

P.L.A.Y.

(Performance = Literature + Art + You)

Student Matinee Series



Billy Bishop Goes to War

By

John Gray

In collaboration with

Eric Peterson

Directed by

Christopher Gurr

Student Matinee
2002/2003



Geva
Theatre

30th Anniversary

SEASON

Dear Educators,

I've jumped out of perfectly good airplanes. I still can't believe that I can honestly write that sentence. In the days of my youth, I briefly enjoyed the thrill of parachuting. Part of what made the experience so damnably exciting was that back then (the late 1970s) one trained for the experience by simply jumping off the back of a pick-up truck traveling at 30 mph. If you rolled and survived, you were deemed reasonably capable of safely jumping from an airplane mid-flight. Only you didn't jump. When the time came, you stepped through the door, planted your foot on the landing gear, grasped the wing strut and scooted yourself out suspended from the wing of the plane. There you hung, waiting for the plane to fly over the drop zone. Could take one minute, might take 10. Hanging on, in anticipation, was more exciting than the jump itself. We fancied ourselves the desperadoes of the skies, you see.

Well, we weren't even close. Billy Bishop and his fellow WWI pilots were the true desperadoes. Ezra Bowen called them the "knights of the air." They strapped themselves to wood, paper and cable and soared through the sky well before parachutes were practical. Their planes were called "coffins in the air." A staggering 50 percent of WWI pilots never returned from the war, with most killed within a few days of arriving at their squadrons. There can be no question of bravery. But does bravery make a hero?

That question seems to be at the center of the play *Billy Bishop Goes to War* by John Gray in collaboration with Eric Peterson. To assist you in exploring that question, you will find in this study guide a variety of resources, including a synopsis, an interview with director Christopher Gurr, questions and activities, informative articles and comments from the set and costume designers. Our hope is that you will find these to be useful tools in preparing a lesson plan, and that seeing the play will only be part of that journey.

To further assist you, **please let me strongly urge you to attend our free teacher workshop for *Billy Bishop Goes to War* on Wednesday, October 30th from 4-5:30 pm, in Geva's rehearsal hall.** We will be bringing together some of the artists who created the show to speak first hand about their intentions and experiences with this production. Thank you for coming to *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. Please call with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Skip Greer
Director of Education
232-1366 x3073

Table of Contents

The Synopsis . . .	3
John Gray and Eric Peterson Bios . .	3
Interview with Christopher Gurr	4-5
Cavalry to Airforce	5
Truth, Heroism, The Media, and War	6-7
Bio of WWI Flying Ace Albert Ball .	7
Set & Costume Designs	8-9
Glossary	10
Tell Us What You Think	10
Resources	11

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

Billy Bishop
World War One
Canadian Flying Ace

Piano Player

The actors will switch roles every other performance

"I mean, I am a really good shot. I've got these tremendous eyes, you see." Billy Bishop

Synopsis of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*



William Avery Bishop

Billy Bishop was a country boy from the plains of Canada who never really amounted to much at home. After a dismal turn at the Royal Military College in Kingston, he is given a second chance, and taken on as an officer in the cavalry. After an extended illness and a riding injury, he finally sails for England and the front in June of 1915.

The misery of the conditions on the ground, and the futility of the antiquated cavalry in a modern war of machine guns and planes, leads Billy to pursue a transfer to the equally dangerous but exciting (and less muddy) Royal Flying Corps. He starts out as an observer, but an injury threatens to pull him out of the war altogether. However, the unexpected mentorship of Lady St. Helier results in Billy's eventual reinstatement — as a pilot. After a rocky start, he gets the hang of flying and starts to go on missions above the German held continent. Will his new-found luck hold?

'cavalry' n. : *Troops trained to fight on horseback.*

'observer' n. : *A crew member on a military aircraft that makes observations and sometimes operates the plane's machine gun.*

Biographies of the Creators of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*

John Gray

Gray was born in Ontario in 1946, and is best-known for his work on CBS' "The Journal." After attending college at Mount Allison University and The University of British Columbia, Gray founded the Tahmanous Theatre at UBC. Later he joined Theatre Passe Muraille and began writing for the stage. *Billy Bishop Goes to War* was created with the celebrated Canadian actor Eric Peterson in 1978 and became an international success a short while later. Gray lives in Vancouver.

