

Sacha Baron Cohen: This Time He's Serious

Reviving his Borat character and playing the political activist Abbie Hoffman, the actor feels he "had to ring the alarm bell and say that democracy is in peril this year."

By

Leading man: Sacha Baron Cohen's riotous characters have perhaps masked his dramatic abilities. Buck Ellison for The New York Times

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Borat uses the flower bed in front of the Trump hotel at Columbus Circle as a men's room.

Sacha Baron Cohen plays the cello and is planning to take some Zoom classes from the masters.

Borat keeps his teenage daughter in a cage. ("Is it nicer than Melania's cage?" she wonders.) And when he takes her clothes shopping, he asks the saleswoman to direct them to the "No means Yes section."

Sacha Baron Cohen, who once dreamed of being a chef, loves to cook for his family.

Borat buys a chocolate cake and asks the woman behind the counter to write on top, "Jews will not replace us" in icing — with a smiley face.

Sacha Baron Cohen is an observant Jew who speaks Hebrew and works with the Anti-Defamation League on "Stop Hate for Profit," a campaign to stem the bile on social media.

Borat sings a ditty about the Wuhan flu and chopping up journalists "like the Saudis do."

Sacha Baron Cohen is Zooming in for an interview, sporting a black baseball cap, black T-shirt and a Covid-o'clock shadow.

We talk for two hours about everything from his riotous "Borat" sequel to how he fell in love with his wife, the flame-haired actress Isla Fisher, to how he prepared to play Abbie Hoffman in Aaron Sorkin's new Netflix movie, "The Trial of the Chicago 7," to how he decided to [call out Mark Zuckerberg and "the Silicon Six."](#)

If you thought the comedian could never do anything wilder than [getting Dick Cheney to sign a waterboarding kit for him](#) in his 2018 Showtime series, "Who Is America?" you would be wrong. There's a scene with a top Trump adviser in "Borat Subsequent Movie Film: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" (premiering on Oct. 23 on Amazon) that will leave you gobsmacked.

Arriving in character for the premiere of "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." Matt Sayles/SAYLES, via Associated Press

They say Donald Trump has destroyed satire. But Mr. Baron Cohen proves that's not so.

I've been following his work, and pestering him for an interview, ever since he first hit America, masquerading as Ali G, a wannabe British rapper, and scamming unsuspecting dignitaries into interviews.

He quizzed a puzzled James Baker about why he used a system of carrots and sticks in international diplomacy. What if a country didn't like carrots? What if its inhabitants preferred a different vegetable?

Ali G pitched Donald Trump about investing in an ice

cream glove that would prevent your hand from getting sticky.

Mr. Trump, who [walked out of the interview](#) in disgust, [told me afterward](#): "I thought he was seriously retarded. It was a total con job. But my daughter Ivanka saw it and thought it was very cool."

Mr. Baron Cohen, who turned 49 this past week, said, "Obviously, I've realized that I've had a longstanding distaste for the president. That was why I wanted to interview him as Ali G."

He added, "His brilliance was to commandeer the very term that was being used against him, 'fake news,' and use it against every journalist that had journalistic integrity."

The prankster has no problem sprinting out of a luxury hotel in New York and running down the street in lacy pink lingerie. But out of character, he's very private, even a bit shy.

He refused for many years to give interviews as himself. He would occasionally speak as his characters. He tended to let critiques pass without rebuttal, as when journalists wondered if Ali G was in the tradition of Al Jolson and when Abe Foxman, the former director of the Anti-Defamation League, criticized Borat, fearing the character could incite anti-Semitism because some people might miss the irony.

After the [white nationalist rally in Charlottesville](#), Va., an appalled Mr. Baron Cohen reached out to Jonathan Greenblatt, the director of the A.D.L., who persuaded the star to give the keynote at last year's A.D.L. summit, *Never Is Now*.

