

'Billy Bishop' enlists a strong cast



Freddy Arsenault, left, and Paul Lincoln kick up their heels in a scene from “Billy Bishop Goes to War.” (Photo courtesy of Anne Peterson)

If you go

What “Billy Bishop Goes to War,” directed by Edward Morgan, starring Freddy Arsenault, above, with Paul Lincoln and Bob Stillman, presented by Virginia Stage Company

When 7 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, matinees at 4 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays; through Feb. 7

Where Wells Theatre, Monticello Avenue and Tazewell Street, Norfolk

Tickets \$28-\$45; (757) 627-1234, (757) 671-8100 or www.vastage.com

By [Mal Vincent](#)
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NORFOLK

The exuberance, energy and multifaceted nature of Freddy Arsenault's performance spark "Billy Bishop Goes to War," the three-man musical that returns to the Virginia Stage Company for the third go-round. In a tour de force, Arsenault brings a full arc to his boyish yet manipulative World War I hero.

Also assigned 16 other characters, he comes across as versatile and believable in all of them (even though his bit as the French chanteuse, "the lovely Helene," is a bit cautious).

Wars come and wars go, but "Billy Bishop," the musical from Canada, remains a war statement that is ambiguous - never quite going where you expect it to. Produced at the Virginia Stage Company in 1986 (when Queen Azalea was Canadian) and again in 1991, it returns with America involved in two unpopular and ongoing wars.

"Billy Bishop" is not an anti-war statement. It leaves the verdict on war up to the audience. Billy learns the horror of World War I, arguably the most brutal war in modern history, but he is not so much disillusioned as he is thrilled. He becomes one of the war's greatest air heroes, shooting down 72 enemy planes and, admittedly, enjoying it. He has become a killing machine but, on the other hand, expresses some realization that he is subsequently used, hypocritically, as a token "hero."

Eventually, its most definitive statement seems to be that "we are not in control of these things, are we?"

The real Billy Bishop died in 1956, and this musical is based on his autobiography and a biography by his son.

Arsenault plays Bishop, of course, and such varied characters as stuffy commander Sir Hugh Cecil; Lady St. Kelier and her butler, Cedric; assorted British and German soldiers; King George V; and the cabaret singer, Helene. Of necessity, perhaps, most of these are broad caricatures, but the actor has the title character to fall back on, a real-life Canadian hero who is initially an "aw, shucks" boy who hands in his cheat notes with his exam paper. He wants to fly, even though his vessel is, as he describes, it "just a kite with a motor what will hardly get off the ground." His motivation is getting out of the mud of the calvary.

The actor admirably captures that most difficult of personas - the regular guy, likable yet shifty. Arsenault has a charm that could grant him leading-man status, coupled with the off-kilter bent of a character actor. His resume ranges from Virginia Musical Theatre's "Camelot" and "1776" in Virginia Beach to working with the inimitable Rosemary Harris in the recent Broadway revival of "The Royal Family."

Arsenault is ably supported by accordionist Paul Lincoln and pianist Bob Stillman, both of whom suggest they have the voices and personalities to take center stage, if allowed. The accordion adds a folksy touch, especially for the Parisian moments, and Lincoln's tenor leads us to expect him to break into a chorus of "Danny Boy" at any moment. (He doesn't.) Stillman handles the piano as if it were in the intimacy of our living room.

These multirole mini-musicals, though, are quickly losing any novelty they had. We've had mini versions of "My Fair Lady" and "Man of La Mancha," which got away with it, but theatricality can go only so far when the genre is repeated. With five characters opening soon in multi-roles in "Around the World in 80 Days," VSC may be testing audiences' tolerance for the style.

Terry Summers Flint's set design is one of the theater's most lackluster. It has too much empty space, making it look largely as if it is undressed. A. Nelson Ruger IV's lighting, though, makes up for much. There is that wonderful theatrical moment when we realize the airborne Billy is

being pursued by six airborne German villains. They descend from the upper stage in an ominous way that makes us forget they are just toy planes. Such is the magic of theater.

The songs are a stylistic mixture of Kurt Weill, Jacques Brel and Irving Berlin. The most caustically telling of them is "The Empire Soiree," about how national interests rule the common man - sending him to war with no clear reason other than boundary changes. The exuberant "In the Sky" is a hymn to soaring that has a Broadway scope.

"Billy Bishop" depends greatly upon its smallness and its leading man. It flopped on Broadway in 1980 when it was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as taking a kind of gung-ho, patriotic position. Some audiences may not be into irony. When it comes to war, they are either for it or agin it, and they may feel cheated by the show's refusal to take a stance. Veterans as well as doves have adopted it as their own, proving that it has an effective double edge.

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