

Review: Virginia Stage Company's 'Billy Bishop Goes to War'

Words [Jeremiah Albers](#)

Photos [Anne Peterson](#)

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At the heart of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, an affably intimate musical being revived by Virginia Stage Company, is a trio of charming, rich-voiced gentlemen.



Freddy Arsenault in all his glory.

Chief among them is Freddy Arsenault, a Hampton native, who carries the two hour and twenty minute evening in a marathon-sized role, playing the eponymous hero and myriad other characters as well. Indeed, Arsenault switches characters and emotions so rapidly, and with such grace and felicity, that one hardly realizes he's having a conversation with himself.

If that isn't enough, Arsenault also sings well, supported on the evocative score, arranged for piano and accordion, by the equally accomplished Bob Stillman and Paul Lincoln.

Billy Bishop Goes to War, a popular musical in Canada, is relatively obscure in the United States. Written in 1978 by John Gray and Eric Peterson, and performed by the authors for many years after in productions across Canada (and for a brief stand on Broadway in 1980), the musical tells the story of Billy Bishop, a decorated Canadian WWI flying ace. The real-life Bishop rose from being the worst student in his class at the Royal Military College of Canada (where he failed out, having been caught cheating), to the status of mythic legend as a fighter pilot for the British Army, one of the few in his regiment to survive. His heroics led him to move in impressive social circles, and he remains to this day one of Canada's greatest military heroes. The musical follows his story faithfully, in a series of engaging scenes, monologues, and songs, which are well-performed by the gifted company.

Stillman's warm tenor, and even warmer piano accompaniment, well complements Arsenault's stunning performance; aided by Lincoln's expressive accordion, equally impressive singing, and

strong dramatic support in several character roles. As staged by Edward Morgan, on a beautiful set by Terry Summers Flint, elegantly lit by A. Nelson Ruger IV; the production soars as high as Bishop himself, avoiding the pitfalls that might render it stodgy and earthbound.



Bob Stillman.

With a lesser actor in the lead, the piece might not be as compelling. The songs, nice as they are, often do not serve the book, are sometimes unnecessary, and occasionally stop the dramatic action completely rather than progress it forward. As the production reached its poignant conclusion, however, any quibbles I had with the piece were rendered unwarranted; Morgan's production is so emotionally well-pitched that the musical's inherent weaknesses become inconsequential.

Billy Bishop Goes to War is a play that should well entertain Hampton Roads audiences. Its themes of heroism and courage under fire are familiar to many local residents, and it is likely to resonate deeply with military audiences. History buffs, also, are likely to enjoy the show. Bishop, far better known in Canada and the United Kingdom, is an interesting, obscure historical figure, one of whom many in the United States may be unaware. We are fortunate to be introduced to such a fascinating figure in so handsome and inspired a production as is currently on offer at the Wells Theatre.

Billy Bishop Goes to War runs through February 7 at the Wells Theatre in Downtown Norfolk. Tickets are \$15-\$45, and are available through Ticketmaster, or through the Wells Theatre Box Office (757-627-1234). Tickets can also be purchased through VSC's website (www.vastage.com).

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