A FILM BY MAREN ADE

TONI ERDMANN
Winfried doesn’t see much of his working daughter Ines. The suddenly student-less music teacher decides to surprise her with a visit after the death of his old dog. It’s an awkward move because serious career woman Ines is working on an important project as a corporate strategist in Bucharest. The geographical change doesn’t help the two to see more eye to eye. Practical joker Winfried loves to annoy his daughter with corny pranks. What’s worse is his little jokes at her routine lifestyle of long meetings, hotel bars and performance reports. Father and daughter reach an impasse, and Winfried agrees to return home to Germany. Enter flashy “Toni Erdmann”: Winfried’s smooth-talking alter ego. Disguised in a tacky suit, weird wig and even weirder fake teeth, Toni boosts into Ines’ professional life, claiming to be her CEO’s life coach. As Toni, Winfried is bolder and doesn’t hold back, but Ines meets the challenge. The harder they push, the closer they become. In all the madness, Ines begins to understand that her eccentric father might deserve some place in her life after all.

SYNOPSIS
How was the idea for TONI ERDMANN born? Is it autobiographical?
All my films are partly autobiographical in the sense that I take something I know as a point of departure. When it comes to the subject of family, it was interesting to see how little I was able to escape my own family while writing. There’s nothing you know better than where you come from. You only have one family, and the relationship between parents and children is for life; it’s hard to escape that. That’s what happens with Ines in TONI ERDMANN. She thinks the family in which she grew up holds nothing of relevance in her present life; they’re all trapped in their assigned roles and their interactions play out according to rigid, almost ritualistic patterns none of them can escape.

What gave you the idea for the Toni character invented by Ines’s father Winfried?
Winfried’s impulsive transformation is a bold attempt to break out of the mold of the father-daughter relationship. “Toni Erdmann” is born out of desperation. Humor is often a way of coping with things, and as such it is always also a product of pain. Winfried is unable to get through to his daughter any other way. He tried to redefine his relationship with her as a father and failed, and now he’s at a loss, torn between his desire for more closeness with Ines and the resentment he feels towards her. The balance of power between them shifted long ago. Winfried finds a way out of this dilemma with the brash offer he makes Ines in the guise of Toni. Honor is his only weapon, and he starts using it to the hilt. That means playing a much tougher game, and since Ines is a tough cookie herself, he’s suddenly speaking a language she understands.

COMMENTS FROM WRITER-DIRECTOR MAREN ADE
Your female protagonists constantly grapple with their conflicts. Is that typical of the women you see and experience in contemporary society?

Ines works in a male-dominated field, and she has really internalized that. She may actually even regard herself as “one of the guys” — the problem is that, when push comes to shove, they don’t see it that way. I’ve interviewed quite a few women in leadership positions, and most of them claim to enjoy being the exception to the rule, even though it means they’re lonely at times.

In that sense I guess Ies is a contemporary female character. She started out convinced that self-determination and equality were things women of her generation could take for granted so that she had no need for feminism. When she says, “I’m not a feminist or I wouldn’t tolerate guys like you!” she really means it. She refers to the “women’s group” and “sexual harassment at work” ironically, and she assumes the same sarcastic, sexist tone in her comment about Anca “pushing the buttons.”

But to be honest, I never intended to do something especially critical of sexism in the business world. I merely wanted to show things the way they are, and sexism is a part of that reality. The whole gender issue actually kind of gets on my nerves, especially when it’s given so much weight. As a woman, I’m used to identifying with male characters. I mean, when I watch a James Bond movie, I’m not the Bond Girl, I’m James Bond, too.

Maybe it’s best to think of Ies as a contemporary, gender-neutral character — much like a man who cries now and then and has father issues.
After EVERYONE ELSE, this is the second film you’ve shot outside Germany. Why did you choose to set Toni Erdmann in Bucharest? What did you find particularly interesting about Romania as a location?

Setting large parts of the film in another country had two major advantages in terms of the story I wanted to tell. That the two main protagonists face off far from home, isolated and unencumbered by the constraints of their familiar surroundings, highlights the conflict between father and daughter and gives it added force. And having Winfried visit his daughter in another country and bring the feeling of “home” with him underscores how foreign that element has become in Ines’s life.

