



# Theatre of War: Virginia Stage Company Scores Direct Hit with Billy Bishop

 Tuesday, 12 January 2010 22:34 | 

The rehearsal space for Virginia Stage Company's latest play, *Billy Bishop Goes To War*, the third production of the company's 31st season (not counting the annual *A Christmas Carol*), only faintly suggests the scenic setting of a decorated World War 1 fighter pilot's life in reflection. Upon a quick scan of the empty classroom-like space, one sees only a leather lounge chair, a smallish bench, a bunch of frilly scarves and a piano, which stands out largely due to its size.

But then, none of this is surprising, as it's still quite early in this musical's march toward anticipated previews later this month. The actual set is still a work in progress, with only the tiny model of it, shown to me earlier by the play's director, illustrates the visual aesthetic of this "theatrical biography."

Well that, and witnessing the developing performance of the actual actor tasked with bringing the life of one William Avery "Billy" Bishop to the Virginia stage, in both monologue and song, Hampton Roads native Freddy Arsenault. The actor, who attended high school and college on the Peninsula, is both a ham and an intellectual, which in observance, seems to serve him well in managing the grueling requirements of this multi character filled, largely one-man show. Part of which includes, reconciling his own instincts as an actor, with the suggestions and dictates of his "very smart" director, Virginia Stage Company alum, Ed Morgan.

"He's an actor's director," enthuses Arsenault. "He's not gonna treat you like a pawn . . . He wants to figure it out with you."

The "it" that he refers to, includes all of the intricacies inherent in mounting professional theater. For Freddy that includes figuring out the core qualities of *Billy Bishop*, along with the other twenty or so characters whom the Hampton native will need to convincingly inhabit.

"The challenges are physical and vocal," he explains. "He was a talker, drinker . . . He liked to party. And, he was a little nutty . . . I want to get a bit of that in [the performance] as well."

There is indeed a lot of nuttiness to go around in this play. Written and originally performed by John MacLachlan Gray and Eric Peterson, *Billy Bishop Goes To War* began as a Canadian musical, way back in 1978, that eventually had successful Broadway and Off-Broadway runs in the early eighties. The play, which director Edward Morgan describes as "a revue with a plot," dramatizes the life of Billy Bishop, the now famous WW1 Canadian flying ace, who is credited with 72 victories and is thus regarded by many as the top ace of the British Empire.

In the rich tradition of the American musical, Billy's narration of his own life includes many launches into narrative song, especially heavy in Act II., as well as accompaniment by a stage comrade armed with piano (John Gray's role in the original production), portrayed in this VSC production by noted musician/actor Bob Stillman.

What really distinguishes VSC's new production of *Billy Bishop*, though, is the addition of a third fellow on stage, accordionist Paul Lincoln. Credit that bright idea to the aforementioned playwright and director Edward Morgan.

"I hope it will seem natural and organic or even essential," the director offers, "I hope people will say, 'Wow, I can't imagine it with only two . . .'" Morgan completes his thought with an optimistic chuckle.

As it turns out, the play has a significant history with VSC, as the musical has been produced here twice, most recently in the early nineties. According to Ed, it was the constant feedback from patrons requesting another return to the Wells Theatre, received by Artistic Director Chris Hanna, which led to its inclusion this season.

"I think this is an excellent show for this area, both as a military community and not . . . The show has done very well here twice before," he notes.

It would indeed appear as though the time is ripe, either for or against, a war focused musical, considering the current political and social climate. Yet Ed clarifies that this play is hardly political.

"The play itself is neither pro-war nor antiwar. It reflects on the costs of war and yet sort of celebrates the gusto of this individual guy's joy of fighting," Morgan surmises.

"Everybody loves a winner . . . right?"

## **Billy Bishop Goes To War**

### **Virginia Stage Company**

Wells Theatre

January 19- February 7

Info: 627-1234 or

[www.vastage.com](http://www.vastage.com)