

REVIEW: Billy Bishop soars to new heights

Brampton Guardian

It doesn't matter if you're interested in Canadian history, or music, or war or comedy. None of this matters when you go to see the Rose Theatre's production of

Billy Bishop Goes to War

, the opening play of the Summer Theatre Series.

Don't get me wrong – you'll thoroughly enjoy the play if you're a fan of one or all of these things.

But here's the real reason to see the play: Kyle Blair.

Like me, you may have seen

Billy Bishop Goes to War

before; and, like me, you may wonder what this presentation has to offer that's new, different and exciting.

So here's the answer: Kyle Blair.

I've seen a lot of theatre, and with it, a lot of phenomenal talent. But there is only a small handful of actors who have had a deep and lasting impression on me due to their overwhelmingly powerful performances.

Kyle Blair is one of them.

In his portrayal of Billy Bishop – a First World War flying ace from Owen Sound who was self-described as the worst student the Royal Military College ever had – Blair's talent emerges beautifully and (dare I say) seductively.

I felt like he was performing just for me.

On stage, Blair has a commanding yet gentle presence – he's lively and earnest and immediately likeable.

And versatile. Not only is he fully invested in the role of Billy Bishop, he also masters the additional 17 parts required of him in the play. He switches from fighter pilot, to elderly patroness Lady St. Helier, to a bubbly flight recruiter, to a French seductress, all without missing a beat. Young, old, male, female – his flexibility is extraordinary. And, so is his voice.

He's accompanied by Kirk Teeple, who rounds the play out nicely with his lovely singing voice and piano playing, and small speaking roles.

If you don't know the story of Billy Bishop, the play highlights the life of William Avery Bishop from Owen Sound, Ont., from when he enrolls in Kingston's military college. He lies and cheats – all in the name of fun, of course. From there, and through a whirlwind of chance encounters, he winds up as a fighter pilot and becomes the top Canadian flying ace of the First World War.

There's much to enjoy about this production. The set and props are inventive and well-served – there is just enough to supplement the story well, without distracting from the narrative and the acting.

Danny Harvey's direction measures well in this production of

Billy Bishop Goes to War

, and he's pieced together all the right elements for a tight, robust show.

Blair really does pilot the success of this show, though, and expertly navigates the audience through dramatic – at times very tense – and comedic snapshots of Bishop's story and Canadian history.

I urge you to remember his name, because I wouldn't be at all surprised if one day he's revered as a Canadian stage hero. In my books, he already is.

Billy Bishop Goes to War

runs until July 19 in Studio Two at the Rose Theatre. For tickets and information visit www.rosetheatre.ca or call 905-874-2800.

Next up:

Sleuth

, running July 25 to Aug. 9 in Studio Two.



Kyle Blair as Billy Bishop in the Rose Theatre's presentation of *Billy Bishop Goes To War*. The production runs until July 19 in Studio Two.