"I was just so impressed by his intelligence," Mr. Greenblatt said. "These issues are at the heart of his motive for his unique style of art. More than anyone in public life today, he exposes bias — whether it's anti-Semitism, homophobia or rank racism — for what it is, shameful and wrenching and ignorant." (In fact, Mr. Baron Cohen used Hebrew and some Polish as a stand-in for the Kazakh language in *Borat*.)

The actor started his speech by saying that, to be clear, "when I say 'racism, hate and bigotry,' I'm not referring to the names of Stephen Miller's Labradoodles." Later he noted that while his stunts could be "juvenile" and "puerile," at least some are aimed at getting people to reveal what they actually believe, as "when *Borat* was able to get an entire bar in Arizona to sing 'Throw the Jew down the well,' it did reveal people's indifference to anti-Semitism."

Scorching the lords of the cloud, he said that Facebook would run and micro-target any "political" ad anyone wants, even if it's a lie. "If Facebook were around in the 1930s," he said, "it would have allowed Hitler to post 30-second ads on his 'solution' to the 'Jewish problem.'"

The speech catalyzed the “Stop Hate for Profit” campaign, with a coalition of civil rights groups and Mr. Baron Cohen wrangling celebrities. Doing the speech was “completely out of my comfort zone,” he said, because “I’ve always been reluctant to be a celebrity and I’ve always been wary of using my fame to push any political views, really.”

He added that “it was the first time I’d ever given a major speech in my own voice but I felt like I had to ring the alarm bell and say that democracy is in peril this year. I felt, even if it was going to destroy my career and people are going to come at me and say, ‘Just shut up, the last thing we need is another celebrity telling us what to do’ — I fully understand people who do that — I felt I needed to do that to live with myself.”

"I've always been reluctant to be a celebrity," Mr. Baron Cohen said, "and I've always been wary of using my fame to push any political views." Buck Ellison for The New York Times

Crashing CPAC

Mr. Baron Cohen actually started studying anti-Semitism at Cambridge University, when he wrote his thesis on "the Black-Jewish alliance" and identity politics in the Civil Rights movement. So he was primed to play the puckish Abbie Hoffman.

"Essentially, he was trying to be a stand-up comedian," Mr. Baron Cohen said of the man who co-founded the Yippies and preached flower power. "He was very influenced by Lenny Bruce and he realized that if he could make people laugh, he could get them engaged in the cause."

While he calls himself "this comedian who's dabbled in a bit of acting over the years," Mr. Baron Cohen is actually, like all great clowns — yes, he went to clown school, L'Ecole Philippe Gaulier — able to switch easily from light to dark.

(And, he has a terrific singing voice, which he showed off in "Sweeney Todd," "Les Misérables" and at David Geffen's 75th birthday party, when he sang "If I Were a Rich Man" from "Fiddler on the Roof" and chaffed the billionaires and millionaires in the room that they made up "the world's third largest economy.")

Mr. Sorkin, who wrote and directed the Chicago 7 film, said that the day Mr. Baron Cohen shot his scene on the witness stand reminded him of the day Jack Nicholson shot his courtroom scene in "A Few Good Men," noting,

"Everyone wanted to watch; 120 extras didn't care that the camera wasn't on them, they stayed to watch."

Mr. Baron Cohen has been compared to a raunchy de Tocqueville and he said he did see a huge change in American society from the time he first went out to shoot "Borat" 15 years ago to the time he made the sequel.

"In 2005, you needed a character like Borat who was misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic to get people to reveal their inner prejudices," he said. "Now those inner prejudices are overt. Racists are proud of being racists." When the president is "an overt racist, an overt fascist," he said, "it allows the rest of society to change their dialogue, too.

"My aim here was not to expose racism and anti-Semitism," he said of the sequel. "The aim is to make people laugh, but we reveal the dangerous slide to authoritarianism."

He pondered if America, under a second Trump term, would "become a democracy in name only, similar to a Turkish democracy or a Russian democracy?"

