

Review: History Theatre heads to the woods for a visit with ‘The Root Beer Lady’



Kim Schultz portrays Dorothy Molter, the last non-Indigenous resident of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, in her one-woman show, “The Root Beer Lady,” which is being presented through July 26, 2026 at the St. Paul theater. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)



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Considering how many Minnesotans make a habit of going “up north” each summer, perhaps it’s no surprise that History Theatre has taken to doing the same. Mind you, the company doesn’t leave its home base in Downtown St. Paul, but, for the past 10 years, this has been its time for stories from the state’s northern tier.

For eight summers, it presented “Glensheen,” Jeffrey Hatcher and Chan Poling’s unlikely smash of a dark musical comedy about a pair of 1977 murders in a Superior-side Duluth mansion. And now History Theatre is spending much of July taking audiences a little further upstate for a visit with a legendary North Woods character known as “The Root Beer Lady.”

Chicago-based playwright and actor Kim Schultz originally learned of Dorothy Molter while on an artist’s retreat at the Tofte Lake Center near Ely. After consuming just about every word ever written about or video or audio ever recorded of the last non-Indigenous resident of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Schultz composed a one-woman show in which Molter unspools tales from her 52 years on a remote island on the Canadian border.

History Theatre premiered “The Root Beer Lady” in 2023 and revived it in 2025. Now it’s pulled its canoe ashore for a summer stay on the company’s St. Paul stage. And it remains a very enjoyable portrait of a uniquely Minnesotan character who ran a resort situated miles from the nearest road and gained her nickname from the homemade beverage she served to thirsty canoeists.

Having seen all three incarnations of this one-act play, I can say that Schultz is displaying an increasingly firm grasp on the subtleties of pace, pause and timing that contribute to skillful storytelling. It feels like a faster show than previously, coming in at 75 minutes. But Schultz maintains an engaging delivery and an elastically expressive face that proves especially effective for the funniest of her recollections.

The show is a memoir in monologue about how a young nursing student from Chicago filled in for one of her father’s fishing buddies on a 1930 northern sojourn and immediately fell in love with what later came to be called the Boundary Waters. It follows her journey from visitor to resort employee to owner to ambassador for a natural treasure, including captivating tales of a blizzard-bound rescue and a loon that guides her out of a dense fog.

Director Jess Yates helps keep the story chugging along with plenty of movement and mood shifts, aided immeasurably by a Chelsea M. Warren set split between an overstuffed cabin interior and a forest full of canoe paddles. And kudos to the marvelously evocative sounds and sights of the forested lakes courtesy of Katharine Horowitz’s sound design and the projections of Leslie Ritenour, which beautifully capture the multi-hued skies of the wilderness.

It’s a theatrical creation designed to not only entertain and inspire your admiration for this rugged woman of the wilderness, but to remind audiences of the awe-inspiring beauty of our state’s northeast corner, a refuge currently under threat from mining interests. If you can’t make it up there this summer, “The Root Beer Lady” offers the next best thing.

‘The Root Beer Lady’

When: Through July 26

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$55-\$15, available at 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com

Capsule: An engaging love story about a woman and her wilderness.