

Jan. 22, 2010

**WHRO Radio review**

**BILLY BISHOP GOES TO WAR**

Author and Composer John Gray with Eric Peterson

Presented by Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theatre

Jan. 19 through Feb. 7, 2010

For tickets: (757)671-8100 or (757) 627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

This richly theatrical, consistently entertaining, wonderful work of joy and pathos transports us into a wild blue yonder of dramatic perfection that we rarely get to see. It's a true story of a skinny, somewhat goofy Canadian who seemingly has little going for him except super keen eyesight and an unemotional view of war. His name, as you may have guessed, is Billy Bishop.

Billy Bishop unfolds as a more complex character than he at first appears to be as he tells us his life's story. He was conscripted into military service and put into the cavalry. He nearly flunked out of military school. He almost died an ignoble death in mud and horse manure. By and by he wants to fly one of those little World War I planes. As Billy says, they were little more than kites with motors. He ultimately gets in the air, not as a pilot, but as an observer. He is destined for fame and becomes the Great War's most decorated Allied pilot.

This story is told in a style called theatricalism. The scenery and other technical support are minimal but just enough and just right. The emphasis is on the actors. Theatricalism has been called "exaggeration under control." Call it what you will, Billy Bishop is a compelling account of a unique hero whose story is put in the hands an incredibly effective, heart embracing young actor who is a Hampton Roads native. He is Freddy Arsenault and that's a name we are sure to hear more of. Besides drawing a masterful portrait of Billy Bishop, Arsenault acts and sings his way to nearly 20 other characters from King George V to a dour butler called Cedric and a couple of ladies as well. He receives artful support from two triple threat actor/musician/singers, Bob Stillman at the piano and Paul Lincoln on the accordion. They display their many talents with perfection. These three extraordinary performers all have Broadway credits. Their singing voices are pure and strong and ideally suited for the 14 catchy tunes that are of vital importance to Billy Bishop's story. I can't imagine three better performers for this show.

Director Edward Morgan deserves a few medals himself for this exceptional event. He guides his cast with the eye of an expert, sensitive man of the theatre.

Terry Flint has found the essential elements needed in the set and presents them in a striking yet simplistic manner. A. Nelson Ruger's lighting enhances Flint's visual concept.

"Billy Bishop" functions on many levels. It captures the hilarity and, more important, the horrors of war. It's very special.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.