With both of my films, I simply felt freer shooting abroad. Sometimes it helps if you don’t know too much. I’m not sure if I would have dared to do the kukeri scene the way I did if we’d been shooting in downtown Berlin, for instance. And last but not least, the fact that Bucharest served as the location of great films like those of Corneliu Porumboiu, Christi Puiu, and our producer, Ada Solomon, piqued my curiosity. And as it turned out, working there really was a wonderful experience.

So what initially appears to be a simple family conflict turns out to be much more than that: a conflict between generations?

Yes, setting the film in Romania also helped underline the political aspect of the conflict between the two main protagonists – the father who once fought to ensure his daughter would grow up with the confidence and independent spirit she needed to make her way in the world, and the daughter who chose a life far removed from the ideals her father instilled in her as a child when she decided to go into a conservative, performance-oriented field that embodies the very values he used to despise. The freedom that Winfried’s generation fought for paved the way for an unfettered capitalism in which profit is the be-all and end-all, and he equipped Ines with everything she required to make it in that world – flexibility, self-confidence and the firm belief that only the sky is the limit.

Ines, on the other hand, regards the complacent certitudes that govern Winfried’s supposedly politically correct life as too facile. It was easier for those of his generation to take a stand because it was easier for them to set themselves apart from the generation before them and to separate friend from foe.

Although Winfried has since given in to resignation, his old rebelliousness resurfaces in the guise of Toni. When Ines deliberately puts him in a situation that gives him insight into what her work entails, the old political questions become more personal and assume renewed urgency, and his reaction bespeaks the fact that his naïve humanitarian outlook has given way to uncertainty.
A lot of directors say doing comedy is really hard work. What was your experience?

Shooting those scenes really wasn’t easy. The important thing for the comic moments and the movie as a whole was making sure Toni was believable as a human being and yet still have Winfried remain visible underneath. Toni couldn’t just become a character out of a fantasy film, the film couldn’t just switch genres mid-stream. Toni couldn’t become a character out of a fantasy film, the film couldn’t just switch genres mid-stream.

We spent three whole days on the bar scene, rehearsing it extensively. Peter and I systematically tried out various approaches. The hardest thing was for him to hide what a skilled actor he is. Winfried’s supposed to be an ordinary teacher playing a role, not a professional, and it’s extremely difficult for a good actor to play a bad one. Peter himself would have the skills to make Toni seem much more real, to heighten the drama and make him even funnier, but the humor arises precisely from the fact that it’s Winfried who’s playing Toni and not a professional actor. Getting that just right was hard work.

How did you and your director of photography, Patrick Orth, prepare for the movie?

The aim was to give the actors as much freedom and keep things as open during the shoot as possible. On a technical level, that meant we generally used 180-degree lighting and were all prepared to go with the flow when things developed unspec-tacularly, like letting a scene not longer than originally planned. During the preparation phase, Patrick Orth was there for every rehearsal, filming, taking photographs and getting a feel for the sets and lighting. We extensively discussed story perspectives. So working with the actors and the camera was a laborious process. We spent a lot of time on the set working through each scene down to the last detail, even if we would sometimes end up throwing everything overboard again on the day of the shoot. I really believe you have to spend a lot of time with the actors beforehand to get to a point where the camera can respond to them without it feeling like a documentary.

So you aimed for everything to be as realistic as possible?

I don’t like to cut corners in the narrative. I need to be able to believe every step the characters take along the way; it doesn’t have to be particularly probable, but at least possible. Even though realism was the prime consideration, I still wanted to allow for surprises and larger-than-life “movie moments.” But I wanted them to develop from the characters rather than being affected by me as the director. That’s why I decided to create a situation that makes the characters feel like they’re acting in a movie. Toni introduces that element into Ines’s and Winfried’s life – an element of playfulness, boldness, freedom – and allows them to experience themselves in a new way. Thanks to Winfried’s goofy idea, suddenly anything is possible. So I guess you could say a slightly heightened realism was what we were aiming for in terms of cinematography and Silke Fischer’s set design.
The naked party – an impulsive decision resulting in the ultimate challenge, the ultimate surprise… What gave you the idea?

