A DANGEROUS METHOD

A Sony Pictures Classics Presentation
A Jeremy Thomas Production. Directed by David Cronenberg

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser

As a clinician I always found psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory to be boring, too intellectual and overly intense. Except for the occasional Freudian slip, transference encountered in therapy, the odd dream analysis around the dinner table or discussing the taboos of adult sexuality I rarely venture out into the field of classic psychoanalysis. I have come to realise that my stance towards psychoanalysis mainly has to do with a lack of knowledge and specialist training on my part in this area of psychology. I will also not deny that I find some of the aspects of Sigmund Freud's theory and methods highly intriguing and at times a spark of curiosity makes me jump into the pool of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory and 'swim' around a bit – mainly by means of reading or surfing the internet on the topic.

Due to my inexperience and lack of knowledge in psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalysis, it took some time for me to get my head around the film A Dangerous Method that I selected for review in this issue of the Journal. I was never aware of the events that are portrayed in the film, more specifically about the soured relationship between Sigmund Freud, the famed Austrian neurologist and founding father of psychoanalysis, and Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. Nor did I know about the existence of a lady by the name of Sabina Spielrein and the part she played in Freud and Jung's eventual split. Quite the scandal...

Based on the book 'A Most Dangerous Method' by John Kerr and the stage play 'The Talking Cure' by Christopher Hampton, the film A Dangerous Method opens with Sabina Spielrein (played by Keira Knightley) arriving at the University of Zürich's psychiatric clinic Burghölzli (meaning 'wooded hill') located in south-eastern Zürich, Switzerland in August of 1904. At the time Burghölzli was under the management of Eugen Bleuler (played by André Hennicke) who is acknowledged for coining the terms schizophrenia, autism and ambivalence. Suffering from hysteria, Spielrein is admitted under the care of Carl Jung (played by Michael Fassbender - the actor whose male endowment was curiously praised on stage by the actor George Clooney at this year's Oscars) for an experimental treatment modality devised by Jung called 'talking therapy'. As Spielrein's condition improves, Jung uses her as an assistant to help him with his research into word association in an effort to strengthen Freud's view that all mental illness can be traced back to the sexual experiences that a person had in childhood. Jung, up to then an ardent supporter and follower of Freud, meets his mentor in March 1906 and Jung is soon regarded by Freud as his intellectual and theoretical heir.

Through Jung's therapeutic approach he establishes a very close relationship with Spielrein, eventually leading to a bizarre sexual relationship between the doctor and patient that would cause major problems in our day and age, especially when one considers the volumes of ethical rules and regulations that govern our clinical practice. Jung was a married man with children at the time. As if this was not transgression enough, Jung also became Spielrein's advisor on her dissertation in her studies as a psychotherapist. After Jung's attempts to re-establish the boundaries of the doctor-patient relationship with Spielrein, she reacts negatively and contacts Freud, confessing everything about her relationship with Jung to him. Freud in turn uses the information that Spielrein provided in pressuring Jung into accepting his views and methods on the psychological functioning of humans, and it is not long before the two great minds part ways in addition to Spielrein going her own way. Both Freud and Jung suffered as a consequence and the film portrays a keen sense of loss on the part of both men. Spielrein first qualifies as a physician where after she became a psychoanalyst in her own right.

A Dangerous Method is an exceptional piece of cinematography, especially when one considers the detail that the film's Director David Cronenberg included. He was meticulous in creating a period drama that reflects the conditions, costumes and settings of the time that Jung and Freud inhabited. Cronenberg recreated Freud's study to match the original in addition to having Freud's chair replicated to exact specifications. As was the case in the film Shutter Island, the music arranged and composed for A Dangerous Method by the composer Howard Shore was spot on. The use of Richard Wagner's four epic operas Der Ring des Nibelungen, with the specific inclusion of the Siegfried myth, was a masterful touch by both Cronenberg and Shore, as the Siegfried legend was a direct reference to Jung's refusal to give Spielrein a love-child towards the end of their relationship. One cannot help but also wonder about the use of Wagner's music in the film, music that provided the Nazi propaganda machine with a powerful backdrop as Hitler's power grew, especially when one takes into consideration that Freud had to flee from the Nazis and that Spielrein and her children were killed by them during the Second World War.

The casting of Fassbender in the role of Jung is an amusing curiosity, especially when one considers the strong sexual theme that permeates the film in addition to Fassbender suiting the archetypal images required of his role in the film - the fallible hero and the strong, sexual warrior. The multitude of complexities that the film portrays makes you start to realise just how interconnected processes, events and people on earth really are without us mostly even giving it a second thought. Knightley's acting was brilliant, and her risky but powerful performance paid off, providing the film with intensity seldom matched in the film world. A Dangerous Method is a must see film for many reasons, and the film is highly successful in being provocative and perturbing at the same time. Enjoy.