



# Billy Bishop Goes to War

Written and composed by John Gray  
In Collaboration with Eric Peterson

## A Guide to the Play

Written and compiled by Mark Claxton

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## How to Use This Guide

This guide is intended for anyone who would like to enhance their appreciation and understanding of the Globe Theatre's production of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. The guide contains a brief history of the play and its reception, an introduction to the Globe's artistic team, a summary of the action in each scene, a few questions intended to encourage open-ended discussion, and some links to online resources for those who wish to explore further.

Some of this guide's content may give you information about the play's plot that you'd rather discover yourself while experiencing the show. If you'd like to avoid any potential spoilers, you might want to wait until seeing the play before reading any further.

Teachers who are preparing their students to experience the play can provide them with this guide's discussion questions ahead of time -- or first allow them to see the production and then use the questions or other sections of the guide to facilitate further thought and discussion.

I hope this guide is both helpful and enjoyable to read. I welcome your comments and suggestions at [markclaxton@sasktel.net](mailto:markclaxton@sasktel.net).

## A Canadian stage classic

Like the man himself, *Billy Bishop Goes to War* grew from humble beginnings into a Canadian icon.

It all started when actor Eric Peterson (now familiar to many Canadians as the cantankerous Oscar Leroy in *Corner Gas*) lent a book to fellow actor and composer/writer John Gray while the two were working with Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. The book was *Winged Warfare*, an account of Billy Bishop's first 48 air victories, written by Bishop himself.

In a 2009 interview with the CBC, Gray said he was struck by how Bishop "had been kind of forgotten, especially in the anti-war movement. With that generation, nobody was interested in war heroes."

The Canadian theatre scene was, however, in search of Canadian heroes to populate its stages, and in Billy Bishop, Gray and Peterson both saw a remarkable Canadian with a compelling story to tell. Drawing on Bishop's memoirs, additional research, and numerous discussions over the pool table, they set to work on turning a forgotten hero's story into a stage musical.

With the help of personal connections in the Vancouver theatre scene, Gray and Peterson were able to launch *Billy Bishop Goes to War* at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in November of 1978. As they would do many hundreds of times, Peterson played Bishop and Gray played the piano while narrating.

The production was well received and soon brought to Theatre Passe Muraille. Its success in Toronto led to a national tour and eventually a brief stint on Broadway.

Gray and Peterson revised the play in 1998 and 2009, adapting it each time so that an older Peterson could portray an older Bishop, looking back from an increased distance at his wartime exploits. In the meantime, the original version of *Billy Bishop Goes to War* has been produced by hundreds of theatres in Canada and the United States.

Gray and Peterson have both noted the ironic parallel between Billy Bishop and the play bearing his name: they both became popular with Canadians only after achieving success outside Canada's borders. "It's the colonial mentality," Gray has said.

*Billy Bishop Goes to War* has won the Governor General's Award for English Drama, the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award, and the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Award. It has also been adapted twice for film.

## Billy Bishop's legacy: History or just his story?

There is at least one very good reason that audiences for *Billy Bishop Goes to War* hear about Billy's exploits from his mouth alone. The fact is, some of the most remarkable incidents in this Canadian legend's wartime career had no living witnesses apart from William Avery Bishop himself. While many of the facts surrounding his illustrious career are authenticated by military records, others can be accepted only on Bishop's word.

As Bishop's superiors gained confidence in him as a fighter pilot, he was given increasing license to embark on solo missions across enemy lines. While it was, in some respects, sensible to risk only one pilot's life on certain missions, this also meant there were no witnesses to corroborate the pilot's report upon his return.

Bishop's legendary solo attack on a German air base in June 1917 is perhaps the most controversial chapter in his legacy, and was the subject of intense scrutiny in the National Film Board's 1983 docudrama *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*. The film suggested there was some evidence that Bishop fabricated details around his pre-dawn air raid and may even have shot holes in his own plane before returning to base.

The film's theories provoked outrage among Canadian veterans and all who invested national pride in Bishop's legend. The federal government launched an inquiry and a committee of Canadian senators even demanded - unsuccessfully - that the NFB remove the film from public circulation.

