

David Cronenberg's 'A Dangerous Method' Needed More Risk

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 16, 2011 - 3:07pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are glimpses of actual danger in David Cronenberg's divisive "A Dangerous Method" with Michael Fassbender, Viggo Mortensen, and Keira Knightley, and the film has a lingering power as it's easy to roll around your brain and contemplate its themes, but I wanted a bit more actual risk to the filmmaking. Easily the masterful director's most straightforward work in some time (possibly ever), this is a worthwhile piece that nonetheless disappoints in the context of the rest of his filmography.

"A Dangerous Method" is a deeply cerebral film, something that deserves at least praise in today's market, even if I wanted it to be more physical and less verbal every now and then. It is about some of the most important developments in the investigation of how we think about not only mental illness but everyday thought processes. But it's a tale of broad advances in thinking through the lives of the people involved on a very human, personal, and sexual level. Christopher Hampton's script makes the case that the men and women on the forefront of changes in the way we think about thinking were going through the research process on each other.



A Dangerous Method

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The catalyst of Cronenberg's film is Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley), a woman introduced in a severe level of distress. She juts her lower jaw forward, stammers and stutters, and looks as if she could crawl out of her own skin. Rarely has a woman's mental pain been translated into a more physical performance, and she's stunning to watch in the first act as she writhes and does her best to manipulate her still-gorgeous face.

Ms. Spielrein happens into the circle of Carl Jung (actor of the year, Michael Fassbender), a man at the cutting edge of his field. Believe it or not, as prominent as it is in therapy now, the “talking cure” was just being invented. How could merely talking about issues lead to their resolution? For decades, physical action had been the only course to a cure, whether it be shock, leeches, or something even more archaic. Jung dared to suggest that conversation could lead to resolution. Of course, it also leads to revelation

Jung was matched in the field by the legendary Sigmund Freud (Viggo Mortensen), and the film tracks Jung’s initial admiration of and then arguable competition with the man who wrote the book on sexual psychosis. Eventually, Jung would meet with Freud and Sabina would even come between the two in unusual, unexpected ways. Don’t worry. “A Dangerous Method” is not a love triangle movie. But it is a movie about how the expression of therapy techniques on this one woman and the disagreements that arose between Jung and Freud shaped the way we think about not just mental illness but mental wellness.



A Dangerous Method

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The cast is uniformly excellent in “A Dangerous Method” with the central trio delivering in their typical fashion and the great Vincent Cassel nearly stealing the film in the brief role of a man who shakes Jung loose from some of his moral stasis. Fassbender gives a performance so far removed from the ones he gave in “X-Men: First Class” and “Shame” that one might not even realize it’s the same actor. Ditto Mortensen, who has proven a great creative partner with Cronenberg, following up his leading roles from “A History of Violence” and “Eastern Promises” with a quieter, smaller turn here. But the movie arguably belongs to Knightley, who has the greatest and most interesting arc in it.

I admire “A Dangerous Method.” It’s easy to do so when such a smart group of people tackle such an interesting subject. But I wished that the film wasn’t so interested in the discourse of it and got a little dirtier in the process. “Method” appeals mostly to the head whereas Cronenberg of the past often went for the gut or even a little lower. I kept imagining the movie the man who made “Videodrome” and “Shivers” might have produced twenty years ago. It’s not to say that a more-subdued David Cronenberg is necessarily a bad thing but couldn’t he have tackled the mix of sex and psychology before he became that way?

“A Dangerous Method” stars Michael Fassbender, Keira Knightley, Viggo Mortensen, Sarah Gadon, and Vincent Cassel. It was written by Christopher Hampton and directed by David Cronenberg. It is rated R and opens in Chicago on December 16th, 2011.



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