

Theater review: History Theatre's 'Whoosh!' is an eccentric exploration of local lore

Rob Hubbard



Andrew Erskine Wheeler stars as Michael Hickey in "Whoosh! The Civil War Mythology of Michael Hickey and His Perilous Precipitation Over St. Anthony Falls," which runs through Feb. 22, 2026 at the History Theatre in St. Paul. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)

Have you ever seen a movie that concludes its opening credits with the phrase "Inspired by true events"? That's an apt description for History Theatre's production of "Whoosh!," which began life as a 2022 Minnesota Fringe Festival solo show and has been expanded to delve more deeply into those "true events," but also to take on some legends and perhaps create some new ones.

"Whoosh!" might best be called a historical fantasia, an exceptionally well-spun yarn from the imagination and research capabilities of its writer and chief performer, Andrew Erskine Wheeler. It's advertised with the subtitle, "The Civil War Mythology of Michael Hickey and His Perilous Precipitation Over St. Anthony Falls," and tenacious fact-checkers might want to leave their truth-seeking instincts at the door of History Theatre's Downtown St. Paul venue. For "mythology" is a good description of what Wheeler delivers.

His aims are more complex and heartfelt than offering an engaging bit of regional history. While always intriguing, "Whoosh!" weaves in and out of a few different tales and timelines, using repetition as a creator of music might. And, speaking of music, Wheeler is ably assisted by an acoustic duo known as Northern Shores, underscoring the story with Celtic elements.

That stands to reason, for our protagonist is an Ireland-born immigrant to 19th-century Minnesota, Michael Hickey. He's invited us to an informal wake for his older brother, a fellow lumberjack (or "shanty man") who subsequently enlisted in the Union Army and became one of the many soldiers of the First Minnesota regiment killed at the Battle of Gettysburg.

After educating us in often humorous fashion on the cold, cramped and aromatic life of those felling and transporting timber, we're regaled with Hickey's own wartime experiences, bouncing in and out of a tutorial about the history of St. Anthony Falls, the Minneapolis torrent that's since been tamed by the forces of industry and transformed into a dam. As its subtitle suggests, Hickey will relay his experience of plunging over the falls and surviving.

If the first act and its meandering manner of storytelling leaves you wondering where all of this is going, rest assured that Wheeler sharpens his focus considerably in the second act. Although delivered with a light touch and plenty of humor, it becomes clear that the topic at hand is how we are shaped by the experiences of our ancestors and how they coped with the traumas they endured. While Hickey is a colorful raconteur, it's when Wheeler transforms into a benevolent officer from the First Minnesota that we receive the most powerful of the many messages in "Whoosh!": That each veteran of the violence of war must find their own path toward healing.

If you go with the flow, so to speak, "Whoosh!" is a very entertaining piece of theater, one aided greatly by the projections of Brant Miller, the sound design of Richard Graham and the well-paced direction of Allison Vincent. Wheeler was a longtime member of Tim Robbins' Los Angeles-based company, the Actors' Gang, who has returned to the Minnesota of his ancestors. "Whoosh!" stands as testament that uncovering your family history can lead to a greater understanding of yourself. You may even be "inspired by true events."

'Whoosh'

When: Through Feb. 22

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

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

Capsule: A meandering but ultimately rewarding approach to some local history.