

LUX

3 FILMS
24 LANGUAGES
28 COUNTRIES

FILM

DAYS

TONI ERDMANN

Maren Ade
Germany, Austria, Romania



LUX
FILM PRIZE
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
IS COMMITTED TO CULTURE

ye10
ars



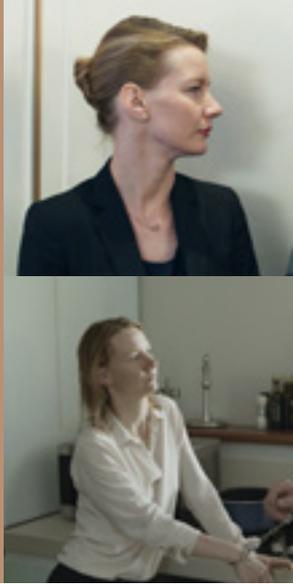
European Parliament

TONI ERDMANN

BY MAREN ADE

When the father of Ines, a businesswoman with a major German firm based in Bucharest, turns up out of the blue, she can't hide her exasperation. Nothing seems to disturb the surface of her perfectly ordered life, but when her father asks her 'Are you happy?', her inability to answer triggers a chain of events which will turn her world upside down. Determined to help her rediscover a sense of purpose in her life, her awkward and embarrassing father takes on an alter ego: that of the prank-loving Toni Erdmann.

Although the plot turns on their difficult relationship, the film is made unexpectedly funny by the father's ability to assume odd-ball personas and mystify the high-powered people in his daughter's life. His character unwittingly shines a light on the deep social and economic divides caused by economic globalisation.



UNEXPECTEDLY FUNNY

Screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, *Toni Erdmann* impressed both critics and the public alike with its off-beat humour, and the film has often been billed as a comedy even though it has fewer purely comical moments than it might at first seem. The humour provides a key to interpreting the film, however, and digging slightly deeper beneath the surface quickly reveals the similarities between the contrasting couple of the father and the daughter and two traditional circus characters: Auguste and the whiteface clown.

Winfried, Ines's father, comfortably takes on the role of a clown with the traditional traits associated with Auguste: outrageous make-up, the red clown nose, represented in this case by his crooked false teeth, a wig, ill-fitting clothes, a larger-than-life provocative manner and a (largely) feigned clumsiness. Many of his pranks and provocations are clearly designed to make us laugh, but often we find ourselves laughing at and not with his victims.

His daughter, meanwhile, initially appears to be an extremely serious character with no sense of humour who gradually becomes less and less tolerant of her father's antics. Only as the plot develops do her comic role and potential emerge, not least when she hosts a party in the nude. We can therefore compare Ines's traits — and particularly her physical ones — with those of the whiteface clown: she is the character who feels that she must be unflappable at all times, who always has an understated appearance and who must always remain dignified. But her serious facade conceals her tragi-comic power.

A SERIOUS, EVEN DRAMATIC STORY

The film wants to do more than just make us laugh, however. In real life, a clown can indeed make people feel uncomfortable, and this is exactly what Winfried does to his daughter by infiltrating her professional circle and repeatedly unsettling her by slipping into the character of Toni Erdmann. A particularly memorable scene shows Ines in a restaurant with two 'friends' after a hard day at work; her father appears behind them wearing a wig and introducing himself as Ion Țiriac's coach. While the two friends and the audience laugh, Ines's response betrays a deep — and entirely understandable — sense of unease behind her outward coldness.

The scene illustrates the conflict which gives the film its dramatic tension: father and daughter have grown apart, and Ines now lives in a totally different world to her father. Will they be reconciled, or will they go their separate ways once and for all? This key question is brought into sharp focus right at the start of the film, when Winfried's old dog dies. This event provides the catalyst for the whole story: even though it is not spelled out, we come to understand that the dog's death brings



home to Winfried the fact that he too is getting old and spurs him to go to Bucharest to find his daughter.

The film explores this issue further by making their reunion coincide with the apparent or imminent death of the father, who is disguised in heavy Bulgarian clothes: at first we think he is going to have a heart attack, although he recovers in the end, and after a jump cut the next sequence starts with his daughter arriving at a funeral, leading us momentarily to believe that it is her father's, before we realise that it is in fact her grandmother's. The ultimate challenge to be faced in life — death — is thus well and truly present in the film, even if in this scene the sting is taken out by the trick of having the grandmother die and not the father. Those watching the film, who barely know her, inevitably feel her death less keenly.

THE DRAMATIC DYNAMIC

The film as a whole has a clear dramatic arc, but each scene generates its own dynamic, which centres on the father–daughter conflict. Far from trying to patch things up between them, they have an inherently antagonistic relationship, with both constantly trying to gain the upper hand — at least symbolically — over the other. As Winfried says, the conflict is clearly rooted in their fundamentally different approaches to life, but it quickly develops into a personality clash. Although Winfried seems to dominate Ines by virtue of his stature and humour, it soon becomes apparent that Ines is quite capable of giving him a taste of his own medicine and turning situations to her own advantage: early on in the film he jokingly says that he has hired a substitute daughter, but she keeps a straight face and tells him that it is wonderful news because it means that she will not have to call him on his birthday anymore. In the same way, in Bucharest, when he asks her about happiness and the meaning of life, she chastises him in a tone combining boredom and sarcasm for using such big words and cleverly bats the question back.

