



Film

BY DAVID LARSEN

Extreme reality

This movie is full of gags, but you may walk away feeling empty.

The problem: your last movie was huge. It was a genuine no-kidding cultural landmark. Sacred cows were slaughtered. Offense was taken. There were lawsuits! (The very best kind: hopeless ones, brought by unsympathetic people over the fact that you made them look very stupid.) So what do you do next? How do you top a success like *Borat*?

Trick question, actually. A film like *Borat* can't be topped, and it's pointless to try. But I'm afraid Sacha Baron Cohen doesn't know that. Everything about *Bruno*, his new vehicle, screams the same war cry: "Push the envelope further!" More outrageous! More offensive! More likely to incite a lynching by enraged conservatives! This time we won't just slaughter those cows, we'll make burgers out of them!

As you'll know, unless you possess an unusual degree of resistance to saturation-level advertising, Cohen's eponymous character in *Bruno* is an uber-gay Austrian fashionista, who sets out to transform himself into an American celebrity after falling from grace in his own country. After his talk show pilot misfires – the test audience somehow failing to appreciate the masterful dancing penis sequence – and his attempt at luring a presidential candidate into starring in a sex video with him falls flat, Bruno decides to find fame through actual achievement. Other celebrities have already bagged poverty in Africa and Aids research, but what about peace in the Middle East?

Bruno

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Sacha Baron Cohen as Bruno: having a gay old time.

The gag, as with *Borat*, is that many of the people who encounter Bruno think he really is an astonishingly clueless Austrian being followed around by a camera crew. (The presidential candidate is taken particularly unawares.)

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Watching him grasp an Israeli and a Palestinian by the hands and sing, "Creating peace is my mission ... Don't kill each other, shoot a Christian", I found it hard not to feel a frisson of disbelief at just how far Cohen is prepared to push things.

But a willingness to behave unacceptably is not a coherent blueprint for a film, and for most of its length *Bruno* is not much more than a random collection of extreme reality TV skits. You want to see some insane caricatures of gay sex? How about Bruno trying to get an

Islamic fundamentalist to take him hostage? (Hostage videos, after all, can make people famous.) Would it amuse to watch him swing through Africa on his way back from the Middle East and adopt a baby? ("Madonna has one, and now I have one ... I traded an iPod for him".) There's nothing here that isn't funny, in an "Oh my God, he really did that" kind of way, but none of it goes anywhere. The frequency of entertaining moments goes up sharply in the final third, after Bruno has his epiphany – "None of the top celebrities in America are gay!" – and signs on with an evangelical Christian gay deprogrammer. But they're just moments. They fall apart in your memory as you leave the theatre, because there's nothing holding them together. The film isn't really about celebrity culture, and it isn't really about America's attitude to gays. It isn't really about anything.

This is only underlined by the handful of scenes with a sharply focused satiric core. The best of these features Bruno interviewing a succession of star-struck parents hoping to get their babies cast in his new video. "Will your baby work with dead or dying animals?" "We'll dress your baby as a Nazi and it can push a Jew baby into an oven. Are you good with this?" "Is your baby fine with lit phosphorus?" "Can your baby lose ten pounds by next week?" "Will your baby undergo liposuction if necessary?" Every single question gets a straightforward "Yes". And, you realise with a lurch, these fine exemplars of parental virtue really mean it. This is satire with teeth: intensely uncomfortable, darkly hilarious. From Cohen's point of view, it might have been better to leave the scene out. It's a magnesium flare to the rest of the film's 40-watt bulb.

BRUNO, directed by Larry Charles.

