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BILLY BISHOP GOES TO WAR

Jacob James tackles one of Canada's greatest heroes.

BY ALEX J MACPHERSON

Billy Bishop is a figure of some controversy, but that hasn't blunted his legacy as a Canadian hero. Born in Ontario, Bishop won the Victoria Cross after a lone wolf raid on a German aerodrome in June, 1917, before amassing the third-highest kill count of the war. Tracing the journey from adolescence to hardened adulthood, *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, a play by John Gray in collaboration with Eric Peterson, examines the folly of war, and how a young man from Ontario became the symbol of a nation. Jacob James plays Bishop in the play; I caught up with him to talk about Bishop's legacy.

Alex J MacPherson: *Bishop is an extraordinarily complicated figure. What's your take on him?*



Jacob James: I think this play is the story of the journey from boy to man, and it happens to be under the cloak of the Great War. What I find fascinating about the real history, and also the story of the play, is

how does a kid from Owen Sound, who is cheating on his exams and stealing canoes to go meet girls ... end up becoming the leading flying ace of World War One?

AJM: *What does it mean to you, as an actor, to play a character like Bishop?*

AJM: *You play multiple characters besides Bishop. What's that like?*

JJ: It's kind of my lot. I'm the kind of actor who usually plays five roles in the same play. I did the Canadian premier of *The 39 Steps*. It's a four-hander, but there are two actors called the

[H]ow does a kid from Owen Sound ... end up becoming the leading flying ace...

JACOB JAMES

JJ: To me it's obviously quite a huge honour. I was very, very close with my grandfather, who was in the navy in World War Two. We were best friends. He used to speak so highly of his older brother Eddie, who was an observer in the Air Force. He was shot down. All my life I've been aware of fighter pilots and the war, through my grandpa. This play in particular is a great gift for any actor.

Clowns and they play about 12 different characters each. I really enjoy the exercise of doing that, of trying to make the audience feel like they're seeing 20 different people up there.

AJM: *The play tracks Bishop's transition from wide-eyed young man to hardened veteran. Is acting that journey a challenge?*

JJ: There's a quote, when he's getting told he's going on extended leave

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and [will] not fly again, to preserve colonial morale. In his argument he says, "You don't understand, sir. I like it." As an actor, it's a wonderful challenge to see how it starts as this kid who doesn't really care about the war, and gets to the point where he actually thrives on killing people. I just find it fascinating, that question, that someone who is inherently polite and kind — the Canadian personality — can get to the point where he enjoys killing.

AJM: *This play also includes a lot of music. What is that like?*

JJ: I feel that this is predominantly a play that has music in it. They aren't

songs in the sense of *Les Mis*, where words can't encapsulate the emotion so they break into song. There are moments where I think it borders into the act of using the song as an extension of the emotion, though. This play covers all sorts of emotions. It makes you laugh and it makes you cry — and it makes you think.

Billy Bishop Goes to War
October 10-28 @ Globe Theatre
\$29+ @ Globe Theatre Box Office

Feedback? Text it! (306) 881 8372

[@MacPhersonA](https://twitter.com/MacPhersonA)
amacpherson@verbnews.com