A female character throwing a naked birthday party is an idea I’ve had for a long time. Much like the Toni character, the naked party is an almost desperate attempt to find a way out of a stalemate. The fact that the dress turns out to be too tight provides Ines with an excuse, but what she really wants is profound change. She doesn’t decide to throw the party just for the fun of it, but to rid herself of her boss and false friends. Ines discovers that it isn’t quite so easy to cast things off and break taboos, because nowadays anything goes… all you need is the right slogan. On the one hand, it’s liberating to realize that you can actually get away with a lot more than you might have thought, but on the other hand it’s kind of depressing to realize there are hardly any taboos left to break.

Is the film a plea for letting go?

To me, “letting go” sounds too much like “giving up,” too much like something out of a self-help book. My film is less a plea for letting go than a plea for coming clean. What Ines does at the end is pretty radical and takes a lot of guts. It may be a bit nuts, but it’s a new beginning: From that day on, she’ll always be the woman who greeted her boss at the door naked. She isn’t letting go of anything, she’s actually taking the reins back into her own hands. At the very end, we see two people who have perhaps grown to know and accept themselves and each other a bit better. We could also see Toni in terms of the common expression “hiding” behind a role, but I actually think Winfried reveals himself in the roles he plays. That’s particularly true for the kukeri, which is really his inner self – a big, melancholy creature with a funny-looking head.
Is the movie also about things coming to an end?

Any relationship between parents and children is full of goodbyes. When something new begins for a child, it often means that something ends for the parents. I’m seeing that with my own kids now. My son is thrilled every time he grows another centimeter, and I get wistful. That’s why I included a series of goodbyes in the movie. Winfried’s student quits, his dog dies, and he and his daughter exchange goodbyes a number of times without ever having a warm farewell. Their embrace at the end is an attempt to convey that sort of goodbye. The kukeri costume transforms Winfried, so that for a brief moment, he appears to Ines like the big, lumbering, warm father she knew as a child and she can be the little girl she once was.
MAREN ADE
WRITER-DIRECTOR

Maren Ade’s second feature EVERYONE ELSE won two Silver Bears at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival: the Grand Jury Prize and Best Actress for Birgit Minichmayr. The modern relationship drama was released in over 25 countries and received three nominations for the German Film Award.

Her first feature THE FOREST FOR THE TREES won the Special Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005 and a Best Film nomination for the German Film Award. The touching drama was her graduation film from HFF University of Television and Film Munich.

Maren Ade also works as a producer for other filmmakers. In 2000, she founded the film production company Komplizen Film with producer Janine Jackowski.

2016  TONI ERDMANN
2009  EVERYONE ELSE (Alle Anderen)
2003  THE FOREST FOR THE TREES (Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen)
2001  VEGAS (short)
2000  EBENE 9 (short)
Born in Graz, Austria, in 1946, Peter Simonischek initially trained to be a dental technician at his father’s business and studied architecture at Graz University of Technology before pursuing his passion for acting at the Graz University of Music and Performing Arts. After finishing his studies, he began his career at various theatres in St Gallen, Bern and Düsseldorf and worked with directors such as Michael Haneke. In 1979 he joined the Berlin’s Schaubühne theatre company, where he acted under the direction of Peter Stein, Klaus Michael Grüber, Luc Bondy, Bob Wilson, Andree Brecht, and others.

In the 1980s, Peter Simonischek had already played in numerous films and televi­sion series, such as Axel Corti’s television movies DAS EINE GLÜCK UND DAS ANDERE and HERRENJAHRE. He played the title role in Dieter Berner’s LENZ ODER DIE FREIHEIT, a three-part historical drama about the Baden revolution. He made his film debut in Margarethe von Trotta’s LOVE AND FEAR (with Fanny Ardant and Greta Scacchi). Leading and supporting roles in many TV movies and TV series followed, and he continued to act in feature films such as GEBÜRTIG (dir. Robert Schindel, Lukas Stepanek), THE MOUNTAIN (dir. Markus Imhoof), HIERANKL (dir. Hans Steinbichler), RUBY RED, SAPPHIRE BLUE and EMERALD GREEN (dir. Felix Fuchssteiner) and DER KLEINER DIKTATOR (dir. Dani Levy) and Götz Spielmann’s OCTOBER NOVEMBER.

