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PROBLEM/SOLUTION: A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME FOR ERNIE

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PROBLEM

At the top of the first, the house lights dim. When lights come up, they are sharp, and they shine on the house. The accompanying booming sound is stronger than the distant thunder we'll hear later. And *Ernie*, the affectionate documentary about broadcaster **Ernie Harwell** by *Detroit Free Press* columnist **Mitch Albom**, is in full swing.

Our setting is a rainy day in 2009 on the service level of **Comerica Stadium** in a nostalgic version of the tunnel where Harwell always waited before going into the booth for the Tigers. This is furnished with a US flag and the stuff of storage boxes, a trash bin, a metal ladder on wheels to reach things. Upstage are three large projection screens, two of them separated by World Series posters from 1935 and 1945. Harwell, 91, is about to give his farewell address when he meets a boy dressed in a suit with short pants and ankle boots, who asks him to recount major moments in his life and career. What transpires isn't exactly a play; Albom has created a whole new ballgame. Director Tony Caselli says it's a mix of traditional play and ballpark attraction, and a moving biography piece about a beloved person from Detroit, all built largely for a sports audience as much as a theatre-going audience, with a lot of wonderful multimedia layered in. Harwell shares anecdotes, often illustrated by stills and video footage key moments he covered, his encounters with baseball luminaries, and moments from his personal life.



Photo David Reed

Scenic designer Kirk Domer found research easy, with Comerica Park right across the street from the theatre. Sizing the projection screens was less easy.

The key to designing the world of the play was to incorporate a series of projection screens that aided in telling the story, says Domer. The exciting challenge was to find the appropriate screen size or sizes with the limited throw distance in the 400-seat City Theatre, without overwhelming the action. The rest of the design team had more significant challenges. Major League Baseball, WDIV-TV, Detroit Public Library, and *Detroit Free Press* were among those who provided images and footage for projection designer Alison Dobbins, who had to create projections from videos and stills that had been shot over a period of years, some in black and white. Some had been taken by high-definition cameras, some by standard cameras. Frame rates and image sizes varied. Some footage was grainy, some sharp. Since characters sometimes talk about disconnected moments in the same scene, footage from different periods would be shown in sequence.

Another issue was the optics of the dual-lamp projector system. One is front-projected, and two are rear-projected and closer to the screens, Dobbins says. Choice of materials was tricky. If you front-project on muslin, it doesn't have the same spread as synthetic projection materials. If you're sitting off to the side, the center screen is dim. The show is very amber, and projectors are very blue. We tried to match the amber, but it came out with more of an orange hint. We wanted it to blend into the scenery. It's very hard with modern footage to achieve that. Amber makes it look old, sepia-like. Modern footage sticks out. Moreover, fast-changing baseball images and video have to blend with lighting and sound cues as well as dialogue and stage movement. Sound designer Steve Shannon, production director for Albom's radio show, had never designed for the theatre. On his first outing, he had to time sound cues precisely with video, lighting, and acting cues, introduce music as rehearsals progressed, synchronize radio calls to video that illustrated what was on the radio, and restore or replace audio when sound was poor on the videos. And the baseball video had problems of its own. Dobbins, who had done a lot of narrative film but no sports video, discovered, she says, If you start a pitch, you have to finish that pitch.

Actors also have to interact with the screens and respond to images. The video is a character, so I constructed it so they can watch it, but also so the audience can watch it, says Dobbins. If it doesn't feel like it's coming in and having a scene with the actors, it totally flops. They make it magic. Lighting designer Daniel C. Walker says the show went through big changes as it developed. Video content

changed through techs. Sound, which didn't initially include music, became more involved. And the feel of the show changed, too. It went from something largely realistic, with a few moments dropping into memory, to something more theatrical, Walker says. And when the plot becomes more dreamlike and magical at some moments, so too must the lighting plot. The changes make the show more fun and interesting, but also forced Walker to do some last-minute rethinking. It didn't help that the initial system Walker encountered was minimal. It's a nice little theatre, but I was stunned at how conventional the lighting system was, he says. There were 24 dimmers, 23, as one didn't work, six ETC Source Fours, four Altman Lighting 6x9s, two Altman 6" Fresnels, two Altman 8" Fresnels, and eight Source Four PARs. They have a reasonably modern light board, but I went in to program it a day early and discovered it didn't record cues. It sort of did; it had the memory content of a 1980s board. It would remember the content, but you had to run it by hand, says Walker. It had a Go button for a chaser.

Costume designer Melanie Schuessler had to make sure Harwell's clothes matched what he wore on a day that was witnessed by thousands and recorded on video, even though Dobbins didn't include video from that day. The hardest part was finding the right pair of glasses, Schuessler says. He had a particular pair in a style that's not popular anymore. Placing a mic in his clothing proved problematic, too. Initially, they had placed it behind his tie, but a tiny bud stuck out visibly. Worse, the mic picked up resonance from his chest all the time, and turning his head the wrong way meant the mic couldn't pick up his voice well, so the volume would fade in and out. Harwell, who was balding, didn't wear a hat on the day of the speech. David Young, who plays Ernie, has, alas, a full head of hair. Would he have to shave it? Schuessler also had to clothe a boy straight out of the 1930s. Today's suit pants have pleats, unless they're cut low, and they aren't made in the same rich medium brown typical of that period. She wanted to use wool because it's cooler than polyester, which doesn't breathe at all, she says.

