

## MEDIA RELEASE

### *Billy Bishop Goes to War opens Soulpepper's 2010 season*

Toronto, ON – January 6, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's highly successful 2009 production of the Canadian classic *Billy Bishop Goes to War* will return to open Soulpepper's 2010 season. Soulpepper's 2009 presentation of *Billy Bishop Goes to War* was 100% sold out.

**John Gray** and **Eric Peterson's** timeless story of World War One fighter pilot Billy Bishop has delighted audiences around the world for more than 30 years.

The musical premiered at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in 1978, and has toured nationally and internationally many times since, as well as inspired a CBC and BBC co-produced television program. *Billy Bishop* won the 1981 Los Angeles Drama Critics' Award, the 1982 Chalmers Canadian Play Award, and the 1983 Governor General's Award for drama, as well as an ACTRA award for best television program. Gray and Peterson revised the show in 1998, adding one new song and presenting events through the eyes of an older Bishop recalling his wartime experiences. *Billy Bishop Goes To War* continues to be one of the most popular Canadian musicals.

Soulpepper's 2009 production of *Billy Bishop Goes to War* was widely critically acclaimed and was lauded as a hit of the 2009 theatre season by *Eye Weekly*, *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and *Toronto Sun*.

**"Thirty years on, *Billy Bishop* still soars"** *The Globe and Mail*

**"Better than ever...this show is not to be missed"** *Toronto Star*

**"*Billy Bishop Goes to War* changed my life...Ted Dykstra's production is perfection"**

- *NOW Magazine*

**"Peterson acs *Billy Bishop*"** *Toronto Sun*

Soulpepper Founding Member **Ted Dykstra** directs *Billy Bishop Goes to War* with **Eric Peterson** as Billy Bishop, as well as 17 other characters ranging from King George V to The Lovely Helene, and **John Gray** returning as the Narrator and Pianist.

*Billy Bishop Goes to War* previews January 22, 2009, opens January 26, and runs until February 27 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$29 - \$70 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting [www.soulpepper.ca](http://www.soulpepper.ca). \$20 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at [www.stageplay.ca](http://www.stageplay.ca). StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

This production is sponsored by Polar Securities. 2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

*Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.*

-30-

**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Laura Barron, Publicist

416.203.6264 x146 / [laura@soulpepper.ca](mailto:laura@soulpepper.ca)

## BACKGROUND NOTES

*Billy Bishop Goes to War* first premiered in November 1978 at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. It was a huge success, touring across Canada and internationally, and incidentally, returning Billy Bishop to the national consciousness. In his heyday, there was no one more famous in this country than the pugnacious young man from Owen Sound who was the terror of the skies at the height of the First World War.

It's hard to imagine that time now. The pilots were its heroes, great warriors who were dubbed “knights of the sky” by the press. To their adoring, war-weary public, they embodied skill, courage and perseverance, prevailing against all odds. Flyers had a chivalric code, they respected certain rules of engagement, certain principles of fair play, or so the mythology claimed. The bravest, most skilled of the aces provided a breath of heroism and old style honour to a public ground down by years of trench warfare. They proved to be a potent recruiting tool as well: the advertisements made the war look like adventure and daring and feats of derring-do to the fresh-faced young men it devoured. What those rah-rah posters neglected to mention is that you would almost certainly die before you reached the age of 21. If, by some fluke, you survived – and statistically, survival was a fluke – you'd sustain permanent, debilitating injuries, age rapidly and prematurely, and probably have to cope with some form of shell shock (what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) for the rest of your life.

Still, there was no shortage of young men who wanted to pioneer aerial warfare, on both sides of the lines. The French coined the term “ace”, to designate those who had distinguished themselves in aerial combat. You had to down five enemy aircraft to win the “ace” designation and pilots competed hard for it. The Germans were quick to adopt the French idea of aces but their requirements were more strict. A pilot had to have eight kills at first and later they augmented this to 16. Of course, they didn't say “kills”. They spoke of “downing an aircraft”. They called them “victories” but in reality more often than not they were kills. An ace was successful if he shot the other plane out of the sky, and the other pilot into eternity. Nominally, each “victory” had to be verified: each kill had to have witnesses, but in practice, this was often difficult to obtain. Pilots were known for taking crazy risks – many young men were attracted to flying because while you had a commander, he wasn't in the air with you: you could make your own decisions, go after your own targets. Pilots had a reputation for exaggeration. Indeed, some units had protocols in place that left the easiest targets to the aces, to pump up their numbers, much to the resentment of the junior pilots seeking to make their names.

