

Billy Flies, Stage Company Soars

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By Montague Gammon III

Canadian pilot William Avery Bishop, known as Billy, flew to fame over Europe during World War I, one of the most successful and most unlikely air aces of the Allies.

The play *Billy Bishop Goes to War* soars victoriously across the Wells Theatre stage, a deeply moving, wonderfully funny, poignant, thrilling, suspenseful and even thought provoking production.

This is the third not-to-be-missed Virginia Stage Company production in a row that reminds us of why we have professional theatre, and why the VSC is important. It's also a fine example of how a show can be wholeheartedly entertaining, thoroughly fun, and still exist as sincere, high quality theatre.

The play retells, in monologues, song, and a few bits of dialogue, the story of Bishop's metamorphosis from teen-aged slacker to young hero. Freddy Arsenault, an erstwhile local performer who's made it in New York, plays Bishop and a host of other people whom the young pilot encounters on his journey from military school through combat to royal recognition. Arsenault is so effortlessly versatile that one ceases to wonder at his skills, but rather, delights in the appearance of the characters he so deftly sketches.

Bob Stillman accompanies Arsenault on the piano, and Paul Lincoln plays accordion. Both take brief speaking roles; Lincoln is most memorable as Cedric, an intimidating lady's very intimidating butler.

Ed Morgan directed, which automatically means two things:

One, there's a preliminary assumption that it will be worth seeing, since everything else he's directed at VSC (plus a show or two at the Generic, years ago) has been excellent. That favorable prejudice is once again wholly correct.

Second, the play is not only a must-see for general audiences, but should be required viewing for theatre students, because it's something of a master class in the director's art. This is not to say that Morgan's touch is obtrusive, for it is anything but that. Rather, it is perceptively elegant, though only if one actively seeks to distinguish it.

Designer Terry Flint's spare scenery fits the show perfectly. When Bishop - or rather, Arsenault - stands on a raised platform in the very center of the stage, he gets the full focus he deserves.

The lighting, by A. Nelson Ruger IV, works well to enhance and support the show and its star, as do Jeni Schaefer's costumes and the especially important sound design by Michael Boso.

Billy Bishop Goes to War

Written and composed by John Gray

In collaboration with Eric Peterson

Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theatre

Through February 7

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