SOLUTIONS

Dobbins tried to capture the footage at its native resolution and size as much as she could. To make the video consistent, she scaled the resolution up for SD and down for HD. This allowed her to stabilize the clips, especially at more exciting baseball moments and crowd shots. Using [Apple Final Cut Pro \(FCP\)](#), [Adobe After Effects \(AE\)](#), [AVID, Automatic Duck Pro AE](#), and [Popcorn Island's](#) free script to go from FCP to AE, she says, "We found a happy medium going from Babe Ruth to Ernie giving a speech much later. The Popcorn Island script was a little buggy but saved a great deal of time, as some of my editors had FCP 7, some had 6, and not everyone had Automatic Duck Pro AE import."



Photo David Reed

Domer and Dobbins explored several combinations of projector models and screen sizes to maximize the projected image on stage, settling on three [NEC NP4100](#) projectors with [NEC NP06FL](#) wide-angle fixed lenses. "This projector is 6K in dual-lamp mode," says Dobbins. "For the small size of the theatre, we were able to use this model." Because the fixed lens has no lens shift control, she had to carefully calculate the positioning before purchase to make sure she could place it where it would work. Domer adds that the projector has a 0.77:1 throw distance, so it can achieve a nearly 6'x8' image. "This negotiation allowed us to place the screens at a 35° angle to accommodate sightlines and to create a continuous stage picture with a 6'2" throw distance in the limited wing space," he says. Because the projector has no internal dowser, however, ghost light was bright when Dobbins wasn't projecting, but working closely with Walker prevented problems. Light sculpted the screens between projections. "Nobody knew how bright the side projectors would be," says Walker. "You can't have sculpting light on when you have key moments."

Dobbins used Apple Mac Pro Quad Core 2.0GHz, running the whole system with [Figure 53](#) QLab Live Show Control software. "I had also purchased [Gefen](#) DVI boosters, but in testing found that the graphics cards provided enough power to make the 100' runs without noticeable difference with or without the boosters. The boosters were needed for our backup system, which used [Matrox](#) TripleHead 2-Go Digital Edition."

Walker added more instruments, so the final lighting package included 36 dimmers (24 [Philips Strand](#) CD80s and 12 [Rosco](#) IPS Dimmer Sticks), various ETC Source Four Ellipsoidals (26°, 36°, and 50°), Altman 360 6x9 ellipsoidals, Altman 8" and 6" Fresnels, Source Four PARs, PAR56 and PAR36 units, and some practicals, like a hanging light bulb and several wall fixtures. If you put a practical on stage, spectators may be distracted by the source, but breaking up the dark screens when they're not projecting helped here, too. Walker planned to use quasi-theatre lights, but that would have burned up the dimmers, so he went with 70W floodlights that one might have outside a garage, a deluxe version of a coffee can light. "We went to Lowe's and got things for 20 bucks," says Walker. With floodlights, he could shoot down small amounts of light to break up the wall. "They work so well. We use them not only to change the look of the walls, but they're bright enough to light the actors." Lighting the actors and not the screens when the screens are dark is tricky, too, and Walker says Caselli sometimes actually reblocked to free him to light effectively.

Walker scrambled around and found an old ETC Expression 1 console, which he says was more capable for this production than ETC's similar newer boards. "As memory got cheaper and cheaper, and computers more powerful, they didn't make one that ran as many dimmers. What was unbelievable was we had trouble getting the monitor to work with the old ETC," says Walker. A local company, [Fantasee Lighting](#), was aware of the production in progress and came through with a new monitor, last-minute. Everything was last-minute. "The last set of frontlights showed up at noon the day before techs," Walker adds. Shannon found his first foray onto the stage very similar to radio production and found his proficiency in audio editing useful, shortening or lengthening sound cues to match stage action. "I did leave the iconic ones alone, though there is quite a bit of extra cheering on the end of the 'Giants win the pennant' call to allow it to mesh better with the actors," he says. Now, with a visual dimension added to the mix, he discovered his ear for what sounds right

stayed steady. In fact, projections allowed “a little bit of license or freedom to use music or sound more so than if they weren't there. I feel like they established that additional dimension.” He based timing and volume adjustments on “feel,” he says. “If we felt a thunderclap went on too long, or a musical piece didn't fade quickly enough or was too loud, we would adjust it on the fly in QLab, which allowed us to really play with things.” After locating and grabbing audio to substitute for anything unclear on original footage, Shannon sometimes threw the ball to Dobbins so she could render to the old footage or just sync it in QLab. “That was one of my biggest challenges—tracking down a lot of the old audio,” Shannon says. “I also would clean up the elements digitally, if needed. The stadium lights' ‘wompf’ on and off was the first thing I worked on.” There were no recordings of some classic moments, so Shannon had to create them and play with them to get them right.

As for the costumes, after looking for glasses in thrift stores to no avail, Schuessler asked her optometrist and found what she needed in a box of old glasses. Harwell wears a navy blue and white pinstriped shirt, blue blazer, and red tie, which she was able to purchase new. “Thankfully, Will Young resembles the real Ernie Harwell nearly enough,” she says. And since Harwell “customarily wore a Greek fisherman's hat,” she could hide Young's hair, and the cap turned out to be the best place to mic him. To dress the 1930s boy, Schuessler searched for a wool suit in thrift shops. She cut the pants short, added pleated pockets where the standard pockets were, using material she had cut from the bottom, and added buttons to what was a two-button suit.

Davi Napoleon has been a regular contributor to Live Design and its predecessors, Theatre Crafts and Entertainment Design, since the year the Yankees won the Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games, and Reggie Jackson was named MVP.

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