Returning in the guise of Toni Erdmann, however, Winfried dominates her by means of his grotesque actions and repeatedly makes her feel uncomfortable, for example in the scene in the restaurant described earlier or when he appears on the terrace in front of her office building and creates havoc with a whoopee cushion.

Despite her meek appearance, Ines is actually quite the joker herself. For example, she decides to invite her father to join her on a night out with friends and takes cocaine conspicuously in front of him, whilst her Romanian colleague (and lover) cavorts obscenely with a bottle of champagne wielded as a phallic symbol. Her aim is to confront her father with a new side to her character, disconcerting and far removed from the image he has in his mind of her as a little girl, and to make him feel uncomfortable for a change in an environment that is completely alien to him. She doesn't push home her advantage, however, and ultimately leaves the nightclub without trying to assert any form of symbolic dominance over her father. In the end, she will be the one who decides to end the rift between them.

Prior to the reconciliation scene, however, the power games move up a gear, in particular when they go to an oil field and she uses her father to put pressure on the Romanian manager; the unexpected outcome is that one of Winfried's clumsy jokes gets a worker fired. The father is thus beaten at his own game, that of disguise, and in the car the daughter administers the symbolic *coup de grâce* by saying that the country's economic growth hinges on such dismissals, whatever his naive environmental sentimentalism may lead him to believe.

Winfried, defeated, then goes to the house of a Romanian woman who had previously given him her business card and pretends to be the German ambassador. Once again the balance of power shifts back, and Ines becomes her father's stooge, being forced to clumsily paint an egg and then sing a song in front of the whole family. Retaining her dignity, she immediately turns on her heels and leaves her father there.

PACE AND CLIMAX OF THE FILM

The shifts in the balance of power between father and daughter give each scene its own dynamic, and we never know who will come out on top. The film is often funny, but the director also does not hesitate to string out many sequences in a film that lasts over 2.5 hours. Although most viewers see the film as a comedy, a number of sequences are filmed in real time, allowing a sense of malaise to develop. The tension felt by certain characters is palpable on many occasions — in the restaurant, at the night club, at the oil field, in the Romanian family — although the humour does mean that the tension sometimes finds release in laughter. Thus, the scene showing the first meeting at the embassy with the CEO Henneberg, who invites Winfried to have a drink with his daughter, has all sorts of hidden implications that the bland dialogue cannot disguise: the scene is long enough — although we, like the father, do not quite understand what is at stake — for us to also feel awkward, not least when we realise that Ines has made a faux pas (or that the CEO has tricked her).

The tension is also very keenly felt in the film's climactic scene: the office party where everyone ends up stripping, much to the amusement of those watching the film. Beyond its comic aspect, however, this scene rams home the film's core message: there is no confrontation between father and daughter, and it is purely the psychological pressure she is under that prompts Ines to suddenly take off her clothes and greet her guests in her birthday suit. Her actions, of course, carry a metaphorical meaning, and her nakedness is both physical and ethical. Ines abandons the disguise she has employed until then in a world characterised by illusions and lies. It is this change of heart which enables her to reconcile with her father once and for all. He then turns up in the most absurd disguise imaginable. We come to understand that, whilst Toni Erdmann's disguises are visible and ridiculous, those in Ines's world are invisible and dangerous and are poisoning her life, until she decides to change.

It is not clear whether the confrontation with her father is the catalyst for her withdrawal from that world, and it could be that the accumulation of lies which we witness in the course of the film prompts her to make her decision, in particular when her boss asks her to organise what is supposed to be an informal get-together to help strengthen bonds within the team, but which, as we soon see, Ines experiences as the height of hypocrisy. Another scene is particularly revealing of the lies told and the acts put on by key players in the business world: after the meeting with the CEO Henneberg, Ines's boss Gerald asks her to sleep with the Romanian manager, Tim, in a bid to win his support for their strategy. Ines agrees to do this, but we soon realise that the Romanian partner is already her lover and, when they are in the hotel room, he immediately tells her that Gerald knows about their allegedly secret affair. Everyone is either double- or triple-bluffing, but at this moment we can see that Ines is sickened by the dishonesty: refusing to sleep with him on the grounds that she does not want to lose her 'drive', she then asks her lover to ejaculate over the petits fours brought by room service. The scene is both farcical and revealing of the extreme hypocrisy and moral cruelty prevalent in a business milieu that is willing to force Ines to sell herself, and this is probably what causes the first crack to appear in her identity.

