

Brüno: Another series of pranks at everyone's expense

By Hiram Lee
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Directed by Larry Charles, screenplay by Sacha Baron Cohen, Anthony Hines, Dan Mazer and Jeff Schaffer

Comedian Sacha Baron Cohen and director Larry Charles, the creators of the popular film *Borat*, have returned with their latest “mockumentary,” *Brüno*. Like the figure of Borat, the creation that preceded him on the big screen, the Brüno character, also played by Baron Cohen, is drawn from sketches originally presented on the comic’s “Ali G Show.”

Stylized as the ultimate gay stereotype, Brüno is the host of an absurd fashion show on Austrian television. Fired from his job for disrupting a Milan fashion show, Brüno makes it his life’s mission to become a celebrity. He moves to Los Angeles in the hopes of becoming the “biggest Austrian superstar since Hitler.” (Brüno’s apparent fondness for Hitler and Nazism is a constant presence in the film’s background, but its inclusion seems arbitrary and nothing much is done with it).

The drive to become a celebrity will take Brüno down several paths. There is an attempt to become an actor in film and television, a talk show host and more. When things don’t go his way, he tries other methods of achieving fame: making a sex tape, brokering peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians, getting himself kidnapped by terrorists in the hopes of appearing in a hostage video and finally, in a fit of despair, attempting to go straight.

As he did previously in *Borat*, Baron Cohen engages in provocative interviews with celebrities, political figures, and ordinary people, all of whom are unaware of his true identity and motives, in order to catch them off guard and trick them into revealing their “true selves” and, he no doubt would like us to think, something significant about the world in which we live.

One of Brüno’s guests, during the sequence in which he tries to become a talk show host, is former pop star and “American Idol” judge Paula Abdul. Discovering there is no furniture in the home in which he has arranged to hold the interview, Brüno pays his Mexican pool cleaners extra money to pose as human chairs. Abdul agrees to sit on the back of one of the “Mexican chair people” as she discusses her supposed lifelong commitment to humanitarian concerns.

Baron Cohen is attempting to make Abdul, and more broadly, celebrity philanthropists, into hypocritical figures. Does he succeed? At least in the case of Ms. Abdul and similarly harmless or trivial targets, one tends to feel sympathy for the person being pranked, rather than outrage over his or her behavior.

Much later in the film, when Brüno has decided to become straight, he is advised by thoroughly repugnant religious figures in the deep South who specialize—they think—in converting homosexuals into heterosexuals, to take part in more masculine activities. Brüno decides to go hunting with a small group of men. Baron Cohen plays up how uncomfortable the hunters are with his sexuality. But, again, this is in large part a provoked reaction. At one point, in the middle of the night, Brüno appears at the tent of one of the men completely nude, holding a condom in his hand, asking to be let in. The hunter is furious. But how else would one expect him to react? What in the world does this prove?

This is Baron Cohen’s method. He sets out to demonstrate, in *Borat* and *Brüno*, that anyone, pushed hard enough, or perhaps made comfortable enough to speak freely, will reveal himself or herself to be anti-Semitic (*Borat*) or anti-gay (*Brüno*). Both films and the approach taken in making them reflect a dim and often contemptuous view of human beings.

The comic is disgusted by anti-Semitism and anti-gay

bigotry, and rightly so. But one sees in Baron Cohen's work the effect of an ahistorical and out-of-context view of anti-Semitism or homophobia which inevitably ends with Baron Cohen chastising this or that ignorant or "indifferent" individual who, under the right circumstances, could be a great many people. The social and historical roots of such matters are entirely obscured.

The film touches on several interesting subjects that deserve critical attention: celebrity and obsession with celebrity, the fashion industry, the supposed religious conversion of homosexuals into heterosexuals, politics in the Middle East, etc. Most of this is covered only in passing, and none of it is given serious thought. Much of the film feels as light-minded and juvenile as the countless hidden camera prank shows one finds on television.

When the comic has certain political figures or the most powerful and vocal supporters of various forms of bigotry in his sights, the results can sometimes be amusing (though little more than that). More often than not, Baron Cohen targets the least powerful and the least threatening. Much of *Brüno* simply feels crude and mean-spirited.

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