

"Billy Bishop" great Canadian success

by Margaret Little

Billy Bishop is another example of a Canadian that has gained world wide recognition but is virtually unknown in his homeland. John Gray and Eric Peterson take a new look at our forgotten W.W. I flying ace in their production, **Billy Bishop Goes to War**. The production, now playing at Neptune Theatre, has brought fame to both Billy Bishop and the actors.

Eric Peterson, who began his career with Vancouver Theatre Workshop, has been named top actor of the '78/79 Toronto theatre season by The Toronto Star and The Globe and Mail due to his portrayal of Billy Bishop.

John Gray, a director, composer, lyricist, playwright and piano player is the other half of this talented duo. Gray met Peterson at the Vancouver Theatre Workshop and it was there that the duo was formed. They travelled eastward across Canada together doing several small productions before they created this play that has brought them immense success.

Individually, Peterson and Gray are very talented Canadians but together they produce tremendous artistic variety that can not be matched.

Peterson is to be highly praised for his 18 varied impersonations in the play.

These impersonations are all viewed through the eyes of Billy Bishop. Peterson's impersonation of Bishop takes a very personal light due to Billy Bishop's commentary on the events and people. Bishop's earthy descriptions of war events give a gut-look at the courage of this remarkable fighter pilot.

Peterson, however, not only portrays Bishop as a courageous hero, but also as a lonely, frightened, and homesick Canadian overseas. It is during Bishop's recitations of his letters to his girlfriend at home that the hero takes on more sentimental and human qualities.

John Gray is not to be forgotten with his excellent sense of sonority during Peterson's narrations. He sets the tone of the stage with his light or sombre melodies. His music is especially effective during the air combat scenes.

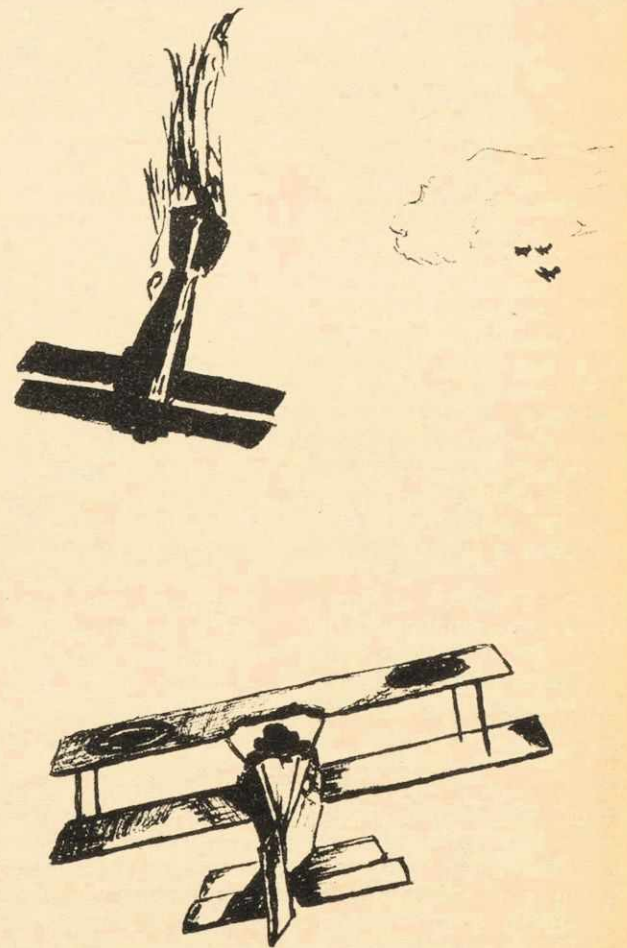
Despite the individual talent it is the combination of the two that makes the production such a success. Gray's sonorous effects and Peterson's vivacious impersonations make a scantily equipped stage (literally consisting of three chairs, a piano, and a backdrop) appear to be richly furnished.

The actual history of Billy Bishop not only covers various sides of the man but also

touches upon the war issues from a very Canadian perspective. Peterson and Gray take us from the young and naive Bishop of 1914 who sings "... And it looked like lots of fun. Somehow it didn't seem like war at all," to a wise recruiting officer of W.W. II.

Peterson gives a personal account of the war conditions through the eyes of Bishop as a cavalry officer and later, a fighter pilot. With his increasing fame, Peterson portrays Bishop's frustrating role as a Colonial symbol. The British realize that Bishop holds the Colonial morale and so they carefully remove him from action. After shooting down 48 planes Bishop is presented with the Victoria Cross. The musical ends with the beginning of yet another war, twenty years later, with Bishop calling the new recruits.

Through the progression of Billy Bishop's life Peterson and Gray touch upon the issues of war from a colonial point of view. This Canadian flavour of W.W. I is something new and exciting to the audience. In the production **Billy Bishop Goes to War** Peterson and Gray have successfully brought our Canadian war hero into the limelight at last!



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Ballet Y's Ballet starts slow but recovers gracefully

by Robin Metcalfe

I took a friend to see the Ballet Ys as a sort of going away present. Half an hour into the programme, it must have seemed as if I were trying to drive him away. The performance to that point was less than exciting; in fact it was boring. The dancers acquitted themselves competently, but had to struggle with unimaginative choreography set to second-rate and poorly reproduced music. "Movemomento", a "tribute to the Broadway style of the 1950's", reminded one of a bad TV show, while "To One Point" was emotionally overwrought. There were serious blunders in the stagemanagement, with the curtain blocking lighting at one point and with an unaccountable absence of proper wings, leaving off-stage performers in full view of part of the audience.

Fortunately, the troupe recovered from this weak beginning. Hope first appeared in the third piece, "Aperitif", choreographed by the lead dancer, Robert McCollum. Although fairly lightweight, the work achieved pleasing

effects in the interrelation of the three female dancers.

The real power of the troupe only became apparent, however, in the second half of the programme, which opened with a powerful work called "Incident at Blackbriar". A female pas de deux depicting an apparently lesbian relationship (my friend though mother-daughter, but if so, it was unusually erotic) was disrupted by a male character who seduced the younger woman. As the deserted one, Carina Bomers skillfully mastered the sharp, Kabuki-like movements of aggression and despair, before being reunited with the loved one. This fascinating piece was followed by another equally good one. "Elegy" featured a female and a male figure whose intertwined movements made an elegant statement on love, death and mourning. "Les Couers Verts" brought the evening to a close in a cheerful, if somewhat stereotyped, French-Canadian folk setting.

As an intermarriage of ballet and modern dance, Ballet Ys retains many of the

sexual conventions of the former. I tire of seeing healthy women forced to flutter about on point as if their athletic bodies had no weight, and of apparently gay male dancers straining our credibility in their impersonations of heterosexual romantic heroes. We should welcome works like "Incident at Blackbriar" which open up the possibilities of the pas de deux danced by members of the same sex, and like "Elegy" which abandon conventional sexual prancing to allow a female dancer to hoist a much larger male into the air, with, I must say, considerable grace. This potential is only touched by Ballet Ys; it is left to more daring troupes such as the Toronto Dance Theatre (coming to the Cohn on November 2) to push back the walls of sexual convention to clear a space for a new dance.

Despite an uneven programme and a failure to overcome the limits of the balletic tradition, Ballet Ys surprised me with a display of power, skill and beauty. We should welcome them back in the future as a good friend to all lovers of dance.

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