

Bruno and other Boys' Shorts

New Film and DVD
Releases Get Serious
— and Seriously Funny

By GARY MORRIS

Early in *Bruno*, there's a scene where the titular star describes his tiny Asian boyfriend, who Bruno thinks "may be a midget." What follows is a montage of the two going at it using a traveling dildo machine, a champagne bottle exploding out of the boyfriend's ass, an alarming pinwheel effect, and other sexual activities that would shock a swinger. This sequence sets the tone for what's to come in Sacha Baron Cohen's jaw-dropping follow-up to *Borat*.

Bruno's marketing campaign invokes the earlier film in a sardonic tagline — "*Borat* was so 2006." And if anything, *Bruno* (Universal) goes even further in skewering star culture, the fashion world, homophobia, and racism — though some viewers may be too busy flinching and covering their eyes to notice. The film is not for the faint of heart.

Directed by Larry Charles (*Borat*, TV's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), *Bruno* is a series of vignettes loosely based on Cohen's latest character, a ridiculously narcissistic Austrian queen in butt-hugging Alpine shorts, and his endless attempts to become an international superstar. This of course involves fashion, one of Bruno's obsessions. In a typical sequence, he crashes a prominent (real) fashion designer's show dressed in a total Velcro outfit.

Staggering and stumbling down the runway — his outfit sticking to him and everything else — he more or less dismantles the set. Cohen ratchets up the attack on the absurdity of haute couture with a scene of Bruno interviewing an airhead model and shots of real models wearing preposterous, clown-like dresses on the runway.

It's uphill, downhill or perhaps sideways from there. Cohen/Bruno's victims pile up fast: a group of *Deliverance*-style hillbilly hunters that he tries to seduce; a bunch of swingers; a queeny ex-gay minister (who he says has "blow job lips"); and in a sequence that will surely

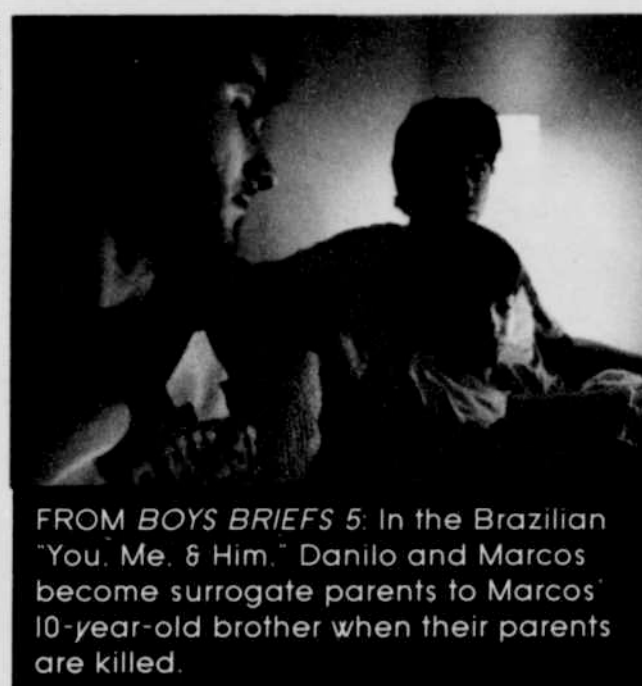


The film *Bruno* is many things, but it is not remotely homophobic, as some have charged. Bruno's seemingly senseless pursuit of fame exposes small-minded attitudes, including homophobia, in just about every scene.

