

Review: 'Billy Bishop Goes to War'

Now through Feb. 7 at the Wells Theater

David Nicholson Daily Press

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Bob Stillman, Paul Lincoln and Freddy Arsenault star in Virginia Stage Company's "Billy Bishop Goes to War." (Courtesy of Virginia Stage Company / January 8, 2010)

Theater works best when it grabs our imagination and takes us on a wild ride. "Billy Bishop Goes to War," onstage at Virginia Stage Company, sends its audience up into the clouds on a hair-raising, thrilling journey.

The musical tells the story of Billy Bishop, a brash Canadian who stumbles into a career as a World War I fighter pilot and goes on to become a decorated war hero. In a simple pub-like setting, Bishop brings his remarkable tale to life with only two musicians, a pianist and an accordion player who also back him up

on vocals.

It's a once-in-a-lifetime role for a young performer, and Hampton Roads audiences are lucky to have Hampton native Freddy Arsenault in the pilot's seat. Having made his Broadway debut last fall, Arsenault has landed in Norfolk with the kind of spunk and confidence that this role demands. He handles the many impersonations smoothly, and in the dream-like sequences when he's pretending to be up in the air fighting the enemy, Arsenault brings a child-like wonder to these harrowing circumstances.

Arsenault is deftly directed by Edward Morgan and gets great backup from musicians Bob Stillman and Paul Lincoln. Great technical support also is provided by lighting designer A. Nelson Ruger IV, soundman Michael Boso and costumer Jeni Schaefer.

The show continues through Feb. 7 at the Wells Theatre in Norfolk. For tickets, call 627-1234 or go online to www.vastage.com.

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