The greatest ace of the war, the one atop the leaderboard, was German: Manfred von Richthofen: the Red Baron, though René Fonck (of France) was the highest scoring ace to actually survive the war. Right behind him is Billy Bishop. We don't know the names of the those who went up once and crashed. Or those who were shot down on their second, or third, or fourth missions. Or those whose inexperience as pilots cost them their lives before they even saw a day of combat.

## BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED...

The other remarkable – and at the time under-publicized – side of this story is that flight technology was in its infancy – remember that the war broke out a scant 10 years after the Wright brothers recorded the first flight. Incredibly, to us today, the planes were made of canvas and wood. It is said that the Sopwith Camel – a type of biplane – killed more British pilots than the enemy did because of its many handling problems. On the German side, the Fokker DR.V's top wing had a tendency to peel off during flight. Fire was a constant hazard on all of the aircraft. None achieved speeds of more than 100 miles per hour.

As the war went on, engineers made extraordinary leaps in construction and function of the planes but the improvements always came at the cost of many lives. It wasn't until nearly two years into the war that engineers figured out how to co-ordinate flight technology with the requirements of the guns and until so-called interrupter mechanisms were invented, the bullets from the pilot's own gun often pierced the propellers and caused the plane to crash. Parachutes were not used at all until the Second World War. A few pilots became famous, got prestige and medals and the adoration of their countrymen, but most took the same extraordinary risks, showed the same exceptional bravery, and were anonymously consumed, their names known only to their families and friends.

Billy Bishop represents so many more of his generation, whose unimaginable sacrifice nearly a hundred years ago, is a timely reminder of the cost of sending our young men (and, these days, our young women) into the line of fire.

### Related Tidbits:

Roland Garros (after whom the tennis stadium is named) was instrumental – if you will – in developing fighter plane technology, when he added deflector plates to the blades of his propellers. When he was shot down, German designer Anthony Fokker stole the idea of the deflector plates and added an interrupter mechanism that would synchronise the machine gun to fire between the propellers.

One of the most beloved French aces, Georges Guynemer, in pre-war days an insurance salesman with a delicate constitution, became a national hero. He had 54 kills to his credit when he died in 1917. He simply disappeared in the skies – neither his plane nor his remains were ever found. According to the newspapers he was assumed into the heavens, like a god.

*Billy Bishop Goes to War* premiered in 1978 and went on to tour across Canada, to Washington D.C., on and off Broadway in New York City, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Los Angeles, and London, England. During the international tour with Peterson and Gray, a second production continued across Canada starring Cedric Smith accompanied by Ross Douglas.

The play won the Los Angeles Drama Critics Award in 1981, the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award in 1982 and the Governor General's Award for English Language Drama in 1983. Two cast recordings were made: one in 1979 and one in 1999.

*Notes by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing*

## ARTIST PROFILE: ERIC PETERSON & JOHN GRAY

**Eric Peterson** talks about the staying power of Billy Bishop, balancing television and stage roles, and the future of Canadian theatre.

**Q:** What talks were had with co-creator John Gray and director Ted Dykstra to re-examine the show and update it to reflect how you and John have grown older with the play?

**ERIC:** We've gone through radical recasting! From a 32 year-old to a 62 year-old as the actor who's going to be narrating the show. In a two-man play like this, it has incredibly different resonance depending on who's telling that story. In many cases, we've taken some minor rewriting for the production we did when we were 52 and updated them and changed the ending. Now, at 62, we're older than Bishop ever was in the play before and we've changed it to extend up to his 62nd year, which was his last but he doesn't know that at the time. But we didn't re-write it to say, "Oh this is my last day of life" or anything like that. It goes back to that John and I are very different people with 30 more years of living under our belts that we didn't have then. This experience has brought out all kinds of different resonances in the play. We did fool around with different attempts of how to get "into" this again and that's resulted in me being in pajamas through the whole thing, which has never been in any previous production. I feel this is much more of a man *remembering* much more than it has ever been before. A memory always has an effect on a person as opposed to the younger man I used to be who was telling a cracking good yarn about what happened to him in the war. This is more about a man looking back on his life it seems to me. Those kinds of elements seem to be more apparent in it this time around.

