

## “A DANGEROUS METHOD” (TIFF Film Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Tuesday, 13 September 2011 14:11

---



David Cronenberg’s latest psychodrama really is just that. *A DANGEROUS METHOD*, which had its world premiere at the current Toronto International Film Festival and opens theatrically November 23 from Sony Pictures Classics, may not be a horror film, but as it’s a character piece about sex and history, charting the period when Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud cross-pollinated each other’s lives and shared an interest in a most unusual patient, the subject matter puts it very much in line with Cronenberg’s previous body of work.

Michael Fassbender is excellent as Jung, a questing, determined intellectual doctor who adheres to the theories of his colleague Freud (played by recent Cronenberg regular Viggo Mortensen) and works to apply them to his patients, especially Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley), a deeply troubled, spastic Russian hurtbag of sexual dysfunction with a towering, untapped intellect. When the otherwise moral—and married—Jung becomes sexually involved with Spielrein, he enters a grey zone filled with sadomasochistic coupling, cerebral meanderings and self-loathing. Meanwhile, Freud questions Jung’s increasing interest in metaphysics, and Spielrein begins adapting Freud’s theories to suit her own agenda.



## “A DANGEROUS METHOD” (TIFF Film Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Tuesday, 13 September 2011 14:11

---

Sounds dull, but it's really not. The meticulously shot, edited, scored and, of course, directed film is in fact, when you take a closer look, the logical chamber-drama extension of Cronenberg's first and most frantic (and, to this writer, best) effort, 1975's SHIVERS (a.k.a. THEY CAME FROM WITHIN). In that wild picture, a sexual parasite is unleashed upon the residents of a Montreal high-rise, turning them into carnal zombies, unleashing the Freudian id with demented and lethal results. And yet, as the director has always articulated, he was firmly on the side of the parasite. In A DANGEROUS METHOD, Spielrein can be seen as the parasite, and her insistence that indulging the command of the id and letting it destroy the ego is the only way to achieve sexual liberation is exactly the same theme explored in SHIVERS. And in fact, that submission to an alien, threatening influence and allowing it to transform the self for both better and worse is the common theme coursing through all of Cronenberg's work.

And taken this way, Knightley's performance makes sense—a mass of jut-jawed, wild-eyed stuttering, twitches and unrefined emotion that shakes the picture's tranquility to its foundations. Many will reject Knightley's turn, but I view her as the “monster” and it's a difficult role...and she sells it. It's amazing that you buy her intellect and are attracted to her sensuality, yet still recoil at her behavior. It's a complex performance, and not one easily dismissed. Mortensen and Fassbender are topnotch in their less showy but more nuanced, controlled parts and the crackling dialogue they spout at each other (courtesy of screenwriter Christopher Hampton) is convincing and compelling.

For what it sets out to do, METHOD is a perfect film. It may be far too highbrow and restrained for Cronenberg's grittier fan base, but those who have followed his evolution and understand his body of work will really get off on it.

