

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Fandom gone fatal in Actors' Theatre's 'Misery'



BY JANA MARCUS October 21, 2025

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Quick Take

Who needs ghosts or gore when human obsession can be even more terrifying? Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre delivers a slow-burn psychological thriller with "Misery" – a dark dive into the twisted side of fandom and the monsters we create ourselves.

If you're looking for a little Halloween fright that doesn't involve haunted houses or plastic skeletons, head to Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre for something far scarier – *human obsession*. William Goldman's "Misery," adapted from Stephen King's best-selling novel, delivers a gripping dose of psychological terror that makes you squirm for all the right reasons.

The story follows novelist Paul Sheldon (Ian Dyer), who has just finished his latest book – one that kills off his beloved heroine, Misery Chastain. On his way home through a snowstorm, Paul crashes his car and is rescued by Annie Wilkes (Manirose Bobisuthi), a nurse who claims to be his "No. 1 fan." As he recuperates in her remote cabin, Paul quickly realizes that Annie's admiration runs disturbingly deep. What begins as gratitude soon curdles into captivity as her devotion spirals into mania – and Paul must literally write for his life.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre
What: "Misery"
When: Through Nov. 1
Where: 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz
Tickets:
www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets

Manirose Bobisuthi's Annie Wilkes is a powerful, physical presence – volatile and obsessive from her first entrance. She brings conviction to Annie's mood swings, capturing the character's unhinged mix of maternal care and sadistic control. At times, her performance could benefit from a slower simmer before the explosive boil – but she remains magnetic throughout. The danger in her eyes keeps us on edge; her quiet moments hum with the greatest threat, especially when she whispers in Sheldon's ear, "I'm your biggest fan."

Ian Dyer gives an empathetic, grounded performance as Paul Sheldon. Confined to a bed for much of the play, Dyer skillfully communicates Paul's frustration, fear, and strategic charm as he tries to outthink his captor. His stillness contrasts nicely with Bobisuthi's volatility – a dance of control and submission that becomes the pulse of the production.

Brad Roades brings a welcome lightness as Sheriff Buster, the small-town lawman who pops in with moments of humor and humanity. His presence gives the audience much-needed relief from the tension – a reminder that the outside world still exists, even if Paul can't reach it.

At its heart, "Misery" isn't a horror story – it's a character study about the dark side of fandom. It explores what happens when admiration turns into entitlement, and love for an artist's work morphs into a demand for control. Annie believes she owns Paul's characters, his stories – even his choices. She feels betrayed when he dares to end Misery's life.

It's not horror scary; it's *human scary*. Putting celebrities and creators on pedestals – and believing we know them – adds a dangerous illusion of intimacy and a chilling sense of entitlement. That's what makes "Misery" feel so contemporary. In our social-media age, we watch fans dissect every move of the artists they adore, convinced they have personal stakes in their lives. The play reminds us how easily passion turns toxic, and how quickly admiration can become possession.



Manirose Bobisuthi stars in "Misery" at Actors' Theatre. Credit: Davis Banta

Bobisuthi taps into this theme with unnerving precision. Her Annie is the ultimate "superfan" – nurturing one moment, vengeful the next, clinging to the fantasy that she and Paul share something special. Dyer's subtle reactions – the wary smiles, the forced politeness, the flashes of panic – make the relationship feel disturbingly real. Together, they embody the terrifying intimacy of captivity: two people trapped in a story neither can control.

Miguel Reyna directs this thriller with a keen eye for tension, aided by Brad Roades' detailed and dimensional set, which feels both cozy and menacing. This isolated space tightens like a trap as the story unfolds. Lighting designer Josephine Czarnecki layers in the atmosphere with eerie shadows, while special effects by Greg Roe add subtle cinematic realism: the flash of car headlights pulling up or the eerie flicker of a trash-can fire.

The production looks and feels right – but the staging occasionally limits the experience. Roughly three-quarters of the action takes place on stage right, which means many audience members view key scenes in profile, or the antagonist's back, for the first half-hour. A more central placement of the trapped writer's bed and furniture could have visually opened up the performances, especially for the intense moments that unfold on the floor. Still, the strength of the acting keeps us invested, even when sightlines falter.

"Misery" runs two hours with no intermission, and at times it feels long – not because of the cast, who maintain strong energy, but because the script itself can be repetitive. Goldman's adaptation keeps close to King's novel but occasionally lingers too long on the back-and-forth power struggle. Even so, the suspense builds steadily, punctuated by small shocks and smartly timed silences. By the end, you can feel the audience collectively holding its breath.

There's something oddly comforting about sitting in a darkened theater and feeling our pulse quicken – knowing we're safe while the characters onstage are not. Scary stories like "Misery" let us confront fear at a distance, testing the limits of control and empathy. They remind us that the most terrifying monsters often look just like us.

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And perhaps that's why this production hits a nerve right now. In a world that already feels unpredictable and anxiety-filled, there's relief in processing fear through fiction. We can scream, laugh and breathe again by the final blackout – grateful that, for once, the horror stays on the stage.

Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre's "Misery" makes for a chilling night out this Halloween season – proof that sometimes the scariest things aren't supernatural at all, but born from the fragile, fractured corners of the human heart.