

## Toni Erdman

Another Oscar prospect is the German “Toni Erdman,” a drama filtered through farce, which has already earned accolades from international critics. In January, the film, written and directed by Maren Ade, was the consensus best movie of the year in the “Sight and Sound” annual magazine poll, voted on by more than 100 film writers. Whether Americans appreciate its humor is anyone’s guess, but one has to admit that it is a distinctive work

The story introduces shambling Winfried (Peter Simonischek), a music teacher from Aachen whose worldview could hardly be more different from his daughter Ines (Sandra Hüller), a workaholic corporate executive, somewhat estranged from her cutup father, and currently involved in a major deal in Bucharest. At loose ends after the death of his dog, Winfried flies to Bucharest to surprise Ines, but his timing is bad since she is at a crucial stage in delicate corporate negotiations. Winfried tries to loosen his daughter up with goofy pranks, chides her stuffiness, and mocks her barren business lifestyle.

Yet just when Ines thinks Winfried has left for Germany, he returns as the flamboyant “Toni Erdmann,” barely disguised in a rumpled suit, a bizarre wig, and grotesque fake teeth, claiming to be her CEO’s “life coach.” As Toni, Winfried is surprisingly bold and wheedles his way into Ines’ circle of colleagues, who strangely and against their best judgment, accept him. He’s impossible to ignore, but through his mischief Ines begins to see some of the absurdities of her own life to the point of finally bonding with dad.

Wags have cracked that German comedy is a contradiction in terms, and I fear many in the US may not get many laughs from “Toni Erdman.” The lead character, especially in disguise, is so ludicrous as to be unbelievable, not the best premise for comedy. When he shows up, he appears more freaky than free spirit. A reasonable person might leave the room. The fact that anyone would pay him any attention, much less believe his ruse, seems preposterous. Not helping, perhaps, is that the daughter is so expertly chilly that much of the intended humor is banked.

What **does** work for this reviewer is director Ade’s overall smart yet snarky take on international corporate life. The airless meetings and cocktail parties, the vapid business talk (it is never very clear in the film what kind of “business” is being done), the stale hotel life—all are valid reasons why Winfried wants Ines free of them. And while the film works awfully hard—and at sobering length—to make us chortle at this world, the fact that it is depicted at all in a movie is singular.

*(The film, with German subtitles, is rated “R” and runs a lengthy 162 mins.)*

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