Eric Peterson

Actor Eric Peterson was born in Indian Head, Saskatchewan in 1946. Peterson has performed in works at Theatre Passe Muraille and Festival Lennoxville and in the commercial production of George F. Walker's *Nothing Sacred*. He helped to revive *Billy Bishop Goes to War* for Canadian Stage in 1998 and returned to the company in October 2000, to perform in *Hysteria*. More recently, he appeared in David Young's *Clout* at the National Arts Centre in January, 2001.

Peterson has also acted in film and television, notably in the CBC series "Street Legal."

How does the structure of this play differ from other plays you have seen?

"I'm on record as the worst student they ever had."

Billy Bishop

Interview with Director Christopher Gurr



Christopher Gurr

What is illuminated or revealed in the text by the actors switching roles?

Billy Bishop was originally created as a one-man show with support from a piano player. One of the first questions I asked of the play was, "So, who is this other guy on stage?" In our production the piano player is also Billy. Literally. The man at the piano one night will be the man at the controls of the aeroplane the next. Both actors will be equally invested in Billy and his story.

Do you think Billy Bishop Goes to War is especially relevant in today's social climate, in the sense that his story is the building of a hero?

In that he flourished in a time where people were in need of heroes — yes. In that Billy was the primary architect of his own image as hero and of the supporting narrative that still frames that image — yes. However, I don't think being heroic is central to this piece. And I don't think the primary actions of the piece are those which result in being thought a hero. The storytelling is the central action.

What function or purpose does the music serve within the structure of the play?

As in any theatre piece with music, the music expands the set of tools used to carry the audience along on the ride. Once I heard the score, though, I knew immediately what, specifically, it brought to the play: irony. Throughout the piece the music is just a little at odds with the text. It's just enough to make one aware of tension between what is being said and what is being meant. To my mind it's what saves this play from being easily classified as either a pro- or anti-war piece.

'irony' n. : A deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning.

What is the greatest challenge facing you as you prepare to enter the rehearsal process?

It is to find a way to allow both actors to bring their own individual, fresh and instinctive powers to the creating of Billy. Every single moment of this piece will require one of the actors to be the second one to have a shot at it. Maintaining a balance of who gets to draw on clean, white paper and who has to draw on top of the other actor's work is already giving me nightmares. These two actors know each other well and have worked quite a lot together. Without that foundation, it would be an impossible task.

Why are you personally drawn to this play?

It goes back to the central action being to tell a story. That's my work as a theatre artist in its entirety: Story telling. As much as this play is about — by turns — World War I, courage, being Canadian, etc.; it is always about storytelling. And it could, at its simplest, be just two guys and a piano. As an actor and musician, the power of those simple ingredients appeals to me.

After attending the performance, can you identify ways that music helped bring irony to the play?

"You are a rude young man behaving like cannon fodder. Perfectly acceptable characteristics on a Canadian, but you are different."
Billy as
Lady St. Helier

List the many differences in the plight of the foot soldier and the airman in WWI. If forced to make a decision, which might you have preferred to be? Why?

It is often difficult to uncover the conflict in a first-person account of someone's life. What is the conflict here?

I'm not sure. This is a narrative, not a drama, so the conflict will come from places other than the usual protagonist/antagonist relationship and other conflicting character objectives — except within Billy's reenactments of his encounters with others. (These are little dramas within the narrative.) Internal conflict might be uncovered as we explore Billy's reasons to tell his story here, now and in this way. Then there's performative conflict: present between actor and audience even in the most hospitable setting.

Billy's claims of his fighting accomplishments don't seem to be undermined by the text, but recently some scholars have questioned them. How do you approach this?

When I first got this assignment, with its built-in "actors switching roles" concept, I joked that when Actor A was Billy, he was telling the truth and when Actor B was Billy, he was a liar. It was a joke, because — if Billy is a great storyteller (by all accounts he was, and this play presents him as such) — there shouldn't be any difference.

What the doubts do is remind me to, well... doubt. "Is it a lie or the truth" is a good question to ask of what any character says. It leads to questions, and hopefully answers, about motivation, intent, and action.

The Transition from Cavalry to Airforce

At the beginning of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, Billy describes being mired down in the mud with his horse and looking up to see a plane sailing through the air overhead. This image is particularly evocative, and speaks to the time of transition from animal to machine that was the early 20th century. With the advent of trench warfare and the ability to sweep lethally across a charge of soldiers or horsemen with a machine-gun, the advantage a horse gave its rider disappeared.

As automobiles and trucks replaced horses in daily life, the airforce began to supercede the cavalry on the battlefield. Though planes were capable of feats above and beyond a man on horseback, there were many similarities that drove people to connect the flying aces to the knights of the Middle Ages. Both aces and knights knew the drama of man-to-man combat, camaraderie and daring tactics.