Interestingly, the Victoria Cross was awarded to Bishop in spite of a policy that the brave deeds cited as reasons for the medal must have witnesses. This bending of the rules is, perhaps, understandable. After all, no one could have fathomed the realities of aerial warfare when the VC was first instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856.

As dramatized in *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, Billy's heroics became an important source of morale for the Allied forces. They have since become a source of pride for a young nation still seeking an identity and presence on the global stage. There was a point at which Billy stopped being an individual airman and became a symbol for Canada and the Allied cause. Every nation has its heroes, and to question a hero's heroism is to invite a fierce, protective response.

In the end, no one can question Billy Bishop's remarkable daring and uncanny skill as a fighter pilot. Neither is there any doubt about his lifelong dedication to Canada and its military. He remains a hero to many of us. And whatever our feelings may be about war and nationalism, Billy's singleminded pursuit of his calling can be an inspiration for all of us.

## Meet the artistic team

**Max Reimer** (Director) has performed, choreographed and directed musicals from Victoria to Charlottetown. Since 1993, he has been the Artistic Managing Director for Huron Country Playhouse, Theatre Aquarius Hamilton, and the Vancouver Playhouse. He recently directed *Titanic: The New Musical* for Vancouver's Theatre Under the Stars.

**Scott Penner** (Set Designer) has designed for Toronto companies such as The Classical Theatre Project, Kids Entertainment, Hart House Theatre, Toronto Youth Theatre, Randolph Young Company and Praxis Theatre. He is a graduate of York University's Theatre Production and Design Program.

**Emma Williams** (Costume Designer) is a winner of the 2009 Olivier Award for her work on the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions of *Henry IV Parts I & II* and *Henry V*. She is the Globe's resident costume designer for the 2012 | 2013 season.

**Robert Thomson** (Lighting Designer), a four-time Dora Mavor Moore Award winner, has designed more than 55 productions for the Shaw Festival and more than 27 for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. He is currently based in Montreal.

**Dianne Woodrow** (Stage Manager) has been managing stages in Canada for more than 25 years. She recently called the cues for the Manitoba Theatre Centre's production of *Calendar Girls* and Soulpepper Theatre's *The Royal Comedians*.

**Monika Dembowy** (Apprentice Stage Manager) is a graduate of Sheridan College's Technical Production for Theatre and Live Events program. Recent credits include stage management for Praxis Theatre's *Underneath* and Hart House Theatre's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

**Jacob James** (Billy Bishop) is a graduate of The National Theatre School, the Stratford Festival Conservatory, and the Second City Conservatory. He spent six seasons as a leading actor at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. He has appeared in the Canadian premiere of *The 39 Steps* and starred as Billy Bishop in the Thousand Island Playhouse's 2011 production.

**Zachary Flis** (Piano Player, Narrator) made his Globe debut earlier this fall as the musical director for *A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline*. Zachary has appeared in many local theatre productions with Regina Lyric Musical Theatre, Do It With Class, and Saskatchewan Express.

## Songs and Stories: A Summary of the Play

We begin the play in an Officer's "Mess" - essentially a lounge for soldiers of rank - and remain there throughout the performance as Billy Bishop, supported by a piano player, tells us his story. Billy's narrative is sprinkled throughout with songs that reinforce for us his feelings and memories from a particular time in his life.

### Act One

#### *"We were off to fight the Hun"*

Thanks to a well-timed declaration of war, young hellion William Avery Bishop avoids expulsion from Royal Military College and enters active service as an officer. He is trained in the infantry but, due to a series of illnesses and injuries, does not see active duty until 1915, when he and his fellow soldiers survive a harrowing ocean journey and land in Portsmouth, England.

#### *"Oh, Canada, sing a song for me"*

Billy soon comes to believe that neither the infantry nor the calvary are for him. Mud-drenched, exhausted, and homesick, he is awe-struck by the sight of a fighter pilot landing his plane and then taking back to the skies. Encouraged by a conversation with a fellow officer, he applies to the Royal Flying Corps. Although he is denied entrance as a pilot, he joins the Twenty-First Squadron as an "observer," accompanying fighter pilots on their missions.

