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Hampton native plays fighter pilot in 'Billy Bishop'

NORFOLK

A decade ago, Freddy Arsenault was a local theater student with a job at Castaldi's, an Italian restaurant then at MacArthur Center.

He was a singing waiter, sometimes waiting on Wells Theatre patrons, occasionally gazing out the window as those patrons headed across the street into the elegant performing home of the Virginia Stage Company.

"I remember thinking, 'God, I hope to be in there someday. How do I get in there?'"

Zooming forward, Arsenault is not merely in the cast of Virginia Stage's show opening next week at the Wells. He is the star of John Gray and Eric Peterson's "Billy Bishop Goes to War," which is almost a solo outing. It's a 90-minute show about a real-life World War I Canadian fighter pilot that entails singing and dancing and lots of humor, plus some darker moments.

Arsenault has 90 percent of the lines. He is joined onstage by a pianist, as usual with this show, and an accordionist, an addition unique to this Virginia Stage production.

The director, Edward Morgan, said he didn't know Arsenault was a Hampton native when he cast him in New York.

"He was the best actor that auditioned. Well, he's charming as the dickens. He has the comic chops and the zaniness and the song-and-dance skills."

Arsenault, 30, has just come off a successful Broadway debut. He was cast this fall in "The Royal Family," a classic comedy of manners at the Manhattan Theatre Club, which received mostly positive reviews. He performed beside such stage legends as Rosemary Harris.

"What can I say? It was a dream," he said last week in a break from rehearsals. He was also amazed to be performing opposite a young woman from Virginia Beach, Kelli Barrett, also on Broadway for the first time.

"She said to me, 'Shut up! You're from Hampton?!'" Each had performed years ago at Virginia Musical Theatre, though in different shows.

Arsenault toured the country last year in a production of Shakespeare's "Henry V." He took on seven roles in that show, which was good preparation for "Billy Bishop."

At the Wells, he'll assume 17 different characters besides the war hero. There's a drunken Irishman, culled from men Arsenault has encountered in Manhattan saloons. And an aristocratic lady who takes Billy under her wing, introducing him to society.

Act one takes Billy through his early years at a military college, where he was a rotten student, and up through his first dogfight, amusingly relived using a toy airplane. He has a gung ho, devil-may-care attitude.

Post-intermission, the show gets a little more serious. He's taken on a daring mission that amounted to suicide, but won the day and became a hero. "He's changed. Many of his friends are dead and he wants revenge. He's seen prostitutes. He's drinking a lot. He's gone to this dark place, and he slowly comes out of it," the actor said.

His challenge, as he sees it, is to "tread the line between the light and the heavy."

Arsenault studied voice, musical theater and straight theater at Christopher Newport University from 1997 to 2002, after which he spent a year trying to find work in New York.

That year, he performed as a member of the famed Blue Man Group; during one performance, a drum near his left ear blew out that eardrum, resulting in a permanent ringing in his ear and a 35 percent hearing loss - a kind of war injury.

He studied theater at New York University from 2005 to 2008, and after graduation he joined Actors' Equity, the professional union. He owes \$150,000 from his schooling and expects "Billy Bishop" may be the last stage show he can afford to do for a while.

"I'll be looking for film and television work," which can pay much more.

Arsenault last performed locally at Hampton's American Theatre in "Henry V," a touring production of two prestigious organizations, The Guthrie Theater and The Acting Company.

While in his hometown, Arsenault attended a ceremony honoring one of his three younger brothers, Daniel, a Hampton firefighter who was handed a Governor's Fire Service Award.

"He saves people's lives all the time. He saved a pregnant woman from a second-story window. As soon as he got her out the window, the house went up.

"Yeah, I'm really proud of him." Pause. "He does the stuff I'm going to pretend to do."

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