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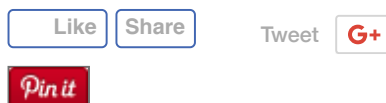


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SEND IN THE CLOWNS

Cohen, Guest Win Big Laughs at Toronto Film Festival

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Sep 22, 2006



Features

At the 31st edition of the Toronto International Film Festival this September, comedy was king. In fact, I can't remember when I've seen an audience so convulsed with laughter—of the screaming, eye-tearing, gut-shaking variety—as at the screening of the preposterously titled *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* from Sacha Baron Cohen. The Brit thesp—in this outing at least—is a kind of genius, the comedic equivalent of Roger Lederer or piano virtuoso Lang Lang.

Unlike the many viewers who were already Borat converts from "Da Ali G Show" on HBO, I had little sense of the hilarity in store. But you couldn't miss the buzz surrounding *Borat*, starting with a *New York Times* story dubbing it an equal-opportunity offender, followed by its first packed screening (jinxed by technical snafus) in the section called "Midnight Madness."

Directed by Larry Charles, the mockumentary follows the mustachioed Borat Sagdiyev of Kazakhstan, a journo from the state-run TV network, on a tour to study American life. It's a classic road movie, offering a foreigner's perspective on America—but with a difference. Affecting an innocence and cheer bordering on the sublime, Borat violates every p.c. precept and then some, reveling in his sister's ranking as "the number-four prostitute in all of country," and his country's anti-Semitism and backwardness. Arrived in the U.S., he slyly exposes the ingrained prejudices and oafishness of the Americans he encounters.

Accompanied by his slovenly producer, Borat mistakes the elevator for his hotel room, washes up from the toilet, and chases unsuspecting New Yorkers for kisses—the traditional greeting in his

homeland. In one hilarious bit, his suitcase bursts open on the subway, loosing a flapping chicken among the riders. Cohen never steps out of character, learning with delicious disbelief of women's rights in America. Tooling cross-country in an ice-cream truck, Borat becomes diverted by his fixation on "sexy time" with Pamela Anderson and her "vageen." The journey culminates in an uproarious naked wrestling match between Borat and his producer that's becoming the stuff of legend—a bit that puts the scream back into the phrase "It's a scream." This lewd, crude and brilliant social satire has reportedly inspired the president of Kazakhstan to protest to George Bush in his upcoming visit—a real-life vignette one can easily imagine in the film. Distributor Fox should laugh all the way to the bank—though there's a whole other film to make on how *Borat* will be received in the red states.

More restrained in manner, but funny as hell on its own terms, is Christopher Guest's *For Your Consideration*, a send-up of Hollywood and the entertainment biz, as it hysterically gears up for awards season. Marilyn Hack (Catherine O'Hara) is an aging-ungracefully screen siren, who hears an Internet rumor that her performance in a Southern melodrama called *Home for Purim* has been tapped for an Oscar nom. The film-within-a-film's cast is surrounded by droll eccentrics, including co-writer Eugene Levy as a smarmy agent; Jane Lynch and Fred Willard—in a Brontosaurus 'do—as brassy Hollywood gossip-show hosts; Jennifer Coolidge as a clueless heiress-producer; and Guest himself, in a square-topped Art Garfunkel frizz, as the volatile director. (Seldom has a filmmaker gotten such comic mileage out of hair.)

Some of the funniest bits involve throwaway shots of B-list costumers on the back lot (a homage to Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust?*), and the Brit producer (Ricky Gervais) who dislikes foreign films—with all that "writing on the screen"—and who attempts to tone down *Home for Purim*'s "Jewish Yiddish" flavor." Catherine O'Hara deserves an award—let the rumor start here—for gamely allowing herself to personify Tinseltown's grotesque quest for eternal youth. Witty, smart and sublimely comic, *For Your Consideration* never puts a foot wrong.

If only I could say the same for the rest of the festival. A disclaimer: It's damnably hard to judge this celluloid behemoth. There's no gauge offered by an awards component, as in Cannes or Berlin. And imagine a roster of 352 movies to choose from (up from last year's 335). Did the programmers cull every film that wasn't nailed down? Taking in five to six films over six days, 20 different viewers might experience, in effect, 20 different festivals.

Also, since several must-sees screened at the same hour, I missed some reportedly terrific stuff: *The Last King of Scotland* by Kevin Macdonald, with an Oscar-bait turn by Forest Whitaker, and Patrice Leconte's *Mon Meilleur Ami* with Daniel Auteuil, a delightful buddy film, I hear, tipped to be the next *Amélie*. Consider, too, the Cannes factor. Many of us had already seen on the Croisette the masterful prize-winners that traveled to Toronto: Pedro Almodóvar's Oscar contender *Volver*, *Babel* from Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Ken Loach's Palme d'Or winner *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*.