An accomplished stage actor, Peter Simonischek has been a member of Vienna’s Burgtheater since 1999. He embodied the title role in Hofmannsthal’s classic “Jedermann” (“Everyman”) at the Salzburg Festival for eight years (2002-2009).
Komplizen Film was founded in 2000 by Janine Jackowski and Maren Ade during their studies at the HFF University of Television and Film Munich. Both serve as Komplizen Film’s managing directors and are active as producers for the company. In 2010, they were joined by Jonas Dornbach as managing director and producer.

Komplizen Film’s primary focus is on developing arthouse feature films and international co-productions for the cinema as well as working to establish German directors on an international level.

We seek out projects that have a special regional and cultural character, projects that cross borders and encourage us to think beyond boundaries. We appreciate cinematic scripts and directors that exhibit a unique signature style. We believe in building long-term relationships with directors and production partners. In addition to Maren Ade, we work with directors such as Barbara Albert, Miguel Gomes, Valeska Grisebach, Vanessa Jopp, Anna Sofia Harmann, Benjamin Heisenberg, Sonja Heiss, Ulrich Köhler, Sebastian Lifu, Travis Pol Chianese and Jasmina Zbanic.

In 2015, Komplizen Film was honoured with the Award for Outstanding Accomplishments in German Film by the DEFA Foundation.

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FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

2016 TONI EIDMANN (dir. Maren Ade)
2015 HEDI SCHNEIDER IS STUCK (dir. Sonja Heiss)
2015 ARABIAN NIGHTS (dir. Miguel Gomes)
2014 SUPEREGOS (dir. Benjamin Heisenberg)
2014 LOVE ISLAND (dir. Jasmina Zbanic)
2013 LIES (dir. Vanessa Jopp)
2013 REDEMPTION (dir. Miguel Gomes)
2013 TANTA AGUA (dir. Ana Guevara & Leticia Jorge)
2012 TABI (dir. Miguel Gomes)
2012 THE LIVING AND THE DEAD (dir. Barbara Albert)
2011 SLEEPING SICKNESS (dir. Ulrich Köhler)
2009 EVERYONE ELSE (dir. Maren Ade)
2006 HOTEL VERY WELCOME! (dir. Sonja Heiss)
2003 THE FOREST FOR THE TREES (dir. Maren Ade)
2002 KARMA COWBOY (dir. Sonja Heiss & Vanessa van Houten)
MAIN CREW

Written and Directed by: MAREN ADE
Director of Photography: PATRICK ORTH
Art Director: SIAKE FISCHER
Costume Design: GITTI FUCHS
Make Up: MONKA MÜNNICH, WITRUD DEBSCHMIDT
Casting: NINA HAGEN
Editor: HEIN PAPPELS
Original Sound: PATRICK VEGEL
Re-recording Mixer: BERNHARD HASESCH
Production Manager: OEY NICOLSCHEN
Line Producer: BEN VON DORENBECK
Commissioning Editors: ULRICH HERMANN (SWR)
Associate Producer: BRUNO WAGNER, ANTONIN SVOBODA
Co-producers: BRUNO WAGNER, ANTONIN SVOBODA
Co-producers: JANINE JACKOWSKI, JONAS DORNBACH, MAREN ADE (Komplizen Film)
Producers: MICHEL MERKT (knm)

MAIN CAST

Winfried / Toni Erdmann: PETER SIMONISCHK
Inas: SANDRA HÜLLER
Henneberg / Gerald: MICHAEL WITTENBORN
Tom: THOMAS SCHUL
Tim: TRYSTAN PUTTER
Tatjana: MADALYF AHMED
Steph: LUCY RUSSELL
Anca: INGRID BISU
Iliescu: VICTORIA COCIAS

A KOMPLIZEN FILM PRODUCTION

TONI ERDMANN
a film by Maren Ade

2016, Germany, Austria
Ratio: 1:1.85, Sound 5.1, 162 min, in German & English

in co-production with
coop99, knm, Missing Link Films
and
SWR/WDR/ARTE

with the support of
Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, Ermenger, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Förderamt Berlin-Brandenburg, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Austrian Film Institute, Filmförderung Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein, Filmfonds Bayern, and MEDIA

World Sales by The Match Factory