The young pilots also knew alarmingly high casualty rates, as each side raced to improve their planes and weapons. According to Ezra Bowen in *Knights of the Air*, by the end of the war, many aces no longer felt akin to glorious knights, but rather 'hired assassins.' The toll of 'man-to-man' air combat took hold as pilots watched planes they had destroyed plummet to the earth with young men just like themselves trapped inside.



No. 85 Squadron, with Billy Bishop's aircraft in the foreground.

"The only way out is up."

Billy Bishop

'evocative' adj. :
Having the ability to
bring to mind.

'camaraderie' n. :
Goodwill and
rapport among
friends.

Truth, Heroism, the Media and War

Even though he has been dead for almost 50 years, Billy Bishop still figures largely as a hero in the eyes of many Canadians. His 72 aerial victories made him a British Commonwealth record-holder and wartime savior. In a 1999 survey of Canadians, Bishop was ninth on a list of 'newsmakers of the century,' a list populated largely by former prime ministers and other more contemporary figures. But there are others who believe that Bishop's war record was exaggerated, both by himself and the Canadian government, in hopes of boosting morale by creating an allied flying hero to match the stature and reputation of the German pilot Baron von Richtofen, the 'Red Baron.'

Even his staunchest supporters will often concede that Bishop was a man given to exaggeration, but they chafe at the implication that he was a plain liar. Bishop supporters become particularly incensed when it is suggested that he fabricated his attack on the Douai Aerodrome, an accomplishment that earned him the Victoria Cross, the cornerstone of his alleged achievements. Recently, the 85th anniversary of that dawn attack (June 2002) was commemorated by two diametrically opposed books: the reprinting of Bishop's memoir *Winged Warfare*, and the publication of a *The Making of Billy Bishop*, a book that denounces the dogfights and air victories *Winged Warfare* describes as false. Brereton Greenhous, the author of *The Making of Billy Bishop* does not believe that his book will deflate Bishop's status as a hero, what he calls 'the Bishop myth.'

Still, others find the controversy destructive. A Bishop supporter, Didy Grahame said in an interview, "We create heroes to recognize the highest of human values. If we try to knock them out, what are we left with?" Though it is hard to say whether one side or the other dominates the controversy over the truth of Bishop's exploits, it is surprising to find such faith in an era that demands idealized and unbiased accuracy and truth from its media. How important is it that our heroes be accurate portrayals of the human beings that lie behind their public personae? Should there be reservations as to the potential depth of their heroics? Should we question heroes that our culture has already embraced and canonized, and what are the dangers of questioning or rejecting them?

It is clear that the Allies of the First World War needed heroes. They needed to boost morale and fuel the war machine with enthusiastic workers and fresh recruits. The information that the general public received about the battlefields did not come as quickly or as accurately as it does today. Even the most alert civilian could not approach the level of enlightenment that is possible with the current omnipresent news reporting that has its fingers on the pulse of events occurring across the world.

Why do you suppose WWI has come to be known as "the forgotten war?" Is there a prelude to this notion found in the text of the play?

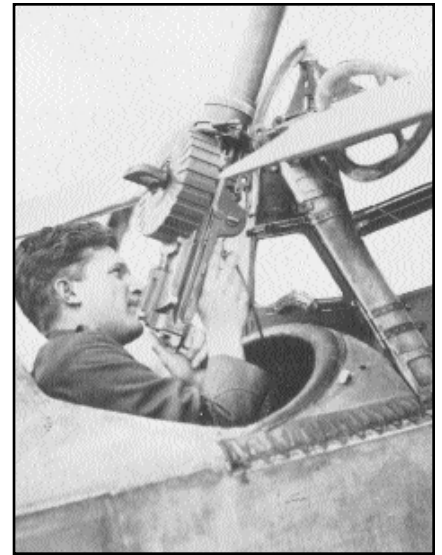
'British Commonwealth' n. :
An association of nations including the United Kingdom, its dependencies, and independent nations that claim loyalty to the British Crown, i.e., Canada.

'Red Baron' n. :
Manfred von Richthofen, the German flying ace that shot down 80 aircraft and led the Flying Circus squadron of fighter pilots.

'dogfight' n. :
An aerial battle between fighter planes.

'canonize' v. :
To glorify or declare a saint.

omnipresent' adj. :
Present in all places at the same time.