As Ali G, Mr. Baron Cohen pitched Donald Trump an ice cream glove that would prevent your hand from getting sticky. "I thought he was seriously retarded," Mr. Trump said after walking out.Keith Bedford/Getty Images

He said he moved in with two conspiracy theorists for a few days for the new "Borat" to show "that they're ordinary folks who are good people, who have just been fed this diet of lies. They're completely different to the politicians who are motivated by their own power, who realized that they can create fear by spreading these lies through the most effective propaganda machine in history": social media platforms.

I had thought that the satirist's most challenging moment was when he fell asleep as Ali G, after drinking in Mississippi with two old Southern gents, and somehow, to the amazement of his terrified director, woke up in character.

But in the new "Borat," filmed in part during the pandemic, he said "the hardest thing I had to do was, I lived in character for five days in this lockdown house. I was waking up, having breakfast, lunch, dinner, going to sleep as Borat when I lived in a house with these two conspiracy theorists. You can't have a moment out of character."

Also a high degree of difficulty: a scene where he sneaked into a Mike Pence speech at a Conservative Political Action Conference this year. He was costumed as President Trump and carrying on his shoulder the actress playing his daughter as a gift from Kazakhstan for "Vice Premier" Mike Pence.

“Obviously, I’m wearing a fat suit,” the comedian said. “How do I get in and how do I get out?” Security was there to “check everyone’s bodies going through. Bear in mind, I spent five hours in makeup that morning with the prosthetic team changing my face into Trump’s face. This fat suit is huge. It’s a 56-inch fat suit to turn my waist into Trump’s because we had estimated that was the most realistic.” When a security guard’s wand began beeping, Mr. Baron Cohen improvised that it was because of his defibrillator.

“Then I ended up hiding in the bathroom, listening to conservative men go to the toilet for five hours until I broke into the room. We were surrounded by Secret Service and police and internal security.”

He said that when he was presenting “Borat” to streaming services, several were concerned by the political content and the idea of running it before the election.

But the comedian was determined to get it on before Election Day because “we wanted it to be a reminder to women of who they’re voting for — or who they’re not voting for. If you’re a woman and you don’t vote against this guy, then know what you’re doing for your gender.”

"In 2005, you needed a character like Borat who was misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic to get people to reveal their inner prejudices," Mr. Baron Cohen said. "Now those inner prejudices are overt." Buck Ellison for The New York Times

The B-Listers

I wonder if, with all the scenes of his near escapes from armed crazies, diving into trapdoors and vans, carrying a clipboard in case he needed to ward off bullets, his wife ever tells him that his job is too dangerous.

"If there's anything dangerous that I'm going to do, I just don't tell her until it's over," he said. "I made a mistake with her. She once came on set just for fun. On set means coming to the minivan, which carried me around when we were shooting 'Bruno.' And there ended up being a police chase. I was in a separate car and the police were trying to find me. She found the whole thing so upsetting, and she never came back on set again."

He had an early preview of Mr. Trump's penchant for vengeance. Playing a prank at the 2012 Oscars, dressed up as his character in the movie "The Dictator," he dumped the cremation "ashes" of Kim Jong-il — really just flour — on Ryan Seacrest's tuxedo. Mr. Trump, who used to spend an inordinate amount of time gossiping about celebrities, went nuts, tweeting and making a YouTube video about how rude the stunt was.

The real estate dealer said that Mr. Seacrest's security guard should have "pummeled" and "punched" Mr. Baron Cohen "in the face so many times, he wouldn't have known what happened." He said the comedian should have ended up in the hospital.

Recalling the bizarre incident, Mr. Baron Cohen said, "I

remember my late father watching Trump on the campaign trail in 2016. I said, 'What do you think of him?' He said, 'Two things. He's extremely entertaining. Far more entertaining than Hillary. Two, he's a fascist.' My dad was born in 1932. He'd seen fascists on the streets, Mosley's Blackshirts beating up Jews. And he knew what fascism was."