**Q:** Most people perhaps know you best from your television roles, but you got your start in Canadian theatre and have worked steadily on stage ever since. You've mostly been involved in new Canadian works. What made you want to tackle a more classical repertoire?

**ERIC:** The offer. I wouldn't be at Soulpepper if Albert hadn't asked me. Because *Corner Gas* was coming to an end and my summers were available. I was really flattered by that and I thought, "it'd be good fun acting with those people at Soulpepper." I don't think there's been a year in my career that's gone by without doing at least one play. Theatre is still my first love and it's a remarkable art form. And it is enjoying a renaissance right now, given that the world is becoming more virtual and disconnected.

**Q:** What do you think is the future of Canadian theatre?

**ERIC:** Theatre is so specific to time and place - you have to come to it. In Toronto, I'm amazed that we have an audience here to the extent that we do and not just for commercial theatre where the economics are so different. As far as not-for-profit theatre goes in this country, in this city, I think it's doing great. The thing about theatre is that it's much easier to realize your creation in the sense that you don't have to pull together all the resources you do for TV or film. It's also easier in the sense that the non-profit theatres have that ambition to produce interesting, artistically challenging work on the whole. Whereas in film or television those ambitions may not be quite so acute. They are a business model from beginning to end, whereas in theatre, if you really want to do something, you can get the people together and do it some place - that's how Soulpepper started. It seems to me that the ability to access your own

## ARTIST PROFILE CONTINUED...

creativity with a minimum of interference, it makes theatre a valuable asset and allows for a whole kind of variety and diversity that keeps the art form alive in this country. I don't ever see theatre going away in Canada - it's a human need.

Q: Are there any roles in the classical canon that you'd love to tackle?

ERIC: I came up through a different route than most, not educated in theatre school where they teach acting by participating in the classics - so I missed that. I never ended up at theatre companies that specialized in the classics like Stratford or Shaw, for example. So those kinds of parts have never been in my mind much. On the other hand, most of my experience has been in doing new work - plays that haven't been written yet. I hope that some writer out there is writing a great part that I would still be able to play, the unwritten part.

~

Writer and composer **John Gray** talks about revisiting *Billy Bishop Goes to War* thirty years later, seeing other productions of the show, and the differences between writing for the stage and for novels.

Q: Why do you think *Billy Bishop Goes to War* first struck a chord with audiences?

A: It has resonances that extend past that the act of war itself. It has to do with life and the resilience of the human spirit. And, on top of that, there is the theatricality of the play. Audiences have always responded to the storytelling aspect of the show. There's a childlike wonder in watching Eric play multiple characters. It's a kind of wondrous feat that you don't see everyday, something about it reminds me of the kind of performers from the Ed Sullivan show.

Q: Now that you and Eric are the age that Billy Bishop was when he died, how is that reflected in updating the script?

A: Well, we've re-written the ending and that has taken the script even further away from the documentary aspect it once had. We're getting more and more into the realm of fiction. We've spent a lot of time working with Ted to rediscover the piece as an aging Billy Bishop in his pajamas and what that means. That has pushed it further in the direction about a life looking back.

Q: You've written five novels now and this seems to be a trend among Canadian playwrights who are also novelists - Robertson Davies, Michael Redhill, Claudia Dey among them. Do you think there's a correlation between the two mediums? What is the attraction for you?

A: In a novel, you're doing one great, expanded improvisation. It's not a big transition from one to the other. So much of a novel is dialogue that writing for the stage or a novel is really not a huge jump. Writing a book is kind of like writing plays with the most massive sets one can imagine. When you write a script, it is not really a play until it's performed by actors on a stage. It's somehow incomplete until you can find someone who wants to put it on stage. You tend to get into novels because you don't have to rely on other people to exist. When I'm done writing a novel, it's there and finished whether or not anyone reads it, it still exists.

## ARTIST PROFILE CONTINUED...

**Q:** Your son Zachary is now performing the show in Vancouver. Seeing him perform this show in his 20's and employing devices like the electric guitar, does that change the resonance or the impact for the audience?

**A:** It absolutely changes the way the piece feels, but that's a good thing. It evolves depending on who's playing the part at any given time. Whenever we come back to the show, it reflects Eric and I being older and adapts to that, it makes sense that it should change depending on the performers no matter who they are. But the energy of rock and roll that they bring to it is so similar to the kinetic energy of an aerial battle. Zachary and Ryan are the actual age of guys who would have been in the First World War. Seeing that youthful energy on stage conveys an urgency about it which, again, changes according to the storyteller.

