

Harwell and Albom were friends for 25 years, and Albom drew upon that friendship and those memories when creating the play. He also researched Harwell's life and interviewed the people who worked with him and knew him best.

The play opens with Harwell about to make his final broadcast as part of a tribute night to him at the baseball stadium. There is a rain delay and Harwell, ever humble, doesn't want to go out. He's about to leave when a kid in 1930s clothing approaches him all excited to meet him. He talks him into giving the broadcast of his life in nine innings.

Each "inning" deals with a different phase of Harwell's life from his childhood, to his teen years, to his time in the Marines and his love affair with his wife. Other innings deal with each of the teams he spent time with including most notably his 42 years with the Tigers.

But it is more than just a story of Harwell's life and more than just a story of baseball.

"The way I approached it, Ernie's life and baseball were parallel. Baseball's rise as a popular Americana sport happened when he was born and throughout the '20s when he listened to his first baseball game," said Albom.

"The play parallels his life, but also baseball and Americana. It's a life of innocence and the laconic earlier days of listening to a baseball game with a crystal and a piece of wire all the way up to the destruction of Tiger Stadium. It works on those two levels."

The play is also a multi-media experience. It's hard to put a baseball game on stage, and Albom felt the two-person play needed some more action, so he wrote the commissioner of Major League Baseball and asked for some footage. He sent in a list of all the memories that are talked about in the play, expecting to get a few clips. Instead, the League sent everything, with footage going back to 1926 where Babe Ruth tries to steal second in the World Series.

The footage is set up to be shown as left field, right field and center field, and they're playing constantly throughout the play, illustrating everything going through Harwell's mind.

"When he talks about his wife, you see his wife. When he talks about a (baseball) play, you see the play and hear the call," said Albom. "It's moving in and out of different mediums, and it helps the play move along. Sometimes screens get in the way of plays. In this case, it really enhances it."

Albom says we're unlikely to see another Ernie Harwell again. That time and its innocence are gone. Television announcers, he says, will never make the same connection where the listener had the transistor radio under their pillow and fell asleep with Harwell as their lullaby.

"Ernie Harwell's voice painted a picture for you, that doesn't exist anymore. You put your trust in a guy to tell you the story night after night, it's a remarkable thing. Few people in history have lived up to that trust and affection. He never let it go to his head, he never demanded high salaries. He's an extremely humble guy."

In the play, the young boy asks Harwell about Paul Carey's chain smoking and insisted it was Harwell's right to ask him to stop. Ernie replied that given a choice between being right and being kind, it's better to be kind.

"That sums up Ernie's approach to many things. He could have argued and instead he said, let me be kind. I hope (play-goers) come away realizing what a treasure we had here for 40-plus years with a single team having Ernie Harwell as a Tigers announcer." IF YOU GO

•What: "Ernie"

•Where: Pasant Theater, Wharton Center, Michigan State University campus

•When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday

•Cost: Price: \$35; www.whartoncenter.com