



# Toni Erdman

**Director:** Maren Ade  
**Country:** Germany  
**Date:** 2016

A review by Mark Kermode for *The Observer*.

Be honest, when was the last time you can remember a German comedy feature film making international headlines and garnering global awards? The bittersweet *Good Bye Lenin!*, perhaps, which picked up nominations at the Baftas and Golden Globes in 2004? Or 1992's Oscar-nominated *Schtonk!*, the Hitler diaries farce that became a huge domestic hit while prompting international critical snipes about German comedy being no laughing matter.

Now, writer/director Maren Ade's melancholy *Toni Erdmann*, a 162-minute black comedy about father-daughter estrangement, looks set to take the Academy Award for foreign language film. Having cleaned up at the European film awards and topped Sight & Sound's prestigious best of 2016 poll of more than 150 critics and curators, *Toni Erdmann* is provoking grins and grimaces wherever it plays, balancing laugh-out-loud absurdity with excruciatingly understated tragedy. "This will not be a comedy," Ade reportedly told her co-producer. "This will be a very long and sad film." In fact, it is both and more.



Sandra Hüller, who mesmerised as a young woman troubled by inner demons in Hans-Christian Schmid's *Requiem*, is simply breathtaking as Ines Conradi, a brittle careerist working her way up the consultancy ladder. Distanced from her perennial-joker father Winfried (a splendidly bedraggled Peter Simonischek), Ines presents a prickly facade, although she's secretly sickened by the realities of her job; taking the blame for the cost-cutting cowardice of her clients.

While on business in Bucharest, Ines's dealings with an oil company are sideswiped by the unexpected appearance of her dad, apparently to deliver a birthday present and spend time with his daughter. She humours him briefly, and mourns the death of his beloved dog, but when it's time to leave, Winfried refuses to play ball. Instead, to her horror, he dons a shaggy wig and buck teeth (think Ken Dodd meets Gérard Depardieu) and starts introducing himself to her colleagues as "Toni Erdmann", a gregarious, entrepreneurial "life coach" whose company Ines cannot avoid. As Winfried's baby-boomer hippy ideals clash with Ines's 21st-century cynicism, dysfunctional family wounds are reopened, with increasingly disruptive consequences.

On one level, *Toni Erdmann* can be read as scathing satire on Europe, and a warning about the depersonalising results of globalisation. Yet while such socioeconomic subtexts are hardly hidden, it's in the intimate interplay between infuriating father and insular daughter that the real fireworks occur. Ade's genius is in refusing to allow either character to become a caricature, instead painting both in sympathetic shades of grey.

Yes, Winfried/Toni is an exasperating presence whose attempts to reconnect with his daughter border on stalking (he hides in her closet after covertly accessing her apartment). And yes, Ines's soul-sucking profession is one in which corporate venality and moral abnegation are the order of the day. Yet both harbour a heartbreaking awareness of their own shortcomings, their failure to make something better of their lives and relationships. That we feel and share these anxieties is testament to the deceptive precision of Ade, who apparently shot hundreds of hours of footage in search of the film's perfectly timed moments.

When the laughs come, they are as toe-curling as a vintage episode of *The Office* or a performance of Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*. An increasingly spirited rendition of *The Greatest Love of All* had me hoiking the neck of my jumper up over my face to hide my radioactive embarrassment. Elsewhere, there's something of the unbearable cruelty of Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All*, not least in a superbly uncomfortable sex scene that will put you off petits fours for life, particularly the green ones.

But such pain is not without purpose. Amid the symphony of stubbed toes and hurting heels, false teeth and fake smiles, Toni Erdmann gradually turns embarrassment to empathy, awkwardness into acceptance. Unlike Giuseppe Tornatore's thematically comparable *Stanno tutti bene*, or even Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, this tale of a pathos-laden parental pilgrimage doesn't want us to conclude that life is indeed disappointing. On the contrary, it wants us to wake up to the possibility of something better, even if that possibility comes wearing a furry Bulgarian folk costume and looking like an escapee from a surreal Andrew Köttling movie.

In a recent interview in the *Observer*, Ade cited the gruelling French comedy *Mon père, ce héros* (remade as *My Father the Hero*) and the alter egos of Andy Kaufman as inspirations for *Toni Erdmann*. Links to both are evident, but thankfully neither leapt to mind as I watched. Instead I was left marvelling at how the writer/director of *The Forest for the Trees* and *Everyone Else* (and indeed the co-producer of Miguel Gomes's astonishing *Arabian Nights*) had forged something utterly unique and wholly indefinable. I laughed, I cried, I shrieked. Bravo!



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