



Patron: Jim Broadbent
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Toni Erdmann (Cert 15)

dir: **Maren Ade**

Starring: **Peter Simonischek, Sandra Hüller**

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Synopsis: Germany, present day. Winfried Conradi is a divorced, 60-something music teacher with a fondness for practical jokes. He lives alone, though his mother and ex-wife are nearby. His daughter Ines, a management consultant in Bucharest, rarely visits.

After Winfried's dog dies, he pays a surprise visit to Ines, who is busy with work. Winfried accompanies Ines to several networking events, but proves something of a nuisance. After an argument, he leaves for Germany. Soon afterwards, though, Ines is surprised by Winfried, disguised in a wig and fake teeth and introducing himself as life coach 'Toni Erdmann'. An aggravated Ines calls his bluff, inviting him to a party where he snorts cocaine. The next day, Winfried handcuffs himself to Ines for a lark, but loses the key. He attends a site visit with her, where he meets the workers she is planning to fire. On the way home, they stop at the house of Flavia, a woman Winfried met at a party, where they join in the celebrations for Orthodox Easter; posing as Ambassador Erdmann and his assistant Frau Schnook, they perform 'The Greatest Love of All' for the assembled guests, before Ines flounces out.

The following day, Ines hosts a brunch for her colleagues; she strips bare and announces to her baffled team that it is a 'naked party'. Winfried arrives, dressed as a 'kuker' - a furry spirit thought to ward off evil. When he leaves, Ines chases after him and the pair embrace.

Later, Ines and Winfried attend his mother's funeral. Ines pops her father's false teeth in her mouth and he goes in search of a camera. The film closes on Ines waiting for his return.

During the Q&A that followed the UK premiere of *Toni Erdmann* at the BFI London Film Festival 2016, director Maren Ade expressed surprise at its inclusion in the comedy strand.. She's made a love film, not a laugh film, she insisted; a work that is bookended by two deaths and turns on the broken relationship between an increasingly desperate father and daughter. Make no bones about it, on first viewing, *Toni Erdmann* is as strange, delightful and dementedly funny as the hype has it. But repeat watching reveals a film that plays first as comedy, then as tragedy.

The humour is broad and situational, centred on the tension between the highly-strung career woman Ines Conradi's focus on climbing the ladder at the management consultancy where she works and her father Winfried's attempts to get her to lighten up. This he does by donning a wig and false teeth and assuming the persona of lifestyle coach 'Toni Erdmann', effectively stalking Ines as she undertakes a series of professional engagements (Peter Simonischek is an extraordinarily good actor playing a mediocre one here, to great effect).

It's a satisfyingly retro set-up, summing such 80s/early-90s gems as *The Secrets of My Success*, *Big* and *Mrs Doubtfire*. But where those films found comedy in the clash between personal happiness and the pursuit of the American Dream, *Toni Erdmann* is set against the backdrop of globalised

Europe in up-and-coming Bucharest, an expat playground where shiny high-rise hotels and neon-lit malls stand back-to-back with shacks made of corrugated iron.

Winfried is baffled by the city's venality. A child of the 60s, he's been mocking the establishment for years, as an extended opening sequence makes clear. For the most part, his friends and family take his silliness in their stride dismissing him with a gentle eye-roll. The only person shocked by his behaviour is his ex-wife, an earnest woman who lives in a tasteful, book-lined apartment. Ines on the other hand keeps no books in the furnished apartment sourced by her put-upon assistant; there are few clothes in her closet; wine but no food in the fridge. Her sterile lifestyle is clearly a rejection of her parents' liberal values, but at stake is power rather than money. Bullied at work by the laddish colleagues who describe her as "business nail varnish", she fires people for a living and takes no small pleasure in berating a spa attendant who falls below her exacting standards, or indeed a boyfriend who lets slip that he's been indulging in locker-room talk about their sex-life.

To Ines (played dead straight by dramatic actress Sandra Hüller), humour is one more weapon. From the first encounter we witness between father and daughter, she picks up his jokes and flings them back at him ("I've hired a substitute daughter," he tells her. "Great. She can call you on your birthday so I don't have to," she deadpans back.) She's learned from the master, of course. Winfried may have the look of a dopey St Bernard, but just occasionally he bares his teeth. Their game of one-upmanship climaxes with him goading her into a glorious yet utterly humiliating rendition of Whitney Houston's 'The Greatest Love of All' that sends her running from the room.

Patrick Orth's camerawork is mostly minimalist, the better to show off the astounding performances. Scenes often open on a character at rest, abiding with them as they move into action. Indeed, the real strength of Ade's film lies in its pacing. Every sequence of the 162 minute running time feels significant, but then another comes along that feels even more so. The elisions are potent, too. A cut from Winfried mourning his dead dog to him alone in his garden at dusk to him waiting in Bucharest is particularly striking. So there is liberation - genuine liberation - in the characters' ostensible reconciliation towards the film's end, as the camera, for the first time, takes flight for an extended tracking shot. But in keeping with the rest of the film, the scene is also weirdly ambivalent. Dressed

in a traditional Bulgarian fur costume that covers him from head to toe, Winfried is not visibly himself, and remains entirely silent. Ines, meanwhile, is shadowed by a little girl who is completely, unabashedly enamoured with this great furry beast in a way that Ines herself is not, and perhaps can never be.

There is a bittersweet coda to the film that suggests something has changed between father and daughter in the aftermath of this event. But what has been lost that cannot be regained? When the laughter has faded, this is the question that lingers.

