

# SUNDAY FEATURES

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# Bruno:

He's a limp-wristed, sex-crazed queen, but does Sacha Baron Cohen's latest comic character do more harm than good?

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a mince too far?

Sacha Baron Cohen recently approached Elton John through a representative. Could he use *Can You Feel the Love Tonight*, John's hit song from *The Lion King*, for a pivotal scene in his

forthcoming movie?

*Bruno*, a comedy set for wide release by Universal Pictures on July 10, stars Baron Cohen as a flamboyantly gay fashion journalist from Austria. The filmmakers wanted to play the song during a scene in which the title character, participating in a cage-fighting match, pulls down his opponent's pants and kisses him on the mouth, prompting a horrified crowd to throw garbage at him.

The answer was no. John, along with the Walt Disney Co., which owns the copyright to the song but seeks his approval in such matters, learned of the scene's particulars and blanched, according to one of John's advisers. But then John reversed himself — kind of. He didn't want to be associated with the provocative scene, but he ultimately agreed to perform part of another song that functions as a coda to the film.

So it goes for *Bruno*, a movie that, in mercilessly exploiting the discomfort created when straight men are ambushed by aggressive gayness, happens to (surprise!) expose homophobia. Gay groups are reacting with deeply mixed emotions, heightened by the recent triumphs (Iowa) and losses (California) in efforts to legalize gay marriage. Is the film then vulgar, inappropriate and harmful? Or bold, timely and necessary? All of the above?

Ultimately the tension surrounding *Bruno* boils down to the worry that certain viewers won't understand that the joke is on them and will leave the multiplex with their homophobia validated.

"Some people in our community may like this movie, but many are not going to be OK with it," said Rashad Robinson, senior director of media programs for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. "Sacha Baron Cohen's well-meaning attempt at satire is problematic in many places and outright offensive in others."

## 'THIS GUY IS QUEER'

Holding the opposite view are people like Aaron Hickland, the editor of *Out* magazine, who said he plans to put Baron Cohen on the August cover. "The movie does something hugely important, which is showing that people's attitudes can turn on a dime when they realize you're gay," Hickland said. "The multiplex crowd wouldn't normally sit down for a two-hour lecture on homophobia, but that's exactly what's going to happen. I'm excited about that."

*Bruno* is not a lecture, at least not overtly. Like *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, the 2006 smash that starred Baron Cohen as an anti-Semitic Kazakh journalist, *Bruno* is first and foremost a raunchy comedy featuring a not-so-bright guy who embraces sexism, racism and stereotypes as he happily goes about his business. *Borat* and *Bruno* are both familiar to fans of *Da Ali G Show*, Baron Cohen's satirical talk show, which first ran in Britain in 2000 and began appearing on HBO in 2003.

Yet *Bruno* is also intended as a statement about what it is like to be a member of a minority in America in 2009. Baron Cohen's malaprop-loaded antics are fictional, but the hate they can elicit from the people he encounters is ostensibly real. (The same was true of *Borat*, which some human rights groups also greeted with hostility; Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League said at the time that audiences "may not always be sophisticated enough to get the joke.")

Bloggers have given *Bruno* an unofficial subtitle: "Delicious Journeys Through America for the Purpose of Making Heterosexual Males

Visibly Uncomfortable in the Presence of a Gay Foreigner in a Mesh T-Shirt."

Universal won't discuss the filmmaking process, but the studio insists that the vast majority of the people who appear with Baron Cohen had no idea they were being filmed. Ads for *Bruno* trumpet, "real people, real situations."

That was at least true of Representative Ron Paul of Texas, the former Republican presidential candidate. In a scene filmed in early last year, Paul sits for an interview with the Baron Cohen character. (Paul has said he was told the topic would be Austrian economics.) When lighting trouble delays the interview, Baron Cohen strips to his underwear. Paul storms out muttering, "This guy is a queer."

In a subsequent radio interview Paul said: "I don't like the idea that he lies his way into an interview. To me it's a real shame that people are going to reward him with millions and millions of dollars for being so crass."

Judging from the way certain subjects in *Borat* reacted after that film was released, Universal's lawyers will be busy. At least six lawsuits were filed against the comic and 20th Century Fox, the *Borat* distributor. So far no plaintiffs have won, but some cases are on appeal. (Universal, which won a bidding war with 20th Century Fox for the distribution rights to *Bruno*, paying US\$42.5 million, seems happy to take the risk. *Borat* cost US\$18 million and brought in US\$262 million worldwide.)

*Bruno* was served with its first lawsuit on May 22. According to a complaint filed by a California woman, Baron Cohen — as Bruno — infiltrated a charity bingo tournament and offended the elderly audience with vulgarities while calling a game. The plaintiff, Richelle Olson, contends that she was severely injured when she tried to grab the microphone away from him. In a statement Universal called the lawsuit "completely baseless," noting that full footage of the encounter shows that Olson was never touched.

