

## King of all shenanigans

Sacha Baron Cohen is leading a revival in prankster comedy. Why now? Perhaps because reality has become too ridiculous to parody

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

North America is in love with a racist, dog-hunting idiot.

Borat Sagdiyev, the adorable bigot from Kazakhstan, has become a multinational sweetheart, rapturously embraced by moviegoers across Canada and the United States. If their enthusiasm continues at its current rate, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* may soon become one of the highest-grossing comedies of all time.

For the uninitiated (and therefore vulnerable), Borat is an alter ego of British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, who has resuscitated that classic comedy cliché: the backwards foreigner. Borat is remarkably similar to Andy Kaufman's Latka Gravas, *Saturday Night Live's* "Wild and Crazy Guys," and every Pole in every Polak joke ever told.

The crucial difference, however, is that this is hoax comedy, where the butt of the gag isn't a fictionalized Kazakhstan but a very real America. Baron Cohen is pioneering a viciously funny new movement in comedy. Forget the sitcom, the skit and the standup: These days, the shenanigan is king.

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"The prank's stock is high," Yuk Yuk's founder Mark Breslin says. "You wouldn't believe how many tapes I get from comics doing this stuff."

A casual list of successful prank-related offerings in recent years would include *Punk'd*, *Jackass*, *Crank Yankers*, *The Daily Show's* field reports, the films of Michael Moore, the activist comedy of *The Yes Men* and, of course, *Da Ali G Show* -- home of Borat. These shows range from the clever to the crass, presenting both elaborate political satire and variations of a pie to the face.

The folks at Just for Laughs scored an unexpected international hit with their slapstick Gags series. It's popular in Burkina Faso, China, Iran and, of all places, Kazakhstan. "We never thought it would work that well," says Bruce Hills, chief operating officer. "But it just seems to connect with so many people. You can even see shades of Borat in it."

Consider Baron Cohen the standard-bearer of prank comedy. No individual is more responsible for bringing esteem to a form of humour previously synonymous with the whoopee cushion. "Sacha's unbelievably brilliant," says Breslin. "He succeeds on a *Jackass* level and a Michael Moore level."

Perhaps this is his genius, sneaking complicated and cutting ideas in a juvenile wrapping. In the prank, he has found a form in which shock, schlock and satire co-exist. He goes where *Candid Camera* feared to tread, to a place where the ugly truths exposed can't be smoothed over with a point to a hidden camera and a good-natured slap on the back. This comedy has teeth, and after Borat's success, we can expect to see a lot more of it.

But why has the prank chosen this precise moment to come into vogue? Perhaps it's because reality itself has become too ridiculous to parody. We don't need Dana Carvey's talent for mimicry to see the president as a hapless boob with a silly speaking style. Nobody does a better Dubya than Dubya and his shtick is too frightening to be funny. Equally impotent is the smug, cynical standup of political comics like Bill Maher and Dennis Miller. In times as confusing as ours, who can genuinely claim to be so knowing?

A far more appropriate response is Jon Stewart's baffled double-take. "*The Daily Show*," Breslin says, "is probably more honest than what you

see on CNN."

More and more, comedians are looked to for truths as well as laughs, and pranks are essentially lies designed to expose truths. If you dare to witness just how absurd the world really is -- how little the emperors are truly wearing and how much people will actually put up with -- you can sic a prankster on them and find out for sure.

Pranks have always had an uncanny ability to reveal society's vulnerabilities, even when all their creators had in mind was a little playful mischief. By signing a urinal in 1917 and calling it sculpture, Marcel Duchamp intended nothing more than to flip the bird at the New York art establishment. But *Fountain* was embraced as avant-garde work, and it changed the course of modern art (for the worse, according to many, including Duchamp).

But even when hoaxes have such massive implications, their significance is often lost. The havoc caused by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938 spoke volumes about the rising power of mass media. But Orson Welles faced so much public hostility afterward that he was forced to apologize for the "accident," denying that he had set out to intentionally deceive his listeners (he came clean almost 40 years later in his prankish documentary, *F for Fake*).

That's the catch -- a prank is just an inside joke until the fact that it's a prank has been exposed. But even career tricksters have had a tough time revealing their own deceptions. Hoax artist Joey Skaggs spent decades duping the news media with such put-ons as the "Cathouse for Dogs" canine bordello and the "Fat Squad" weight-loss militia. These projects poked holes in the media's credibility in a playful way, sounding an alarm we could have heeded years before more dire examples like Jayson Blair and RATHERGATE.

But the eagerness with which the press reported Skaggs's nonsense as news was always equal to their reluctance to admit to their gaffes after the fact. The best Skaggs could usually hope for was a buried correction blurb. Pranksters have thus been kept in the cultural basement, their craft associated with childishness and malice, even as their work exploded anonymously on front pages around the world. That is, until now.

"It's a camcorder world," Breslin says, "there's a cultural movement towards amateurism in all arts . . . and if no one picks it up you can always put it on YouTube." Cheap production gear and the Internet have equipped hoax artists with new tools to pull pranks and new venues to reveal them. All they've lacked is respect -- which brings us back to Borat and to his creator.

Sacha Baron Cohen is doing for the prank what Lenny Bruce did for stand-up. Both comedians are similarly misunderstood as shocking rule-breakers. But Bruce's greatest gift to standup wasn't the licence to swear, it was the responsibility to speak honestly. Baron Cohen has likewise established one essential rule for pranksters, even as he has broken 100 little ones. Namely, he never winks. Whether he's in the guise of Borat or his other two characters -- the clueless wangsta Ali G or the viciously shallow Bruno -- he never flinches, never breaks character. He is as likely to offend a cowboy as a homeboy, a feminist or a pharmacist.

Compare this to our own Rick Mercer, who made his reputation by stacking the deck in his popular *Talking to Americans* special in which unsuspecting Yanks were set up to make asses of themselves by parroting back lines Mercer fed them. These entrapments contrast sharply with Mercer's current routine, where we find him getting chummy with our elected officials who have been let in on the joke and are eager to seem the good sport. Mercer's newfound honesty is, well, unfair. Ditto Michael Moore, once an inventive prank comic who has morphed into a seedy propagandist, cooking the books against his political opponents.

Ali G, meanwhile, has offended Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan with equal gusto. Bruno is too concerned with his own fabulousness to make distinctions between Nazi skinheads and New York fashionistas, and Borat, well, Borat loves everyone, except Jews, Gypsies, unfaithful wives and, oh yeah, Uzbeks.

Therein lies the essential decency of Baron Cohen's comedy. His characters are so shamelessly wrong, they're constantly drawing a picture of what's right in the negative space around them. Watching Borat in action, you keep waiting for someone to just say, "Stop. What you're saying is horrible. Not just in America, but anywhere." And you keep waiting.

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