

Joy of Life Expands When Meeting ‘Toni Erdmann’

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – If you need a little cinema therapy, it doesn’t get any better than “Toni Erdmann.” This subtle story builds to generate a joyful feeling, which defines the small-but-important survival guides for this thing called life. Writer/director Maren Ade has delivered the goods, and the film is nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the upcoming Academy Awards.

The film features Sandra Hüller and Peter Simonischek as a daughter and father who are estranged, and come together again through the father’s “mission” to help his progeny enjoy life more. It is a reminder of the characters that populate our lives, and how they are designed with the perfect timing to remind us that there is more to life than just living. The film builds perfectly under Maren Ade’s sure hand, and the 162 minute length is no match for the culmination of the main moral to the story. There is a lightness, audacity and finally truth in this essentially cast and executed film, and will have you celebrating the joie de vivre, especially if that happens to be missing in action in your own life right now.

Ines (Sandra Hüller) is a hard charging upper level European executive for a company that comes in to downsize other companies. She has little contact with her father Winfried (Peter Simonischek), but does visit him on his birthday, because she is working in nearby Bucharest in Romania. Winfried is a music teacher, and a free spirit who is not above putting on false teeth and a bad wig, to become his alter ego Toni Erdmann.



Ines (Sandra Hüller) Encounters Toni (Peter Simonischek) in 'Toni Erdmann'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Life changes for Winfried when his loyal dog passes away. He decides at that point to make his daughter his new project, to give her a dose of life affirmation. Showing up at her apartment in Bucharest, he infiltrates all elements of her life – work and private – and often does it in the guise of Toni Erdmann. It's obvious Ines needs his help, but will she accept it?

It is the process of her acceptance that makes the film sing (literally at one point). The film was a project of Germany, Austria and Romania, and Ines sort of represents that taciturn European attitude – the stereotypical impression of those three countries. Her unraveling to her father's whims is a fascinating exercise to experience...everything she has taught herself on how to be successful is in need of the adjustment that Winfried/Toni brings to her.

The two lead actors have indisputable chemistry, and invent their roles with small details that create magic. Sandra Hüller as Ines has to break down slowly for the story to really work, and projects a stoic front even to the redemption. Peter Simonischek is magnificent as the title character, it's obvious he has stage experience, because Winfred/Toni is such a broad expansion of nuttiness. The character also has no fear, which Simonischek really seems to enjoy.



Ines Sings a Different Tune Under the Spell of ‘Toni Erdmann’
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

What ultimately makes the film cinema therapy is that it doesn’t hit anybody over the head with its moral-to-the-story implications, but uses them as comic truths in life. The way that writer/director Maren Ade constructs this absurdity is unique, all the way up to a mass nude scene that provides deep belly laughs. The humor is not direct, but sideways, more like the unintentional humor we see in everyday life, which accumulates to provide our lessons.

Toni Erdmann has echoes of comedian Andy Kaufman’s old alter ego, Tony Clifton – both are brash, strange and bizarrely funny. But Toni E. is a gentle soul, looking to unearth the potential of the human soul. We all should be so lucky to have a Toni in our own lives, even though on the surface it doesn’t seem the case. It’s sort of like what we think is most important while “making our living,” turns out not to be that way when facing the end.

Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com joins Ian Simmons of KICKING THE SEAT podcast, to discuss “Toni Erdmann,” [CLICK HERE](#) [17] to listen and win!

“Toni Erdmann” has a limited release, locally at Chicago’s Music Box Theatre, 3733 N. Southport, through February 2nd, 2017. See local listings for other theaters and show times. Featuring Sandra Hüller, Peter Simonischek, Michael Wittenborn, Thomas Loibi and Ingrid Bisu. Written and directed by Maren Ade. Rated “R”



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