Credits

Ines Conradi	Sandra Hüller
Winfried Conradi	Peter Simonischek
(‘Toni Erdmann’)	
Hennenberg	Michael Wittenborn
Gerald	Thomas Loibl
Tim	Trystan Pütter
Anca	Ingrid Bisu
Tatjana	Hadewych Minis
Steph	Lucy Russell
Flavia	Victoria Cocias
Dascalu	Alexandre Papadopol
Natalja	Viktoria Malektorovych
Annegret	Ingrid Burkhard
Gerhard	Jürg Löw
Renate	Ruth Reinecke
Director	Maren Ade
Screenplay	Maren Ade
Cinematographer	Patrick Orth
Editor	Heike Parplies
Production design	Silke Fischer
Sound	Patrick Veigel
Costume	Gitti Fuchs
	@Komplizen Film
	Germany/Austria/
	Romania/Monaco 2016
	162 mins

Another View

Pondering what to write about this phenomenal film, I thought it might be worth looking at exactly what is meant by the term ‘bittersweet’, as it often, if not exclusively, crops up in critical prose. It’s a bet-hedging word, often used when it’s too taxing to pinpoint the exact tenor of a film, or its overall tone. There’s some happy, there’s some sad, but the movie sits comfortably at a mid-point between the two, so let’s say no more about it.

Using a term like ‘bittersweet’ in tandem with a work like Toni Erdmann would be at best lazy and at worst downright insulting. German director Maren Ade reveals herself as someone with profound insight into the arcane specifics of human frailty, and what she’s doing here is far too complex to be encapsulated with a lone descriptor. At times it feels like this is the work of a celebrated psychologist or behavioural scientist more than a filmmaker, so nourishing are her witty speculations on how people are able to exist together in the world. She is not someone who heedlessly tackles The Big Questions head on, but she instead probes for the small pressure points and works, works, works at them.

You can imagine someone like Judd Apatow watching this movie and thinking, ‘I’ve wasted my life.’ It concerns a dyed-in-the-wool prankster named Winfried (Peter Simonischek) who pays the bills by teaching piano. He lives alone, cares for his frail mother and owns a hound on its last legs. Even in scenes that seem intended as basic exposition, Ade never uses Winfried’s gloomy domestic situation as a shorthand to impose inner feelings on the character. Just because he lives like this doesn’t automatically make him sad. In fact, the reality is the opposite – he’s a man seemingly immune to the ravages of depression and loneliness, a mischievous grin being his default countenance.

Ade’s previous film was called Everyone Else, and rightly earned comparisons to Roberto Rossellini’s Journey to Italy for its depiction of a relationship that always seems to be in the throes of decline. You might say

that Toni Erdmann plays a similar hand, exchanging the twentysomething male/female protagonists of that film for a father and his estranged, high rolling daughter, Ines, played by Sandra Hüller. Ade’s masterstroke is telling a story in which every action and event subtly allude to a moment outside of the film’s timeline. Motivation is couched in hard experience. Everything we see in this film tells us something important. So the focus is small and the scope is gigantic. Ines is based in Bucharest and has apparently outgrown the fuzzy shackles of her relentlessly chipper father. By day she facilitates corporate downsizing and her life – professional and personal – is dedicated to amassing power and signing off the big deals. He visits her and wants to know if his daughter still exists inside this shell he no longer recognises. Yes, it sounds like a sappy ‘90s romantic comedy about growth and understanding and remembering where you came from. And what’s so extraordinary is that it absolutely and unabashedly is that, but it’s so much more as well. Ade clearly has a deep fondness for these wacky, high concept American pictures – she dares to make one, albeit with a real human pulse.

The title refers to a Mrs Doubtfire-like alter-ego created by Winfried as a way for him to briefly embed himself within his daughter’s stressful and, from his vantage, dismal life. With his comedy fright wig, garish buck teeth and quite the most wonderful bargain basement nylon sports jacket, he just follows her around and talks to her. She hates it and wants him to just go away. But gradually he wears her down and she becomes complicit in his fanciful charade. They regress back to her childhood, hand in hand, but it takes a lot to convince her to join him. It’s hard to think of a more thoughtful, incisive, observant and eloquent depiction of a father-daughter relationship outside of Ozu.

As mentioned, you’d likely classify the film as a comedy due to the number of expertly choreographed comic set pieces, which are duly hilarious. Like, really hilarious. But Toni Erdmann is, eventually, an unbearably melancholic experience, to the point where the film’s funniest sequence also manages to be its saddest. In time, the irrepressible Toni comes to represent something more than a person, but a block of time that a pair of people spent together.

It questions whether we can ever comprehend that we have been indelibly shaped by our parents, even if we’ve taken steps to evolve and sever ties with past foibles. It’s also about the magic of movies themselves, about how role-play and acting can be used as tools to explore uncharted emotional terrain and see life anew. This is cinema as portal for lost memories. It’s the product of a master filmmaker.

David Jenkins, Little White Lies

Our next film: Friday October 13th Neruda (Chile 2016. Cert 15)

Following his foray into mainstream cinema with *Jackie*, Chilean director Pablo Larraín returns to his roots with a further delve into his country’s chequered history.

The film is based on an episode in the life of Pablo Neruda, described by Gabriel García Marquez as ‘the greatest poet of the 20th century in any language.’ Mixing fact with fiction, it traces the events that led to Neruda - diplomat and politician as well as poet - being forced into exile, following the outlawing of the Chilean Communist Party in 1948 by the then President.

Featuring Larraín regulars Gael García Bernal, Alfredo Castro and Luis Gnecco and with great production values and ravishing cinematography, *Neruda* (described by Larraín as an ‘anti-biopic’) is another reminder of the current power and originality of Latin American cinema.

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Details are available on our website - lincolnfilmsociety.com/join-ifs. Please complete the membership form and make payment as detailed on that page.