ROMANIA AS A BACKDROP

Alongside the emphasis on Ines's personal relationship with her father, the director focuses on her relations with her colleagues and managers. Although the lies that cover up the obvious power struggles seem to dominate the business milieu, the locations in which the action takes place hint at a much wider social context: the consultancy firm where Ines works is seeking to restructure the oil industry in Romania with a view to making it more efficient, even if this entails mass redundancies. But this aspect emerges only gradually, and the film first focuses on upscale locations — the embassy, luxury hotels, offices of major companies and night club — visited by the young woman. When she waves her father



off from her balcony, only for him to come back a little later as Toni Erdmann, the camera quietly shows us the other side of the city in the form of run-down houses partly hidden by a wall which are clearly part of a shanty town. Social segregation is visible, and the 'real' Romania is portrayed only when Ines needs to call on local 'craftsmen' to open the handcuffs for which her father has forgotten the keys.

The contrast between the two worlds is made brutally clear during the visit to the oil company, when we see the impact that the plans and decisions made around office tables will have on Romanian workers on the ground, who are blissfully unaware that their future is at stake. The divide does not seem to get the young woman down, however, and she justifies the policy and its supposed benefits for economic development in the car on the way back. What is more, the end of the film shows that she has not in fact left the business world, but simply moved to another consultancy firm. However, we do not share Ines's viewpoint and the depiction of this universe, the hypocrisy and the cruelty of human relationships leaves a lasting impression.



SOME POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

In addition to the points analysed above, several aspects of *Toni Erdmann* are worth further discussion.

Relationships between men and women are also power relationships. On that basis, it is interesting to study Ines's relationships with her colleagues and managers: how does the film deal with the issue of relationships between the sexes? Are women treated differently to men? Are these differences obvious or hidden? How does one gender dominate the other?

What is the specific economic strategy illustrated in *Toni Erdmann*? What role do the German and Romanian characters play?

10 YEARS OF EUROPEAN CINEMA FOR EUROPEANS

The European Parliament is pleased to present the three films competing for the 2016 LUX FILM PRIZE.

À PEINE J'OUVRE LES YEUX (*As I open my eyes*), by Leyla Bouzid
France, Tunisia, Belgium, United Arab Emirates

MA VIE DE COURGETTE (*My life as a Courgette*), by Claude Barras
Switzerland, France

TONI ERDMANN, by Maren Ade
Germany, Romania, Austria

These multi-faceted stories, which are the result of the great dedication and creativity of talented young European film directors, will be screened during the fifth edition of the LUX FILM DAYS.

LUX FILM PRIZE

Culture plays a fundamental role in constructing our societies.

With this in mind, the European Parliament launched the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2007 with the aim of enhancing the circulation of European films across Europe and sparking Europe-wide debate and discussion about major societal issues.

The LUX FILM PRIZE is a unique initiative. While most European co-productions are shown only in their country of origin and are rarely distributed elsewhere, even within the EU, the LUX FILM PRIZE gives three European films the rare opportunity to be subtitled in the EU's 24 official languages.

The winner of the LUX FILM PRIZE will be chosen by the Members of the European Parliament and announced on 23 November 2016.

LUX FILM DAYS

The LUX FILM PRIZE gave rise to the LUX FILM DAYS. Since 2012, the three films competing for the LUX FILM PRIZE have been shown to a wider European audience during the LUX FILM DAYS.

The LUX FILM DAYS invite you to enjoy an indelible cultural experience that transcends borders. From October to December 2016, you will be able to join cinema lovers from across Europe in watching screenings of *À peine j'ouvre les yeux (As I open my eyes)*, *Ma vie de Courgette (My life as a Courgette)* and *Toni Erdmann* in one of the EU's 24 official languages. Don't forget to vote for your favourite film via our website <http://luxprize.eu> or our Facebook page!

AUDIENCE MENTION

The Audience Mention is the LUX FILM PRIZE people's choice award. Don't forget to vote for *À peine j'ouvre les yeux (As I open my eyes)*, *Ma vie de Courgette (My life as a Courgette)* or *Toni Erdmann*! You might be chosen to go to the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2017 — courtesy of the European Parliament — and announce the winner of the Audience Mention.

WATCH,
DEBATE
& VOTE



@luxprize



#luxprize

LUX
PRIZE
.EU

DIRECTOR: Maren Ade

SCREENPLAY: Maren Ade

CAST: Sandra Hüller, Peter Simonischek, Michael Wittenborn, Thomas Loibl, Trystan Pütter, Lucy Russell, Hadewych Minis, Vlad Ivanov, Victoria Cocias

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Patrick Orth

PRODUCERS: Janine Jackowski, Jonas Dornbach, Maren Ade, Michel Merkt

PRODUCTION: Komplizen Film

CO-PRODUCTION: Coop99 Filmproduktion, KNM, Missing Link Films, SWR/WDR/Arte

YEAR: 2016

DURATION: 162'

GENRE: Fiction

COUNTRY: Germany, Austria, Romania

ORIGINAL VERSION: German, English

DISTRIBUTOR: Soda Pictures (United Kingdom, Ireland)



