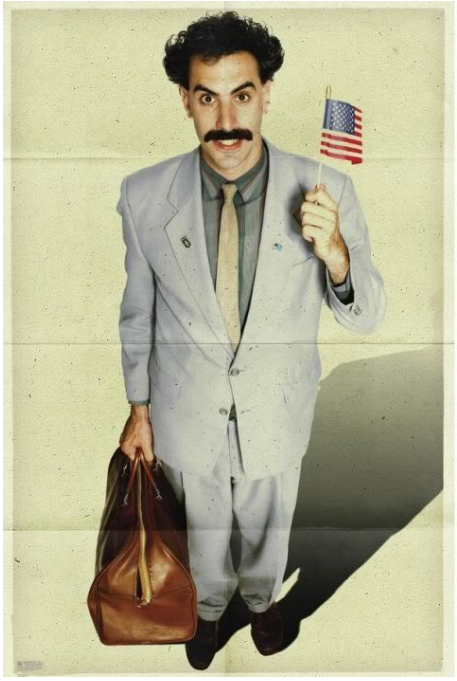
It was an easy choice when deciding what film to send film critic extroardinaire Mitch Cyrus to this week. The heavily hyped "Borat", starring Sasha Cohen ... an emerging star in the comedy world. I kind of figured that Mitch would either love this film or loathe it, and I was correct. Mitch reviews "Borat".



If awards were given for audacity, we would already have our winner for this year, and probably this century. Not since Mel Brooks stuck a sharp stick in the eye of prejudice with his brilliant “Blazing Saddles” has there been a comedy so side-splitting funny, gross, or as brazenly, embarrassingly spot on in its ridicule as Sacha Baron Cohen’s mocumentary “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan”.

Satire is not for the weak or the meek. And neither of those two words could possibly apply to Cohen. The show is a tour-de-force of the absurd for the English funnyman, and you can’t stop yourself from alternately laughing until you cry, or turning away and cringing from the antics of Cohen’s clueless, bigoted Kazakhstani news reporter as he travels the country learning about American culture while supposedly filming a documentary for his home country.

“Candid Camera”/”Punk’d” style interviews with unsuspecting victims provide much of the humor and almost all of the squirm-inducing scenes. Perhaps not unintentionally, Southerners end up in the worst light, as Borat makes his cross country trip by driving through the Deep South, giving himself numerous opportunities to interact with the denizens of Dixie. Sometimes you can tell that these people have a pretty good idea that they are part of a joke, in which the scenes are still rather humorous. But it’s when Borat is with those who take him at face value

that the satire really ratchets up and people are revealed to be not much more intelligent than the moronic skinny man with the bushy moustache…and every bit as prejudiced.

Borat bashes gays and Muslims with a rodeo promoter in Virginia who gives a high-five to Borat when the “newsman” lets him know that gays are killed in his area of Kazakhstan. A few minutes later, he is being applauded by the crowd as he tells them that he “supports Emperor Bush and his War of Terror” and that he hopes that Bush “drinks the blood of the vanquished”. The redneck whooping turns to boos, however, when Borat riotously sings the words to his fictional National Anthem of Kazakhstan” to the tune of the Star Spangled Banner.

Later, in Mississippi, he first puts an etiquette instructor to the test. She is supposed to be teaching him how to act when going to a fancy Southern dinner party, but has to maintain her own composure when he shows her nude pictures of a young man said to be Borat’s son. The dinner itself also leaves you shaking your head, as Borat manages to call one guest a “retard”, insult the looks of one of the women, and then pretends not to know how indoor plumbing works, bringing back downstairs a bag that may have human waste in it. The other guests try to excuse it all away up until Borat’s dinner guest arrives, an overweight black prostitute. Not something that someone living on Secession Drive in Natchez, Mississippi can handle.

If the movie were strictly “gotcha” interviews with unsuspecting rubes, it would be amusing but ultimately it would get stale. Luckily, more than half of the movie is actually scripted, showing Borat’s home village and its people, and following the antics of the newsman and his producer as they arrive in New York, and then travel the country together. The village scenes are hysterical. Within two minutes Borat has introduced us to the town rapist, and then given a long, passionate kiss to a young woman, who he then introduces as his sister, the fourth best prostitute in the area. Later, Borat narrates the town’s yearly festival, culminating in “The Running of the Jews”. The “Jews” are people inside large racist caricatures of how the Third Reich used to portray Jews, with demonic features and carrying knifes or pitchforks in an attempt to get the villagers’ money.

Borat being disgustingly anti-Semitic is the highest level of satire in the movie, as Cohen himself is a devout Jew. He skewers anti-Semites by making Borat so over the top in his uneducated proclamations. In one bit that was obviously staged, Borat and his producer stop at a bed an breakfast for the night, and are then shocked to find that the elderly owners are

Jewish. They refuse to eat the food, and huddle under covers in their beds at night with Borat making a “Blair Witch” type camera confession, shaking while clutching his money and a hatchet, hoping to fend off the “shape shifting Jews”.

Other staged routines, such as his cross country drive in an old ice-cream truck with a black bear companion, work quite well. Borat was supposed to stay in New York for the entire documentary, but saw something that inspired him to take his own personal Vision Quest…a late night viewing of television for the first time, during which he saw an old rerun of “Baywatch” and fell madly in love with Pamela Anderson, prompting him to take off for California. The inevitable meeting with the “woman of his dreams” does not disappoint.

The only part of the movie that doesn’t work is a nude wrestling scene between the hairy Cohen and his even hairier obese producer. Shock value is one thing, but overkill is another, and five minutes of them squirming about in awkward positions, and then chasing each other through the hotel to continue the battle was too much by about four minutes and forty-five seconds.

The risk in satire is in making the protagonist too mean spirited or elitist, and Cohen avoids this trap by making Borat a very charming, friendly, and engaging bigot. Borat is not someone who he thinks he is superior; rather he is bigoted because he just doesn’t know any better. The reactions to this Innocent while he is blithely insulting everyone regardless of race, gender, religion or sexual orientation are the real sources of humor in the unscripted routines. But while Cohen will take any scene all the way to the edge of the cliff, he’ll hold back at the last second and not go too far. He has no problem with embarrassing people, but fortunately he really doesn’t go to the point of humiliating anyone on camera.

Note: on the other hand, many of the participants are feeling humiliated now that they have seen themselves on screen. There are several reports of people upset or wanting to sue after seeing the final result. They have no real case, as they were not induced to saying anything they didn’t really think, and the release forms they signed prior to filming were evidently very iron-clad. A little hint for people: if you don’t want your racist rantings captured on film, don’t sign a release for authorizing someone to film you, and then follow up by saying stupid things.

This film certainly isn't for everyone. I'm actually surprised it's being shown at all in the South since Southerners take a beating in it. If you are offended easily, you should also avoid it, and not surprisingly, there were several people who walked out during the film.

But if you want 82 minutes of hilarity based on slapstick and some brutal honesty that can prompt you to think a bit as well; then this is a film for you.

My rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs). It would have gotten a 4…but not after the wrestling scene (shudder).