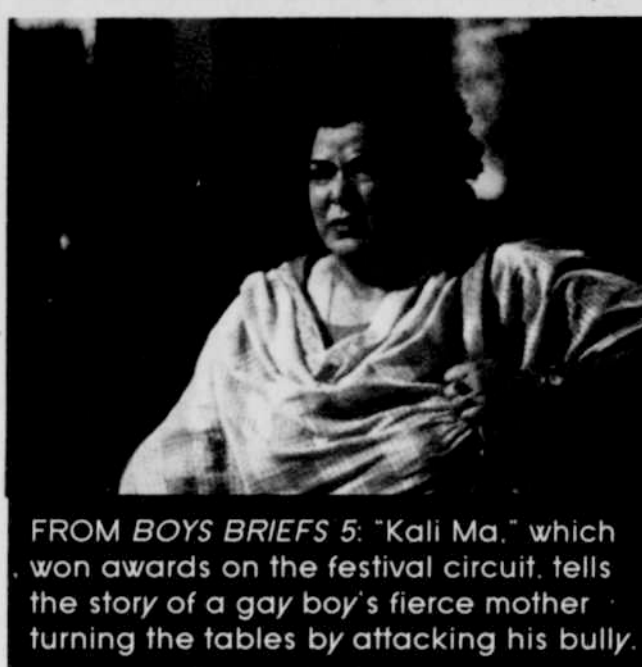
send some viewers stampeding to the exit, an elaborate episode in which "single parent" Bruno trades an iPod for a black African baby, who's then taken away from him by a child welfare officer on a trash talk TV show.

The latter instance is a brutal satire of the celebrity adoptions of third-world children for, the film implies, photo ops and conscience salving. Other encounters find our hero, who calls almost everybody "girlfriend," wagging his ass at Ron Paul and turning basic training into an exercise in style. Normally, describing such scenes would constitute a spoiler, but doing so with *Bruno* doesn't remotely capture their effect.

Bruno may not be as ragingly successful as *Borat*, which took in \$260 million. The original ending, involving what was reported as a "cruel joke" on LaToya Jackson, was cut after



FROM BOYS BRIEFS 5: In the Brazilian "You, Me, & Him," Danilo and Marcos become surrogate parents to Marcos' 10-year-old brother when their parents are killed.



FROM BOYS BRIEFS 5: "Kali Ma," which won awards on the festival circuit, tells the story of a gay boy's fierce mother turning the tables by attacking his bully.

the death of her famous brother. And Cohen's shtick is so intense — the scenes sometimes so unsettling as he puts himself in one threatening situation after another — that it's hard not to feel a bit bludgeoned by the conclusion. One thing should be clarified: the film is not remotely homophobic, as some have charged. Bruno's seemingly senseless pursuit of fame brilliantly, if uncomfortably, exposes small-minded attitudes, including homophobia, in just about every scene.

On a quieter note, one of the happy by-products of the queer film festival circuit has been the thematic gay, lesbian, bi and trans shorts collections on DVD, assembled by companies like Wolfe Video and Picture This Video. These collections, while often all over the map in terms of quality, at least give

us a chance to revisit the worthy ones. Two recent discs devoted to gay male themes have enough gold among the dross to make them worth considering for rental or purchase.

A perennial favorite in this group are the *Boys Briefs* and *Boys Shorts* (Wolfe) collections (get it?). The former series is up to number 5, and showcases several international entries vaguely on the subtitle's theme, "Schoolboys." The "boys" here range from pre-teens navigating an innocent crush in "Benny's Gym" to decidedly post-"boy" exercises such as "Flatmates," in which two twentysomethings — one gay, one straight — indulge in some homoerotic horseplay to mask deeper emotions.

While some of the shorts tackle classic issues of coming out and fitting in, others address more timely concerns. In "You, Me, & Him," Danilo and Marcos become surrogate parents to Marcos' 10-year-old brother when their parents are killed. The film doesn't sugar-coat the problems of a sometimes disruptive child unexpectedly entering a couple's life. "Kali Ma" won awards on the festival circuit, and it's easy to see why: who doesn't love the idea of a gay boy's fierce mother turning the tables by attacking his bully?

Speaking of accolades, more than half of the seven shorts in the *S Is for Sexy* (Picture This) collection are award winners. "Signage" offers a sensitive take on the common theme of the pleasures and pitfalls of picking up, but the context is fresh: the main characters are either deaf or understand sign language. "Mr. Right22" is a witty look at the terrors of Internet hookups.

By far the most ambitious of these shorts is "Shahram and Abbas," a veritable extravaganza in the genre at 35 minutes. The title characters are both straight Iranians, both applying for refugee status in the Netherlands by pretending to be gay. Is it a sign of our community coming-of-age that an only marginally gay film like this can make it into a gay shorts collection by simply being well-written, well-acted, and compelling? Let's hope so. **JO**

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