

BILLY BISHOP

Billy Bishop goes to war

by Rob Cohn

There is a place in Nova Scotia where life is slow and people like it that way. At the Hub of the province lies Truro, a town which is not known for too much except for being there.

Truro, however, is now becoming known as the hometown of John Gray, Canada's hottest playwright. As a matter of fact, he is one of the hottest writers any where.

Although he has directed over sixty productions and composed for over twenty or more, he is best known for his three original musicals: "18 Wheels", "Billy Bishop Goes to War", and "Rock and Roll".

Gray is one of Nova Scotia's favorite sons. Growing up in Truro, his claim to fame was his long association with the Lincolns, the most popular Maritime band of the 60's. Now his name is widely recognised as the guy who wrote "all those plays". This week one of those plays came to the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium through the good graces of Dal Cultural Activities.

This Vancouver East Cultural Centre production is directed by Gray and Eric Peterson. It stars Cedric Smith who plays Billy Bishop. The story is that of a man from Owen Sound, Ontario, who becomes Britain's number one hero in World War I. While we know Bishop as a man with 72 kills, Gray shows us the motivations and the pressures which drive such a man.

Bishop was the worst student in The Royal Military Academy and so when war broke out he was made an officer. He realized when he reached Europe that the cavalry was no place for a man who wanted to be warm

and dry. He joined the RFC, becoming their greatest fighter pilot ever, eclipsing even Albert Ball.

The play details his rise to fame and gives insight into his inner workings, the best device for achieving this being the use of letters home to his eventual wife Margaret. We see him change from a man who is totally concerned with staying alive, to a man filled with a blood lust for the "Hun". The cause of this is that he has seen all his friends die around him.

Cedric Smith as Billy Bishop, is understanding and convincing in the role. He demonstrates his versatility as he is called on to change from character to character in a split second. Among the best portraits are those of Lady St. Helier, his benefactor, and Lovely Helene, a nightclub songstress. Smith is ably supported by Ross Douglas as the narrator and pianist. The two are most effective together.

If the play is flawed, it is in the ending. There is a high energy level maintained throughout until the final scene which is more of a gloomy epilogue than a happy ending. The show would have been much better off with a curtain after Bishop is decorated by the King. The drop in energy could be the reason why the play did not receive a much deserved standing ovation.

Billy Bishop goes to war is the production which firmly entrenched John Gray in the ranks of the masters, and as such should not be missed. If it is an evening's entertainment that you are looking for, there is no better value for your dollar. It is a pity that it is such a limited engagement.



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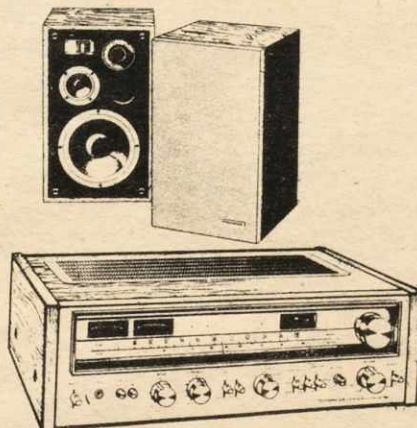
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