Borat

Talent: Sacha Baron Cohen, Ken Davitian, Pamela Anderson, members of the greater American public.

Director: Larry Charles
Classification: MA (15+)
Duration: 83 minutes
We rate it: Four stars.

Sacha Baron Cohen is a man who’s used to offending people. For years now the gifted British comic has, in his hugely successful TV shows, created and masqueraded as a series of idiotic and hilarious caricature figures, most famously the sexist homeboy Ali G and the buffoonish TV host Borat Sagdiyev. Through these creations, Cohen has satirised not just the broad cultural types he’s playing with, but the gamut of reactions that they generate in others, as well. It’s a fascinating kind of comedy, predicated upon the comic’s cunning ability to catch his audience(s) entirely off-guard. Cohen seems to be a master at it, and with this new film version of Borat he has brought his extraordinarily confronting comic gift to the big screen.

The film’s full title is Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation Kazakhstan. The title, hilariously inept and long-winded as it is, explains the premise of the film: Borat, a Kazakh television host whose grasp of English is as shaky as his understanding of etiquette and public decency, is sent by his bosses in Kazakhstan to travel to America and learn what it is that makes the most powerful country in the world “great”. Borat’s gruff producer Azamat is sent with him, in the hope of keeping the irrepressible and irresponsible anchorman under control. Things of course go horribly wrong, and before the audience knows it, Borat becomes embroiled in any number of wincingly embarrassing episodes with actual members of the American public (many of whom have attempted to sue the film’s producers now that the movie has been released). Cohen’s masterstroke has been this, his insistence upon setting Borat loose among unsuspecting bystanders and filming the results. The narrative of Borat is thin at best, but it’s deliberately thin. The point is not following Borat on his hopeless journey to understand America and woo Pamela Anderson; the point is watching the incredibly revealing chaos that Cohen is able to unleash when setting his staggeringly offensive alter-ego loose amid gatherings of all kinds.

As Borat traverses the American continent, he incites or witnesses numerous astonishing sequences, many of which illuminate fascinating or frightening things about the American population. Highlights include Borat interviewing (and deeply
offending) an entire panel of middle-aged feminists; the frighteningly racist and homophobic ramblings of an ageing rodeo cowboy; and Borat’s encounter with a detestable group of drunken fraternity boys whose language, beliefs and behaviour have to be seen to be believed. The gross out zenith of the film is reached in the stomach-churning sequence wherein Borat wrestles naked with his producer in an hotel suite while screaming abuse and brandishing a rubber sex aid. This is farce of the most confronting kind, and it’s both harrowing and hilarious.

Many of us (myself included) don’t usually enjoy films like this. I’m no fan of grossout comedies, but Borat is indeed far more than that, and the ways in which Cohen reveals telling details about America set his film apart from any number of less confronting and less effective satires. This is discomfiting stuff indeed, but one cannot help but be impressed by both the bravery of the piece, and the sheer comic skill Cohen demonstrates in taking on the whole of America through the guise of an inept, sex-obsessed Kazakh talk-show host. Brilliant and genuinely revealing, Borat is the sharpest satire disguised as the bumblings of an idiot. Remember Norman Gunston? Borat is his Kazakh cousin, and he’s just as gifted as the Little Aussie Bleeder.

Nick Prescott