

Candid Camera

New stunts from the creator of *Borat*

BRÜNO: Directed by Larry Charles. Written by Sacha Baron Cohen, Anthony Hines, Dan Mazur and Jeff Schaffer. Cinematography, Anthony Hardwick and Wolfgang Held. Music, Erran Baron Cohen. Starring Sacha Baron Cohen, Paula Abdul, Ron Paul and Harrison Ford. Universal Pictures, 2009. R. 83 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

If you've been wondering, as I have, where comedian Michael Myers went, look no further than *Brüno*, the new film by guerilla comic Sacha Baron Cohen. In *Brüno*, vestiges of *Austin Powers* loom large. Myers' best work exudes a sweet Canadian insanity — think of the gags involving male genitalia — the likes of which you'd hardly expect in a film by Cohen. One of the surprising disappointments of *Brüno*, in which a gay Austrian model tries for fame in America, is how easily one spots its antecedents, from *Zoolander* to *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Given the fearless originality of *Borat*, I expected something less derivative. Instead, Cohen's penis, which actually has a speaking part — it introduces Bruno's show like a tiny, helmeted Ed McMahon — appears so often it should be listed in the credits. The problems with *Brüno* are many, but none run deeper than the man behind the gland: Borat offended us by an ignorance so profound the ignorant found it sympathetic, inspiring them to reveal their prejudice. Bruno, on the other hand, is an

archly superior fashionista nearly equal in stupidity to Borat but nowhere near as sweet.

Then there are problems with the format. Whereas *Borat* is presented as a documentary, it is in fact a *Spinal Type*-like mockumentary with a careful mixture of scripted and impromptu humor. *Brüno* is more scripted than impromptu — much more, one suspects, since some "impromptu" scenes apparently were scripted. This raises the question of whether Cohen's recognizability has reduced his ability to infiltrate the public arena. It also raises questions of judgment and taste. The bits written in advance are often dull and offensive, like Cohen's attempt to create a sex tape with Congressman Ron Paul. Structurally, *Brüno* resembles a staircase in which every step down leads to yet another doomed plan by Bruno to achieve celebrity recognition. He tests a TV concept called "Keep It or Abort It," in which guests rate the attractiveness of a celebrity fetus. From a baggage claim carousel, he lifts a baby from a box — a black baby, which he later claims to have traded for an iPod. (The concept was to mimic Angelina Jolie.) There is brilliance in *Brüno*, but the jokes feel arbitrary and scattershot, leaving us with little to think about.

There's too much energy required just figuring out what *Brüno* is, comedy or



documentary, and not nearly enough time in which Bruno interacts with unsuspecting twits. When he catches the right people at the right time, it's hilarious, such as his interview with the gay "converter" in Alabama, who advises him to take up lifting weights with other men, or the cage fighting event he hosts as a new character, "Straight Dave," who ends up making out with a member from the audience. In

Arkansas, no less. Still, much of *Brüno* is an indiscriminate, bottom-trawling affair. By comparison, *Borat* is a child's fable. It is also a much more focused look at ignorance in our midst. Only occasionally funny and without much cultural relevance, *Brüno* will be enjoyed by committed fans of Cohen and those who enjoy vicious humiliation comedy. Fans of straight comedy should take a pass on *Brüno*. **EW**

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