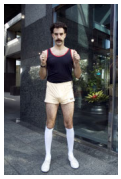
Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 15 November 2006 02:17



BORAT: CULTURAL LEARNINGS OF AMERICA FOR MAKE BENEFIT GLORIOUS NATION OF KAZAKHSTAN

How could any film live up to the hype that preceded *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*
? Even before the movie's national release - which occurred a week before its appearance in *our*
area - everyone, it seems, was abuzz.
Borat
made early splashes at the Cannes and Toronto film festivals, critics were searching high and low for superlatives, and for its October 20 issue,
Entertainment Weekly
put star Sacha Baron Cohen on the cover, accompanied by the teaser "Has this man made the funniest movie ever, or simply the most outrageous, offensive one?" Following
Borat
's opening weekend, box-office records were shattered while the displeasure of many - Kazakh officials, the Anti-Defamation League, a pair of litigious frat guys - was duly recorded, and by the time it opened here on Friday, desire to see the movie was replaced by desire to be in on the *event*
. Could this 85-minute, low-budget endeavor possibly be as great as our expectations of it?

Well, it is and it isn't.

Make no mistake, though: *Borat* is oftentimes extraordinarily funny. Taking Cohen's cluelessly bigoted, misogynistic character (who originally appeared on the star's
Da Ali G Show
)
on a cross-country American tour, director Larry Charles and the film's screenwriters have designed Borat's
faux
-documentary
adventures so that Cohen himself actually has to do very little; he makes rude pronouncements but lets the unwitting victims of his antics provide the laughs - the comic shock of
Borat

comes from those who
aren't
in on the joke.

Throughout the movie, we find ourselves appalled that Borat's hatefulness - his unapologetically unenlightened attitudes toward Jews, women, gays, blacks, et cetera - is shared (or, at least, not challenged) by those he shares screen time with, and what often results is like *Jackass* to the
n
th degree - aghast hilarity. When Borat, preparing to sing the national anthem at a Virginia rodeo, wins over an initially reticent crowd by vilifying Iraq, the crowd's cheers constitute a pretty good joke. When Borat continues his tirade, demanding that President Bush "drink the blood of every man, woman, and child in Iraq" and the crowd
still
cheers, that's not just funny - that's
terrifying
. And, somehow, that makes the gambit all the funnier.

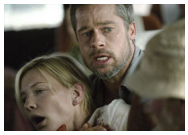
Sequences such as this, where we laugh not only at the gag but at the participants' refusal to acknowledge that it *is* a gag, pop up frequently, and Borat's road-trip encounters yield some unforgettable scenes: his appearance on a morning-news program, exemplifying why you should never go on the air live with a guest who hasn't been properly vetted; his evening at a swanky dinner party, where the hosts display unaccountably good manners before reaching their boiling point. At random moments, *Borat* is every bit as scandalous, and exhilarating, as its advance word indicated.

Yet successful comedy, of course, is dependent on surprise, and while it's fair to say that *Borat* has its share of scenes that not only surprise but
floor
audiences (particularly a nude-wrestling bit that may give moviegoers the shivers for years),
Borat
actually becomes repetitive awfully quickly.

Once we understand what Cohen is up to here - revealing ignorance and bigotry by preying on it - the routines, despite their shock appeal, grow familiar. But the bigger problem is that as the film progresses, the routines themselves *don't*; you expect *Borat* to keep presenting wilder, more uproarious highs, yet at roughly the halfway point, the film starts to run out of steam. For quite a while, the movie has a satisfying rhythm (observation, observation, slapstick belly

laugh), but its narrative - which concerns Borat's quest to meet Pamela Anderson - eventually gets in the way, leading to some obviously staged moments that don't have the force of *Borat* 's real-life comic jolts.

Cohen is so amusing in his role that even when the movie goes off the rails, he keeps you laughing, so it's a shame that a conventionality, and even a sentimentality, eventually creep up on him, and on the film. (The one thing Borat should *never* be is conventional.) *Borat* is simultaneously silly and smart, and features marvelous, taboo-bashing material; it should definitely be seen. But I have to admit a slight sense of disappointment in realizing that, in the end, what began as such a great, sustained comic stunt turned into an aggressively filthy variation on *Pee Wee's Big Adventure.*



BABEL

I really admired *Babel*, even though I'm still not sure what its director, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and its screenwriter, Guillermo Arriaga, are trying to *say* with it. (Of course, when you think about it, this might be a completely appropriate reaction to a tale inspired by the biblical tower of Babel.) Like the collaborators' *21 Grams* and *Amores Perros* , *Babel* tells a series of inter-connected narratives while employing a devious chronology, with events leapfrogging back and forth over the span of five days, only to become fully understandable in the film's final minutes. I'm completely on-board with that, but I don't quite buy *Babel* 's thesis that the narratives *are* inter-connected.

As the film travels from Morocco to the United States to Tokyo to Mexico, we begin to glean connections between the stories - a pair of Moroccan boys, using a gun given to a Japanese businessman, accidentally shoot an American woman on a tour bus, forcing the woman's children to take a sojourn to Mexico with their nanny - but the pieces never fit together in any meaningful way, even though Iñárritu and Arriaga keep insisting that they *do*. Are we supposed to think that the boys' refusal to admit to the crime somehow causes the delay in getting the woman proper medical attention? That the Japanese gun-owner is partly responsible for the international crisis this sets off? That the confusion and adolescent trauma experienced by this man's deaf daughter relates to the other stories at *all*? With its high-minded seriousness, its visual touchstones, and its artful structure masking some serious leaps in logic, *Babel* brings to mind Pauline Kael's quote about director Jane Campion and *The Piano*: "The symbolism never really registers fully, because you can't tell what she's symbolizing, though you know damn well it's symbolic."

That being said, the movie is astonishingly well-filmed and -edited, and the director elicits uniformly magnificent performances; Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Gael García Bernal are the most recognizable names, and even their expert work is overshadowed by the contributions of Rinko Kikuchi as the Japanese teen and Adriana Barraza as the nanny. Iñárritu appears to be a genius with composition and sound - particularly in a scene set in a Japanese nightclub, which effectively puts you in Yakusho's skin - and he delivers devastatingly emotional moments devoid of melodramatic tactics. (I was close to tears on several occasions.) *Babel* is an intense experience, and it's easy to understand the nearly physical reaction some viewers (and critics) have had toward the film; its scope is so enormous and individual sequences so powerful that it certainly *feels* like a great movie. I'm not quite convinced, but as with last year's *Syriana*, I'm looking forward to another viewing just to be sure.