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'Borat' for Best Actor?

Amid a comedy's pranks,
there's a real performance

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

The controversial movie "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan," co-written by and starring British comic Sacha Baron Cohen (aka TV's Ali G), is a faux documentary, opening Friday, about a Kazakh TV reporter traveling the U.S. to learn our ways (and, he hopes, maybe marry Pam Anderson).

The government of Kazakhstan has expressed concern about the fictional Borat (r) "representing" its people. Some activist groups worry that the movie's button-pushing on race, gender and sexuality will be seen as encouraging, instead of spoofing, prejudice. And some of the people interviewed by Borat in the film say they didn't realize he was making a comedy when they expressed or agreed with outrageous comments.

But one thing isn't being discussed: Baron Cohen's goofball skill in a movie that industry bible *Variety* has already called "uproariously funny."

Penn Jillette, of the comedy duo Penn & Teller and one of the forces behind the documentary "The Aristocrats," agrees.

"All anyone is talking about are the things *other* people say in the film," says Jillette. "What I think should be talked about, really, is what a fabulous actor Sacha is. I would watch 'Borat' without *anyone* being pranked in it."

The kick is the difficulty level in Baron Cohen's performance. The improv in films like "Best in Show" or the upcoming "For Your Consideration" comes from actors riffing together, in a standard moviemaking style. And the "Jackass" guys provoke a response with physical stunts. Baron Cohen's goal was to provoke a response, be funny, stay in character *and* never lose the confidence of the people he "interviewed." And to do it all in one take.

So while much of the movie's humor comes from Borat talking to frat boys, a rodeo official and experts on manners (all of whom react with incredulity or cheerful agreement to Borat's rantings), there is a whole other high-wire act happening on screen — though Jillette thinks some people in the film may have caught on to the joke.

"People *love* to put each other on in the U.S.," he says. "While they may have been trying to get along with Borat, they may also have just wanted to have a good time. I think it was America that may have taken Borat for a little ride." ♦