Billy Bishop sighting through his Lewis gun.

*"... Bishop,
grow up.
Before
I throw up."*

Billy as
Lady St. Helier

One task the actor playing Billy must accomplish is to convince the audience that he is flying in a WWI aeroplane while seated in a chair. How might you do about accomplishing this? What research might you do to help you convince your audience?

Perhaps the reality of the German airforce's success was too grim for the Allied public, but was it morally right for the Allied governments to create a hero where one did not actually exist? Even taking into account the suspicions of Greenhous' book, Bishop still figures as a major ace, with 27 documented victories (instead of the alleged 72.) Certainly that makes him a hero good enough for celebration. But perhaps, those 27 victories would not have been remarkable enough to convince a nation that it had a chance for victory, or even some sort of divine blessing in the form of a deified pilot.

Ultimately, it is probably impossible to say whether or not Air Marshall William Avery Bishop was worthy of the decorations and public adoration he received during the war and for the rest of his lifetime. Perhaps it is not so important for us to decide whether or not his record is accurate, but to decide through the story of Billy Bishop what a hero truly is. How much of a hero's worth is actual heroics? How much of a hero's worth is the truth? True or false, Bishop's aura of a crack-shot pilot speeding fearlessly through the air at the defense of a nation no doubt did brighten the outlook for many during the war. Perhaps that is all that a hero needs to be.

Biography of WWI Flying Ace Albert Ball

Albert Ball was born in Nottingham, England, on August 14, 1896, the son of a master plumber. As a young man he built a brass foundry and an electrical shop behind his parents' house.

Ball began his fighting career in May 1916, and by May 22 he gained his first victory; he shot down two German aircraft, but only one was confirmed. By October 1916, he had eight more victories.

Albert Ball was an aggressive fighter pilot, sometimes taking many chances. He preferred to fight alone rather than in a formation. During his career, he was shot down six times, but he always managed to guide his crippled plane back to friendly territory.

On May 6, 1917, Ball shot down his last enemy plane, bringing his total to 44 victories. The next day he became involved in a battle with the Red Baron's Flying Circus. After a grueling battle his plane crashed and Ball, only 20 years old, died in the arms of a French farm girl. The Germans claimed that Lothar von Richtofen, the Red Baron's brother, shot Ball down. Many others think that Ball was actually shot down by ground troops; his death remains one of the countless mysteries that surround the Great War in the air.

Britain awarded Albert Ball the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order during his career, and the Victoria Cross after his death.

'foundry' n. : A building where the process of casting metal is performed.

'Victoria Cross' n. : Britain's highest military award for bravery.

*"If you want the machine to go down every time, you aim for one thing: the man.
I always go for the man."*

Billy Bishop

From Set Designer Gary Jacobs

After reading the play three or four times, I typically like to begin a design by surrounding myself with research. I literally fill the walls and tables around my drawing board with images relating to the time, location or mood. Occasionally I've had a design stem from a painting or photograph that is totally unrelated to the show. The design for this show was influenced by illustrations of bi-planes and aerodromes of the World War I era that I found on magazine covers. There are precious few images of those old aerodromes so I relied on the textures and lines of the planes themselves. These early planes were constructed of nothing more than hardened canvas over metal rod. I decided that was the effect that I wanted to capture in the set. I wanted to be able to see through the walls of the set the way you can see through the wings of the planes. This gives the environment a delicate and fragile quality, and it also allows the design team to change the color and textures of the walls with lights as we follow Billy through his life. I left the set simple, relying on the thin, graceful lines of the aerodrome, and a glint of the horizon beyond the doors to carry the audience on a journey through the life of a Canadian flying ace.

'aerodrome' n. : An airfield equipped with control tower and hangars as well as accommodations for passengers and cargo.

What is gained by creating the landscape outside of the hangar in Gary Jacobs's scenic design? How might the landscape affect the storytelling of the actor playing Billy?



Gary Jacobs' set design

"You're in a kite with a motor that can barely get off the ground."

Billy Bishop

From Costume Designer B. Modern

The design process ALWAYS begins with a conversation with the director about the play. We might discuss the period, the characters, anything we think is relevant to the story we are trying to tell. Sometimes we might use a painting, film or piece of music we both know to get the creative juices flowing. Then I read or re-read the play and we talk again. We talk and talk and talk throughout the whole process. It's really stimulating and fun and many creative friendships are born this way. It's the interaction with the director that begins it all.