## BILLY BISHOP BIOGRAPHY

**1894** – February 8th in Owen Sound, Ontario, William Avery “Billy” Bishop, the second of three children is born to William A. and Margaret Bishop.

**1899 – 1908** – Young Billy makes a name for himself in school as a fighter, if not as a student. He refuses to pursue any subject he can't easily master and he skips classes frequently.

**1909** – His later career is foreshadowed when he builds an airplane out of cardboard, wood crates and string and flies it off the roof of the family home. His sister digs her triumphantly unharmed sibling from the wreckage.

**1911** – He enters Royal Military College at Kingston, following in his brother Worth's footsteps. He fails his first year because he is caught cheating.

**1914** – At the outbreak of the war, Billy leaves Military College to join the Mississauga Horse cavalry regiment. He is later transferred to the Mounted Rifles, where he proves himself to be a crack shot.

**1915** – He sails for England in June arriving safely in Plymouth despite an encounter with German U-boats that sank two ships in his convoy. He quickly tires of life in the trenches and transfers to the Royal Flying Corps.

**1916** – Bishop, who has distinguished himself at aerial photography, is sent into action as an aerial spotter for British artillery. He injures his knee quite badly and is admitted to hospital in London. He makes several influential friends and with their help is accepted for pilot training at Central Flying School. He receives his wings in November and begins flying night missions over London searching for German airships, a task he finds very boring. He asks for and receives a transfer to France.

**March 1917** – He arrives at camp near Arras. The average life expectancy of a pilot in this area is 11 days. German aces are besting British aircraft by a ratio of five to one. Bishop's first mission is a near-disaster; he barely escapes with his life. and is ordered back to flight school. Luckily, fate intervenes and he's kept on until a replacement can be found. In the merciful interim, he claims his first victory, shooting down an enemy aircraft. The incident is not without drama, however: his engine fails and he is forced to land three hundred yards from the German front line and run for cover in the Allied trenches. His pluck and daring is enough to cancel his return to flight school and he is made a flight commander.

**April 1917** – He begins flying “lone wolf” missions deep in enemy territory, which helps him rack up more victories. After his fifth he officially becomes an ace and the nose of his plane is painted blue to mark his achievement. He goes on a tear, taking out twelve more planes, and is awarded the Military Cross for his participation at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. The Germans honour him with an admiring nickname: “Hell's Handmaiden”. This eventful month is capped off by an encounter with enemy ace Manfred von Richthofen, the notorious Red Baron. Both men survive. Barely.

## BILLY BISHOP BIO CONTINUED...

**May 1917** – Billy Bishop wins a Distinguished Service Order for shooting down two planes while under attack by two others.

**June 1917** – He is awarded a Victoria Cross for an action in which he claims to have shot down three aircraft. The medal is controversial because there were no witnesses to verify his story. There were murmurs that he embellished his tally.

**October 1917** – He returns home to a hero's welcome and very soon afterward, at Timothy Eaton Church in Toronto, he marries his fiancée the former Margaret Burden, an Eaton granddaughter. He is stationed in Washington, to help the Americans build an air force.

**1918** – Bishop is reassigned to Europe and in short order he re-claims his title as deadliest ace. The Canadian government, meanwhile, begins to be concerned for Bishop's health – fearing that troop morale might plummet if their number one ace were to be shot down – and they recall him to England, which makes Bishop furious. At the end of this year he is honourably discharged from the Air Force, with an almost unbelievable 72 victories to his credit.

**1921-28** – Bishop and his family live in England, where he is a successful entrepreneur until the stock market crash of 1929, which wipes him out along with so many others. The family returns to Canada.

**1939-44** – Billy Bishop is very active in the war effort as a recruiter and later as one of the creators of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan, which trains more than 167,000 airmen in Canada. Both Bishop's children follow in their father's footsteps: his son Arthur becomes a Spitfire pilot and participates in the Battle of Britain, and his daughter Jackie becomes a wireless radio operator.

**1944-53** – Bishop is exhausted and looks twenty years older than he actually is, but he continues to be a force in the growing field of civil aviation. His efforts are part of the push that creates ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

**1956** – The old campaigner dies of old age at sixty-two, in his sleep in Palm Beach, Florida. He is buried in Owen Sound.