Still, from this vast emporium certain trends emerged. Fest programmers and critics solemnly intoned about the "fallout from 9/11": politically charged visions that dealt with social rebellion or grassroots heroes (*Catch a Fire* by Philip Noyce, about a South African battling apartheid); racial injustice (*Indigenes* by Rashid Bouchareb, about North African soldiers in World War II); artists warring with the establishment (*The U.S. vs. John Lennon* by David Leaf and John Scheinfeld); revolt against foreign invasion (*The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, about the British occupation of Ireland). Animosity toward the Bush crowd ran high in most screening venues; the British oppressors in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* were read as a parallel to America in Iraq.

But here's the question: Are these well-intentioned films also good films? Of course, most viewers applauded the gutsy, hard-working gals of *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing* from Barbara Kopple—especially lead singer Natalie Maines, who started all the fuss with a comment about a certain president's Texas provenance. I mean, were we supposed to side with the right-wing country radio stations? And in *The U.S. vs. John Lennon*, who was rooting for Strom Thurmond or Nixon? Like too many documentaries, these films are numbingly earnest. As for the bad guys, well, it's like shooting fish in a barrel. I greatly admired Philip Noyce's *The Quiet American* at Toronto a few years ago. His *Catch a Fire* addresses a stunning injustice, combining epic scope with an intimate story—but it risks getting shunned by potential audiences as a worthy effort rather than must-see entertainment.

As for entertainment, the Europeans may have incorporated the best of an older Hollywood that once upon a time offered exemplary scripts, setting strong characters against a historical milieu. This is especially true of the German first feature *The Lives of Others* by Oxford grad Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. No wistful look backwards like *Good Bye Lenin*, it slams the surveillance abuses of the Stasi in the German Democratic Republic, c. 1984. Glasnost is nowhere in sight, and a government fat cat hits on a gorgeous actress played by Martina Gedeck, who lives with one of the country's most popular and loyal playwrights. However, the couple's cozy haven is shattered when a mousy Stasi agent bugs the playwright's apartment. Combining history with nuanced portraits, the film makes even the villain with the headphones likeable.

Several star-studded premieres and studio films were awful enough to group under the rubric, "What Were They Thinking?" Leading the pack: the recently opened *All the King's Men* from Steven Zaillian. Another blank was fired by Darren Aronofsky with his much-anticipated *The Fountain*, which had lines of weary journos snaking around Toronto's main screening venue, the Manulife Center. A mushroom dream about reincarnation, the film lays out two parallel stories: A conquistador (Hugh Jackman) searches for the Tree of Life in what looks like Inquisition Spain; and Jackman in modern times, now a scientist, frantically searches for a cure for his dying wife (Rachel Weisz).

Marc Foster's *Stranger than Fiction* with Will Ferrell, about a man with a parallel life as a fictional character, is a neat conceit that strains futilely to become a compelling film. And *The Last Kiss* from Tony Goldwyn is a noisy Hollywood rehash of Gabriele Muccino's mischievous original from

2001.

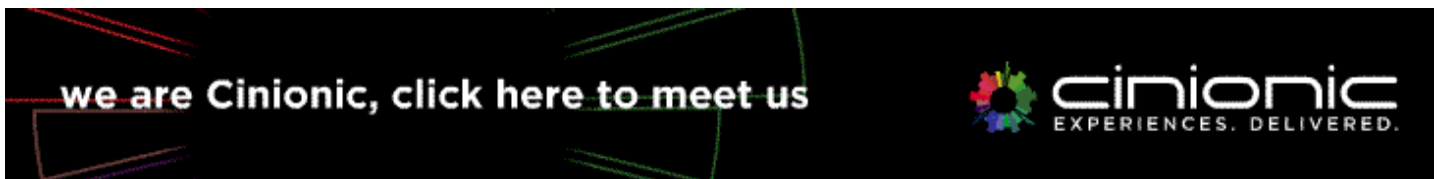
Sitting through some of these films was so arduous, at times, that I relaxed by compiling a list of their more eloquent lines: "Ow, that's my nut." (*The Last Kiss*) "I could be your last chance at happiness." (*Kiss* again) "Have Henry reskin the animals." (*The Fountain*) "You're never too old for space camp." (*Stranger than Fiction*)

Predictably, several films fit the category of flawed but notable. Though *A Good Year* from Ridley Scott was reviled by most critics, I kind of enjoyed this adaptation of Peter Mayle's valentine to Provence for its zingy one-liners, scenery (though they got the light of Provence wrong, along with the "happy villager" scenes in Mayle's beloved town of Gordes), and a cast-against-type Russell Crowe, who combines gruff and tender to winning effect. *The Half Life of Timofey Berezin* by Scott Z. Burns features the soulful Paddy Considine as another "Dead Man Walking," this time a Russian nuclear scientist dying of radium poisoning. In one sequence, he attempts to peddle a vial of weapons-grade plutonium in a Moscow bazaar—a possibly prescient scene to send shivers down the spine.

Finally, on a happier note, in *The Namesake* Mira Nair has fashioned a moving adaptation of the popular novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. At heart a meditation "about grief," as Nair told me at a Fox Searchlight dinner, the film captures both the conflict and comfort engendered by family bonds among Indians in America. Though some may find *The Namesake* overly sentimental, overall its lushness of color and emotional richness should cross over to a larger audience.

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