As roles go, there is no ambiguity about Bruno: he is a limp-wristed, sex-crazed queen. Universal's promotional materials show him dressed in hot pants, leopard bikini underwear and riding nude on a unicorn.

The character has evolved in appearance since the television show. This Bruno has plucked eyebrows and longish hair with blonde highlights. He wears mauve lipstick. Baron Cohen also appears to have shed several pounds of arm, leg and torso hair through waxing or electrolysis.

In one scene Bruno appears on a talk show holding a baby who is wearing a T-shirt reading "Gayby." The sequence flashes back to Bruno having sex in a hot tub while the baby sits nearby. He then boasts to the outraged talk-show audience that the baby is a man magnet (only he uses unprintable language).

In another scene Bruno, intent on becoming straight, goes to a martial arts instructor to learn how to protect himself from gay people. "If they get close to you, hit them," the teacher says. How can you spot a gay man? "Obvious is a person being extremely nice," is the answer. Gays can be tricky, the instructor warns: "Some of them don't even dress no different than myself or you."

The movie also touches on the reckless pursuit of fame. For instance, under the pretext of conducting a "glamorous baby" photo shoot, Bruno interviews real moms and dads, many holding their babies on their laps. He asks one mother "is your baby comfortable with bees, wasps and hornets?" She answers, "George is comfortable with everything." Dead or dying animals? "Yes."

"Can Olivia lose 10 pounds [4.5kg] in the next week?" Bruno asks another mother, who doesn't bat an eyelash: "Yeah, I'd have to do whatever I could," she says.

Baron Cohen declined to be interviewed for this article, as did Larry Charles, who directed the film (as well as *Borat*). Universal

also declined to make a production executive available for an interview, providing the following statement instead:

"*Bruno* uses provocative comedy to powerfully shed light on the absurdity of many kinds of intolerance and ignorance, including homophobia. By placing himself in radical and risky situations, Sacha Baron Cohen forces both the people Bruno meets and the audience itself to challenge their own stereotypes, preconceptions and discomforts.

"While any work that dares to address relevant cultural sensitivities might be misinterpreted by some or offend others, we believe the overwhelming majority of the audience will understand and appreciate the film's inarguably positive intentions."

The studio has twice shown unfinished versions of *Bruno* to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and said that test audiences have come away with a clear understanding of the film's positive social message. Universal also said that it screened 20 minutes of unedited footage at a Texas film festival this year, and that blog coverage was overwhelmingly upbeat.

## MARKETING CHALLENGES

Marketing *Bruno* poses unusual challenges for Universal, as some US multiplex chains will only run trailers to R-rated films before other R-rated movies. And a stunt at the MTV Movie Awards on June 1 may have damaged the movie's credibility, film marketers say.

During the show Baron Cohen, dressed as Bruno, dangled above the audience from wires wearing a jock strap and giant white wings. He landed face down in the lap of the rapper Eminem, who stormed out of the theater. The problem: Eminem admitted to being in on the stunt — and thus faking his reaction — which may lead audiences to doubt the studio's assertion that actors were not used in the film.

Meanwhile the debate among gay rights advocates goes on.

"We strongly feel that Sacha Baron Cohen and Universal Pictures have a responsibility to remind the viewing public right there in the theater that this is intended to expose homophobia," said Brad Luna, a spokesman for Human Rights Campaign.

Cathy Renna, who left the Gay and Lesbian Alliance after 14 years to start her own similarly focused consulting firm, said she thinks gay audiences will greet the film warmly. "Of all minority groups I think gay people are the most likely to be able to laugh at themselves," she said. "If nothing else, let's hope this prompts a lot of conversation."

Will the stereotypes Baron Cohen explores offer support to opponents of gay marriage?

"I don't think that any conservative group is going to use *Bruno* to make a point about how awful gay people are," said Frank Vocci, the founder of White Knot, a nonprofit group focused on gay rights. "If they try to go there, we can easily turn around and point out how horribly these people reacted to him being gay."

Universal would be happy if more people just took the position of Dustin Lance Black, who won an Oscar for his screenplay of *Milk* and has been an outspoken opponent of California's recent ban on gay marriage.

Asked for his thoughts on "*Bruno*," Black responded by e-mail, "Sadly, I haven't seen the film yet!"



Above: Sacha Baron Cohen, in character as Bruno, holds up a sign during a "Yes on Prop. 8" rally on Nov. 2, 2008 in Los Angeles. Proposition 8 passed and overturned the California Supreme Court's decision earlier last year to legalize same-sex marriage.

Left: Sacha Baron Cohen arrives dressed as Bruno at the 2009 MTV Movie Awards last month.

PHOTO: AP

PHOTO: REUTERS