

Freddy Arsenault hits his stride

[By David Nicholson](#)

January 17, 2010

When Freddy Arsenault was a singing waiter at a downtown Norfolk restaurant a decade ago, he would look out the window and see the tall brick walls of the Virginia Stage Company across the street.

"After the show, all the droves of people would come over from the theater," he recalls, "And I thought, I want to get on that stage."

This week, the dream comes true for Arsenault as he takes on the leading role in the stage company's production of "Billy Bishop Goes to War." It's a homecoming of sorts for the 30-year-old Hampton native who has been finding success as an actor in New York and across the country.

It's been heady times for Arsenault of late. He drew strong reviews as a member of The Acting Company's touring production of "Henry V," which stopped at The American Theatre in Hampton a year ago. When the Shakespeare play landed in New York, New York Times theater critic Charles Isherwood singled him out: "As the Dauphin, Freddy Arsenault delights with his pompous peroration in praise of his beloved horse."

More importantly, director Doug Hughes saw Arsenault's performance and cast him in the Manhattan Theatre Club's production of "The Royal Family," landing him his first Broadway role. The job put Arsenault in theatrical stratosphere as part of a veteran cast that included Jan Maxwell, Rosemary Harris and John Glover.

"The Manhattan Theatre Club is made up of the most nurturing, wonderful people," says Arsenault. "The cast was wonderful. It was almost like being a journeyman, learning from actors who have been around the block ... and they want the best for you."

So when his agent suggested he hang around New York for the next year and build his acting credentials, Arsenault agreed — until he got wind of the Virginia Stage job. "This was one of the times when I wanted to get out of town," he says. "I went in and met Edward Morgan and we hit it off right away."

Morgan, who's directing "Billy Bishop Goes to War," says of Arsenault, "he was simply the best actor we saw. He's the right age, he's got charm, he's a good singer, and he moves well.

"Getting to perform at the Virginia Stage Company was an added benefit that made it fun for him."

Arsenault has loved the theater since he was a kid, performing in high school plays and in shows at Peninsula Community Theater. He sang in show choirs and took hours of dance lessons. While still in high school, he auditioned for a part as a drunkard in Christopher Newport University's production of "Guys and Dolls." Early on he never realized he could make a career out of theater, so when he enrolled at CNU, he ended up in the music department with the idea of becoming an opera singer. He soon switched to theater and played leading roles in several CNU Theater productions, including "The Mikado" and "A Little Night Music" and as the flamboyant emcee in "Cabaret."

"In many college environments, theater and music are separate, but CNU wasn't like that," he says. "So I pretty much made my own vocal and theater degree."

"I loved singing, but what hit me about theater was watching people bounce off of each other and communicate onstage. We spend a lot of time in life not doing that."

Arsenault had the support of his parents — "My mom and dad were totally for it," he says. "They knew it was a good fit." — and he thrived during his undergraduate years.

"Freddy was one of the most driven students we've ever had," says George Hillow, CNU's director of theater design. "As soon as he got to CNU he put his nose to the grindstone and was our leading man for years. There was never a question that he would go to New York and make it."

Arsenault even found time to appear in several musicals at Virginia Musical Theatre in Virginia Beach. He appeared in "1776" and played the role of Mordred in "Camelot."

"I had watched Fred over at CNU and knew he had a special light," says VMT Producing Director Jeff Meredith. "When he did 'Camelot' for us, it became apparent that he was ready even though he was working with more seasoned performers."

"He was professional, had good energy and a real passion for the work. He took his art very seriously."

Arsenault graduated CNU in 2002 and toured with the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse out of Staunton before moving to New York. He played a clown character in the Blue Man Group for several months before enrolling in a graduate acting program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. The prestigious program helped Arsenault make connections in the theater world and provided him with some impressive summer jobs. He worked at Bard College's Summerscape program and landed an internship at the Baryshnikov Arts Center run by the famous dancer and director Joanne Akalaitis. As a kid he remembers rehearsing in the dance studio while looking up at a poster of Baryshnikov on the wall.

All this has been good preparation for "Billy Bishop," a one-man tour de force in which Arsenault plays an unlikely World War I flying ace plus nearly 20 other minor characters, including King George V and a butler named Cedric. Written and composed by John Gray in

collaboration with Eric Peterson, the play tells of a young Canadian whose sharp eyesight and unemotional view of war aids him in becoming an Allied war hero. Arsenault is joined onstage by pianist Bob Stillman and accordionist Paul Lincoln.

Morgan calls the play "a good fit for our times" because America is currently at war.

"We're war-weary but we're not anti-war," he says. "And the play talks about the irony and pain of war but it's not anti-war either. The characters Freddy plays are satires, and the play is a satire on the hypocrisy of war. It's a play about growing up and how the war changes him."

Playing so many different roles is "hugely liberating" for an actor, says Arsenault, and bringing to life Billy Bishop and the world he lived in allows him to "connect with these fears and put them out there and play with them. Flying was very violent up there, and this is an opportunity to understand life."

After "Billy Bishop," Arsenault plans to step back from professional theater in order to take on more commercial work and pay back his student loans. Last month he married Gretchen Hall, an actress he met at Tisch, which has filled him with thoughts of becoming a man, having a career, supporting his new life.

Already his career has given him as lot, but he says, "I want more. I want a lot more."

News to Use

What: "Billy Bishop Goes to War" presented by Virginia Stage Company

When: Dress rehearsal, 7 tonight; preview performances, 7 p.m. Tuesday and 8 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday; opening night, 8 p.m. Friday. Additional performances through Feb. 7 at 7 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays, 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays.

Where: Wells Theatre, Tazewell Street and Monticello Avenue, Norfolk.

Tickets: \$10 dress rehearsal, \$15 preview performances, \$28-\$45 regular performances, through Ticketmaster by calling 800-982-2787 or online at www.vastage.com. Call 627-1234 for information.

In special recognition of their service, all active-duty military members in uniform will be admitted free at the Jan. 25 performance. A 1 p.m. appreciation reception will precede the 2 p.m. performance. For tickets, service members should call 627-6988, ext. 358.

Copyright © 2010, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)