#### *"Nobody shoots no one in Canada"*

Billy's first "observing" assignment is to drop bombs on the enemy from planes that have had their machine guns removed in order to lighten their weight. Soon after assuming this perilous role, his luck returns and he injures himself while running drunkenly down a ship's gangplank. He is then diagnosed with a heart condition and admitted for an indefinite stay in hospital.

#### *"You're a typical Canadian"*

While in hospital, Billy is visited by Lady St. Helier, an English politician and friend of Canadian prime minister Wilfred Laurier. Because Billy's father was a prominent supporter of Laurier's, Lady St. Helier is determined to take Billy under her wing - or rather, see that he gets his wings. After a stern lecture about his less-than-stellar military record, Lady St. Helier takes him in to recuperate from his injuries and prepare for return to the war.

#### *"Gonna fly, gonna fly so high"*

Thanks to Lady St. Helier's influence, Billy is soon granted fighter pilot status and his first solo flight. Soon after, however, after being transferred to France, he crashes his plane while trying to land. He is informed by his irate Brigade Commander that he is finished as a pilot. Before Billy's dismissal can take effect, however, he shoots down his first German plane and survives an emergency landing in no-man's-land. On the ground, he is shaken by his first close-up encounter with the death and ruin of war.

## Act Two

*"When you fight, stay as calm as the ocean"*

Time has passed, and Billy Bishop is no longer a stranger to war. He has survived numerous air battles, seen numerous enemy pilots plunge to their deaths under the barrage of his guns, survived where many of his fellows have not. Billy's skill, deadliness, and daring as a fighter pilot is earning him a growing reputation and dinner engagements with England's elite and powerful. He is approached by legendary English pilot Albert Ball, who wants Billy to accompany him on a two-man raid of a German air base. Billy is struck by the idea, but noncommittal: in the meantime, Ball is killed in action.

*"How can you go back home"*

Conflicted about his fame in England, but increasingly attached to the thrill of combat, Billy resolves to carry out Albert Ball's plan - alone. He singlehandedly destroys several German planes and returns to his base with his own machine in tatters. Bishop's legend is now secure, and the powers-that-be are worried about the effect on troop morale if he should perish. With 43 kills, one shy of Albert Ball's record, Billy is awarded several medals and ordered to take an indefinite leave. Over the next week, however, he shoots down five more planes.

*"The Empire Soiree"*

King George himself bestows Billy's medals, and he returns to action long enough to shoot down another 24 enemy planes. He returns to Canada and marries Margaret.

*"Let us dance together in the sky"*

Twenty years later, the western world is at war again. It is 1941, and Billy Bishop, decorated with "an astonishing array of medals," addresses a group of military recruits. He delivers the required inspirational speech, then grows reflective as he considers his children's involvement in this Second World War. "We didn't think there was going to be another one back in 1918," he says. "But then, we're not in control of any of these things, are we? And all in all, I would have to say, it was a hell of a time!"

## For Discussion and Further Exploration

1. Nearly every dramatization or narrative about war describes how the main characters are changed by their experience of it. In what ways does Billy Bishop change? In what ways does he remain the same?
2. In the world of film, wars have often been depicted on an epic scale, with enormous battle scenes and casts numbering in the hundreds. *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, by contrast, places a small cast in an intimate, live setting. In what ways does this change the experience of war for the audience?
3. Billy Bishop's final words about the war are, "It was a hell of a time." What feelings or thoughts may be behind those words? Is war simply a grand adventure to Billy?
4. How do the music and songs contribute to the overall experience in *Billy Bishop Goes to War*? Would the play be stronger or weaker without the songs?
5. If you were given the assignment to write a play about a "Canadian hero," whose story would you choose to tell, and why?

### More information and resources:

[Billy Bishop Goes to War in the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia](#)

[CBC interview with John Gray and Eric Peterson on YouTube](#)

[National Film Board docudrama: The Kid Who Couldn't Miss](#)