In addition to books dealing specifically with the uniforms of British WWI pilots, I looked at several photograph books about the war in general. From them you can get a good idea of how people looked back then — their physical bearing, their youth and the swagger with which soldiers — and the pilots especially — wore their uniforms. Silent films of the 1920s that depicted WWI stories gave me a wonderful opportunity to see pilots in all kinds of situations and from all angles; they were made only a few years after the war was fought, and in many cases the stunt pilots were actual flying aces from the war.

It's very important to remember that a uniform represents not only an individual but also an entire nation's military, many members of which fought and died bravely for what they believed in. Uniforms are very important to the people that wear them and I try to respect that by being as true to the original as possible. The director, actor and I will then collaborate on how the uniform would most likely be worn by the character in question.



Set and Costume designers have to be well versed in history as well as the elements of design to create an accurate world for a period play. Designers must know about the social, economic, and political events that influenced the way people lived and dressed. What kind of research would you need to do to design a costume for a WWI pilot?

B. Modern's costume design

"Your after shave lotion has the odour of cat urine."

Billy Bishop as Lady St. Helier

Glossary

**Aeroplanes (WWI) - *British:* Nieuport, Farnham Trainer, RE-7
German: Albatros, Fokker, Aviatik**

‘aileron’ n. Two movable flaps on the wings of an airplane that can be used to control the plane’s rolling and banking movements.

‘Aldis sight’ n. A tube of lenses engraved with rings that allowed a pilot to focus on his target. The Aldis sight’s advantage over the previous model (the “ring and bead”) was that the pilot’s eye did not have to line up with the centerline of the sight tube.

‘Archies’ n. Slang term for anti-aircraft guns.

‘cattle boat’ n. A cargo ship for the transport of livestock.

‘chocks’ n. Blocks or wedges placed under something else, such as a wheel, to keep it from moving.

‘fetlock’ n. A projection on the lower part of the leg of a horse, above and behind the hoof.

‘hun’ n. A disparaging slang term for a German, especially a German soldier in World War I.

Tell Us What You Think

*We love to get letters from our student audiences, telling us what they thought about the show. We will be posting excerpts from student letters on our website:
www.gevatheatre.org.*

*Send letters to: Andrea Stoner c/o Geva Theatre,
75 Woodbury Boulevard, Rochester, NY 14607
or email them to astoner@gevatheatre.org.*

- Why do you suppose WWI is often referred to as the forgotten war?
- What value does a musical about the creation of a WWI hero have to a present-day high school student?
- How did the production elements — lights, costumes, set, sound — support or detract from the play? What would you have done differently? Why?
- Did you have a favorite scene or moment in the play? Which was it, and why?
- In your opinion, what is *Billy Bishop Goes to War* about? Would you recommend it to someone who hasn’t seen it? What kind of person would you recommend it to?

Though never actually present on the stage, the character of Lady St. Helier is prevalent throughout the play. What role do you think she plays in the structure of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*?



Billy, near the end of WWI

“...before you could learn to lead, you had to learn to obey.”

Billy Bishop

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Nan Hildebrandt
Executive Director

Resources for Students and Teachers

The Aerodrome. <http://www.theaerodrome.com/> (Portraits and biographies of flying aces on both sides; the aircraft they flew; feature articles about life in the Royal Flying Corps)

Baker, David. *'Billy' Bishop, The man and the aircraft he flew*. London: Outline Press, 1990.

Bishop, William Arthur. *The Courage of the Early Morning*. New York: David McKay Company, 1965.

Bowen, Ezra. *Knights of the Air*. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1988.

Bruce, Anthony. *An Illustrated Companion to the First World War*. London: Penguin Books, 1989.

FirstWorldWar.com. <http://www.firstworldwar.com/index.htm> (An exhaustive collection of military information, contextual literature, period music, art, and literature, and links to other great sites)

Graham, Gerald. *A Concise History of Canada*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1968.

Greenhous, Brereton. *The Making of Billy Bishop*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2002

Pisano, Dominick. *Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992.

Robertson, Bruce, ed. *Air Aces of the 1914-1918 War*. Fallbrook, CA: Aero Publishers, 1964

Are the themes and ideas of the play served by the structure? How so? How else might the scenes and songs have been tied together?

Billy Bishop Goes to War
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Special thanks to:

Amy Goeldner
Chris Murray
Darcie Schwarz

"It comes as a bit of a surprise to me that there is another war on. We didn't think there was going to be another one back in 1918."

Billy Bishop



Third Battle of Ypres — a crashed D.F.W.

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