

Dorset Theatre Festival, Dorset, VT

Misery by William Goldman, based on the novel by Stephen King. Directed by Jackson Gay.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Now, you can make it right.”

One of Stephen King’s best, and scariest, novels “Misery” was made into an excellent 1990 film starring James Caan and Kathy Bates, directed by Rob Reiner. Book, film and play all deal with an obsessive fan of an author who has written a series of novels about a woman named Misery Chastain. Obsession, true obsession, is a scary element of the human condition and Annie Wilkes is an honest-to-God obsessive. When Misery’s author/creator is injured in a car accident near her home in rural Colorado, she brings him to her home and literally makes him her captive. She want him to, among other things, write a new novel about his character, bringing her back to life in order to satisfy her manic craving for more Misery. Severely injured, near death, he ultimately agrees to write the new book. Only then does she give him his much-needed pain medication. After all, she’s a nurse. A professional. A professional Nurse.



Dan Butler, Kelly McAndrew; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Dan Butler plays Paul Sheldon, the author, and he spends a good part of the first act in



Kelly McAndrew, Dan Butler;
Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Annie’s bed, alone. Paul has two broken legs, a dislocated shoulder and other injuries including some minor brain damage. She, Annie keeps telling him, is his biggest fan. She, the nurse, isn’t working and we don’t have to wonder why for long. Her erratic behavior says it all. Kelly McAndrew plays Annie Wilkes and in subtle ways begins to exhibit all of Annie’s worst traits. Never as blatant as Bates was in the movie, McAndrew shows

us the sentimental side of Annie more often than she exhibits the craziness that overtakes the nurse.

William Goldman's script is based on his screenplay for the 1990 film including one change that he was compelled to make by Rob Reiner. Instead of chopping off one of Paul's feet she smashes his ankles. This is supposed make her a more sympathetic character; it doesn't work for me. There is another major change in the final moments of the play, but I'll let "Misery" fans discover it for themselves.

At Dorset there is only one more character, Buster, the sheriff who comes looking for Paul. Greg Stuhr gives a fine, controlled performance in the role. At Annie's hands he meets his future with gusto.



Kelly McAndrew, Greg Stuhr;
Photo: T. Charles Erickson



Dan Butler; Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Dan Butler gives an excellent performance as Paul. He is almost too passive to be truly sympathetic but now and then Goldman gives him an aggressive push in the right direction. Butler brings Paul a discreet gentility that is almost southern in feel, but then he bursts out as a wholly temperamental artist and his devotion to his work makes him much more likeable. His final scene lacks the urgency and delicacy that Paul needs to succeed, but that is Goldman's fault, not Butler's.

Jackson Gay has staged this play effectively with the help of lighting designer Joey Moro and set designer Riw Rakkulchon. Annie's costumes are well-conceived by Fabian Fidel Aguilar. The sound design by Daniel Baker/Broken Chord provides both psychological atmosphere and a grounding in reality for the facts of the case.

I liked this production for what it does right, and most of it is right. As noted there are some small things that are disturbing. But this play is disturbing, intentionally so, and we have to live with it as it is. At least we get to see three fine actors do what they can to make it all believable.

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Misery plays at the Dorset Theatre Festival, 104 Cheney Road, Dorset VT through July 8. For information and tickets go to dorsettheatrefestival.org