Sacha's Jewish grandmother Liesel, a ballerina, fled Germany in 1936. She lived in Israel and worked as a fitness instructor. Mr. Baron Cohen filmed her lessons for a video — "Exercise for the Over 60's" — and would send her a bouquet of flowers every week until she died. His mother also worked in fitness.

He said that his father, a native of Wales who was an editor on Fleet Street for a periodical called New Middle East, before he went into the clothing business, sat with him at the kitchen table, when he was still living at home, to edit his first Ali G script.

"He goes, 'This is really funny, Sach,'" the son recalled, lighting up as he talks about his father. "He was a great supporter and a brave, courageous, hysterically funny man. I'm sure he would have preferred to be doing what I'm doing rather than sitting in as an accountant for a very small gentleman's men's wear business."

The business, Mr. Baron Cohen said, laughing, "was so unfashionable that many of the brands actually pulled

their clothes out of my dad's shop when they wanted to become fashionable again."

Gerald Baron Cohen lived to see the son's success. I met the parents at a Vanity Fair Oscar party once and they were the most blissful people at that party, where stars often wander about looking bored or resigned. The father had on a jaunty hat and glowed with pride when I asked about his son.

"That's hilarious," Mr. Baron Cohen said, when I remind him about the encounter. "You can only do this stuff if you feel loved and secure and you don't feel judged. They loved me being naughty, being funny and potentially embarrassing them amongst their friends."

He said that his father grew up in poverty, but his parents worked hard to get Sacha and his two older brothers into a good high school and Sacha did well enough on his tests and in his Cambridge interview to get a coveted slot to study history.

Mr. Baron Cohen said he and his wife, Isla Fisher, go happily unnoticed by paparazzi. Mario Anzuoni/Reuters

When he was unemployed, the lissome 6-foot-3 Mr. Baron Cohen briefly worked as a model. "Believe it or not," he said, sounding a bit sheepish, "I did a tiny bit of work during a time where they didn't want models who looked like models."

He also tried to be a chef. "I finished high school and there was a chef called Raymond Blanc who got a Michelin star. I went over to his restaurant, called Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, and I asked to work there and he declined. He said I was too tall to work in the kitchen, and then I gave up my dream of becoming a chef.

"Recently, I was lucky enough to work in the kitchen at Le Bernardin in New York. I bumped into Eric Ripert and I

told him I want to be a chef and he goes, 'Come over.' It was amazing, because me and my brother spent three hours in the kitchen during their dinner service. It's incredibly tiring and then we're in the way. I felt very bad about it."

Ms. Fisher, a modern Carole Lombard who converted to Judaism for Mr. Baron Cohen, has said that it's difficult to embarrass her husband.

"Listen, I do get embarrassed," he said, but "when I go into character, I get fully immersed in it to the degree that I'm almost locked into the character."

Mr. Baron Cohen believes, as Abbie Hoffman said, that "Sacred cows make the tastiest hamburger."

In "Who Is America?," he satirized the left with a character who is a professor of gender and women's studies at Reed College. The professor believes that "the world's most dangerous chemical weapon is testosterone" and refers to "President Hillary Clinton." He cycles and wears an N.P.R. T-shirt and a pink pussy hat and says things like, "In our yurt, we try to challenge the gender stereotypes. My son, Harvey Milk, is not allowed to urinate standing up. And our daughter, Malala, is obliged to urinate standing up."

Mr. Baron Cohen explained that his aim was "to challenge and mock the absurdity of the extreme left, too," faulting "the ineffectiveness of extremists on the left who are

unable to ask a simple question because there's so many qualifications before every sentence so that they don't offend anyone."

Other comedians speak of his work with awe, particularly the sketches mocking the left that surely hurt his award prospects in Hollywood.

