

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-5 ; S/N-6 . Running time: 1 hour 22 min.

I have waited for a couple of weeks to write about British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's film because of my ambivalent feelings about it, or perhaps better, the way in which it was made. The movie is hilariously funny at times, beginning with the conceit that it is a documentary by a reporter from Kazakhstan who comes to the USA to film its citizens. It is also at times very vulgar, some of the excrement jokes being very extreme. TV reporter Borat (Sacha Baron Cohen) is so filled with anti-Semitism that he brings out similar prejudices in some of the Americans whom he interviews, suggesting that we are not as color blind a society as we like to think we are. This is probably all to the good for our politically correct society, but is anyone else bothered by Cohen's deception in obtaining

his interviews? (Never stepping out of character, he told his victims that he was making a documentary for television in Kazakhstan and that the film would not be aired in North America.)

The film is a road genre tale, beginning with his taking leave of his family and Jew-hating neighbors (they celebrate an annual "Ruining of the Jews") and traveling with his producer Azamat (Ken Davitian) to America where his encounters with our toilets and such are as baffling to the naïve journalist as are the people whom he encounters. In some of the latter he brings out an animosity to Jews, people of color, women, and homosexuals almost as virulent as his own. Unknown to these people is Cohen's identity as a Cambridge-trained scholar who is a devout Jew with a family.

Perhaps more viewers will be put off by the naked wrestling match between Azamat and Borat. It seems that Borat has a secret agenda in coming to America. A fan of Baywatch, he wants to go to California and take what he thinks is "the virgin Pamela Anderson" as his bride. Azamat finds Borat's book featuring photos of Pamela, and when he masturbates before one of the pictures, Borat becomes so upset that he attacks him.

Although much of the humor in this satiric look at American mores and prejudice is so vulgar that a church group will think not twice but three times before using it, many of the observations made by Sacha Baron Cohen as the fictional Borat are right on target. As so often with talented comedians, Cohen's satire is painted on with a broad and heavy brush.

For Reflection/Discussion

1) How is culture clash an easy target for humor? Compare

Cohen's film with Albert Brooks' Looking for Humor in the Muslim World. When Borat tries to bargain down his hotel price, how is this like a North American who pays the quoted price at an African bazaar? What does his mistaking the hotel elevator for his room say about the housing condition in his country?

2) How is Borat's anti-Semitism especially funny and ironical, given what we know about him?

3) What constrains people from expressing their prejudices today? Why do you think some of the people felt they could do so to Borat?

4) Which do you think is better—to blatantly express prejudices, or to conceal them? Why?

5) What do you think of Cohen's tactic of fooling people into signing a release and then using their interview in a film to be shown in this country, even though he told them it was to be used in Kazakhstan?