

Tigers broadcaster recalled in play 'Ernie'

BY MARTA HEPLER DRAHOS mdrahos@record-eagle.com | Posted: Thursday, August 6, 2015 12:30 pm

TRAVERSE CITY — Ernie Harwell grew up in a time when people could only listen to baseball on the radio, if they were lucky enough to have one.

Eventually he became known as the “The Voice of Summer,” whose own play-by-play of the Detroit Tigers enthralled generations of fans.

“He was for many, many years the way that people heard their games,” said Mitch Albom, author of “Ernie,” a play about the life of the beloved Tigers announcer. “If you left the house, you could only hear it in the car. From 1960 to 2000, basically, he was the voice of the Tigers, give or take a few years.”

The City Opera House will bring the play to its stage for an unprecedented six shows, Aug. 12-16. Tickets start at \$20 for adults and \$15 for students.

Albom and Harwell met 30 years ago on Albom’s first day on the job as a sports writer for the Detroit Free Press. His rookie assignment: covering a Tigers game.

The men became fast friends with writing, music — and, of course, sports — in common.

“His father was a cripple for 40 years who was confined to a wheelchair. He could never take Ernie to a game, but he listened to it on the radio,” Albom said, of Harwell’s introduction to baseball. “His love transferred to his son.”

Harwell, in turn, transferred his love of the game to listeners. He often used their names in ad-libbed play-by-play, a tradition he began as a way to send messages to his father through foul balls.

“He'd say something like, 'That ball was caught by a fat man from Clifton Road.' And that's when he got practice making up names and stories,” Albom said.

Harwell was an accomplished storyteller who, in his early days, “recreated” away games for listeners at home using simple code typed in by the other team's announcer.

“He’d get ‘B1O,’ which means 'ball one, outside,' and that’s all he'd get. And he’d make that into,



Long gone, but not forgotten

Author Mitch Albom talks about his play, "Ernie," about long-time Detroit Tigers radio broadcaster Ernie Harwell, coming to the City Opera House.

‘And here comes the pitch, it’s a high loping ball ...’” said Albom, copying Harwell’s distinctive voice.

But Harwell also was a man beloved for his goodness — a man who began the season by reading from the Bible, who believed it was better to be kind than right, who went to the weddings of people he’d never met, if asked.

“He may be the most beloved human being to ever walk Michigan soil,” Albom said. “I honestly think he could have run for governor of the state and won by a huge majority.”

“Ernie” is set on Harwell’s last night at Comerica Park, when the Hall of Fame broadcaster is about to give a moving thank you to a grateful city, providing the conflict needed for the play.

“The biggest challenge from a theatrical point of view ... is all of theater is conflict: somebody wants something from somebody else,” Albom said. “The problem was, with Ernie there was no conflict. Nobody disagreed with Ernie about anything ... The only conflict I ever saw with Ernie was he didn’t like attention paid to him. And when was the most attention paid to him? The night they honored him and, for a few minutes, the entire baseball stadium, his house of worship, was worshipping him.”

The 85-minute play recounts Harwell's life in nine “innings,” with the help of a young "fan" from the 1930s. Just as Harwell is about to step out of the tunnel onto the field, he encounters the boy, who coaxes the broadcaster to give one final performance: the “broadcast of his life.”

“His life basically parallels the growth of baseball as the national pastime and the passion with which the American audience came to the sport,” Albom said. Harwell was present when baseball started to explode, when the color line was broken, when Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle became sensations, even when TV became the mainstay for baseball coverage and when Tiger Stadium was torn down to make way for Comerica Park.

Audiences will revisit some of baseball's grandest moments, including many unmistakable Harwell calls, through actual footage from historic baseball moments. They'll also get glimpses of when Harwell met the Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, and how he recreated games in his early days and find out what was behind his broadcasts of the Tigers’ 1968 and 1984 World Series.

Albom created the play from his experiences with Harwell, along with notes and transcriptions from his interviews with the broadcaster over the years. He also mined players, Harwell’s wife, Lulu, his longtime friend and attorney, S. Gary Spicer, and his fellow Tigers caller Paul Carey, who contributed several "booth stories."

“That’s how I found out there wasn’t a bathroom in the booth, but there was a sink,” said Albom, the award-winning author of "Tuesdays with Morrie."

Harwell and Albom spoke about doing a stage play one day but Harwell’s health declined before the

project came to fruition. Albom said he felt a need to fulfill his promise and retreated to his basement to write the play after the announcer died.

“There wasn’t anybody waiting for it, I didn’t have a deal, I didn’t have a producer, I didn’t have a theater. I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do with it once I wrote it,” he said.

He approached a 300- to 400-seat theater next to Comerica Park, where he’d done a play before, and not only received an enthusiastic response but several partners in the project.

The play had a quick release and now is in its fifth year. It’s the most-seen play in Detroit history, with more than 85,000 viewers.

Visit cityoperahouse.org or call 231-941-8082 for more information.