If you wrote down a list of what constitutes excellence, said Bill Maher, it would be epitomized by Mr. Baron Cohen.

"Originality, courage, degree of difficulty, laugh-out-loud funny," Mr. Maher said. "What he gets people to reveal about themselves, and in so doing, the country, is astonishing. He's a genius in a league of his own."

I ask Mr. Baron Cohen how two A-list stars, who have three children, make it work.

"Luckily, we're not A-list," he said. "I remember once in Hollywood, I was trying to avoid being photographed by paparazzi. I think I put something in front of my face when exiting a restaurant and this photographer shouted, 'You're only a B-lister!' And I said to Isla, 'Oh, my God, we're B-listers! We made it! We're B-listers.'"

He mused that "it seems bizarre that we're still married in Hollywood after so many years."

They met in Sydney, Australia, circa 2000. Was he

ensorcelled at first sight?

"She was hilarious," he said. "We were at a very pretentious party, and me and her bonded over taking the mick out of the other people in the party. I knew instantly. I don't know if she did." He chuckled. "It's taken her about 20 years to know."

So what is he doing now that he can take a breath as his two movies open?

"Well," said Mr. Baron Cohen, "I might try exercising again because I haven't done that for seven months."

Unless you count fleeing crazed Americans.

"A genius in a league of his own," according to Bill Maher. Buck Ellison for The New York Times

Confirm or Deny

Maureen Dowd: You made your dad pose as a famous chef at your wedding?

Sacha Baron Cohen: Correct. We had a secret wedding in Paris. And the ruse was that it was my father's 70th birthday and that he was a famous chef in England. That was how we avoided having photographers at the wedding. I trained him up to be in character. He said that his favorite dish that he created was L'oeuf Scrambled.

You gave a Zoom toast at Larry David's wedding to Ashley Underwood, who was a producer on "Who Is America?"

Me and my wife introduced him to her at my birthday party. Together, we have set up three weddings.

Your favorite Adam Sandler movie is "You Don't Mess With the Zohan."

Listen, I actually tried to get that movie, to rewrite it, to appear in it.

In character as Ali G in 2000, you played a limo driver in the video for [Madonna's "Music."](#)

Yes, that's right.

If Steve Mnuchin wasn't Treasury secretary, you think he would have produced the new "Borat."

No. I think he was one of the financiers of the first "Borat."

You got into day trading on Robinhood during the lockdown.

I wish. Actually, I've lost a lot of money. I'm very bad at financial stuff.

Most nights you spend doomscrolling on Twitter while watching "The Great British Baking Show" on Netflix.

While I do occasionally tweet, I do not have access to Twitter. I think I'd be too infuriated with stuff and I wouldn't be able to control myself. When I write a tweet, I don't have access to my account, so I need to send it to someone for them to actually put it up.

You stayed at the home of Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston while making Ali G.

Correct.

You are still friends with Pamela Anderson, who did a cameo in the first "Borat."

I was never friends with her. "Borat" was the reason she got divorced. She wrote that down on her divorce papers: "Reason to divorce: 'Borat.'" She showed the movie at Ron Meyer's house with Kid Rock. She hadn't told him that she was in it. She texted me after the movie and I

said, "How did it go down?" And she goes, "Great, though I'm getting divorced." I thought it was a joke, but it was actually true.

Your brother, Erran, a composer who wrote the music for Ali G and wrote a new national anthem for Kazakhstan for the first "Borat" and did the music for the new one, also made the single greatest Hanukkah record ever made: "Songs in the Key of Hanukkah," featuring everyone from Chrissie Hynde to rapper Y-Love.

Confirm.

You play the cello.

Correct. In fact, my first ever TV appearance was playing cello in a program called "Fanfare for Young Musicians."

You can't believe that Tom Hayden got Jane Fonda.

Yes, I can't.

Maureen Dowd, winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary and author of three New York Times best sellers, became an Op-Ed columnist in 1995.

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