

# Toni Erdmann (2016)

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hours 42 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*

*Luke 15: 20*

It was more than two weeks after seeing German director Maren Ade's Oscar nominated comedy-drama that I thought of it as more than a father-daughter film, that the father played by Peter Simonischek is very much like the one in what some have called The Waiting Father in the parable told by Jesus. Only more so, in that he is a closer exemplar of the God of the Scriptures who does not wait, but rushes out to reconcile with the strayed son, or in this case, daughter. However, we must add a caveat—he greatly lacks the wisdom characteristic of the Creator!

Winfried (Peter Simonischek) is a 65-year-old divorced music teacher living alone with his old dog. He is playful and outgoing, but his business woman daughter Ines (Sandra Hüller) travels the world in order to optimize the deals of companies. She seldom visits her father, and when they are together, as at the beginning of the film, she spends more time on her cell phone that she does with dad. Maybe this is to escape some of his lame humor, such as his donning a zombie outfit, or stuffing oversized teeth into his mouth. The guy will do anything for a laugh, but nothing works with his overly sober daughter.

While she is working in Romania's Bucharest, his dog dies and

his only piano student quits, so the lonely man pays her an unannounced visit, showing up at her office. Despite his inappropriately sloppy dress, she takes him along to a business party at the American Embassy. Even though we are spectators, we cringe at his inept remarks that send her colleagues seeking someone else with whom to trade hollow and insincere compliments and observations.

They part, but Winfred shows up again soon as his alter ego Toni Erdmann, dropping in on a dinner with two of her friends. He is even more goofy and forthright than before, now wearing a wig, aptly known as a "rug," and stuffing the protruding teeth over his natural ones. To avoid embarrassment, Inez pretends not to know this intruder claiming to be a life coach. A series of outrageous things happen in the days ahead, with Ines emerging slowly and painfully from her all-business shell. We see this when she belts out Whitney Houston's "[The Greatest Love of All](#)" at a gathering, and later on when she invites her associates to her birthday party, which she spontaneously insists that guests change into the nude. (Though this makes the film a less likely candidate for viewing in a church group, you can rest assured that the scene is played for comedy, not for any sexual sensation. Not so another one, however, involving Ines and one of her office colleagues, so be forewarned.)

The conclusion does not tie everything so close together as a Hollywood film would, with father and daughter roasting marshmallows as they sing "Kum Ba Ya," but Ines does change jobs, becoming a little more like her father in the process. I think Zorba the Greek would approve. The film even touches a little bit on sexism, and the effects of the economic consequences of her company's policies and decisions. Their take over and reorganization of companies leads to the dismissal of large numbers of people, who might sink to the level of the poorer Romanians living in squalor that we are shown in a number of shots. As to sexism, during one business

gathering it is Ines, and not one of the lesser ranked men who is asked to take the wealthy client's wife on a shopping trip.

At nearly three hours, the film is indeed long, but this gives the director-writer plenty of time to insert details that round out the characters and their relationships. The film works as both a comedy and a drama, but will not suit everyone's taste. Workaholic Americans, as well as the movers and shakers of Germany need someone like Toni Erdman to remind them, as he does his daughter at one point, that life is more than work. I am reminded of the last verse of the spritely Steven Foster song taught us in grade school, "Some Folks Do:"

*"Some folks toil and save,*

*Some folks do, some folks do,*

*To buy themselves a grave,*

*But that's not me nor you!*

*Chorus:*

*Long live the merry, merry heart*

*That laughs by night or day,*

*Like the Queen of Mirth,*

*No matter what some folks say."*

This might not be as stirring as Whitney Houston's song, but it contains a lesson as true as today as in those pre-Civil War days.

*This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.*