

## Exposing what lies beneath

### Unsophisticated humour reveals the darker side of many social attitudes, says Anna Morgan

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In one of the funniest skits making the rounds on the Internet, comedian Sasha Baron Cohen, in character as fictitious Kazakhstani journalist Borat Sagdiyev, dons a cowboy hat and takes the stage of a redneck bar, guitar in hand, singing, "Throw the Jew down the well."

Who would have thought that the moronic but catchy song, titled "In My Country There Is Problem," would be sung for real on the stage of world politics?

What the Borat video exposes, of course, is the vein of racism and anti-Semitism that lies beneath the surface of so many people, just waiting to be tapped. For those who haven't seen the movie, let me explain.

Cohen, whose film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* opens next weekend, uses humour to reveal the underbelly of American society. By portraying himself as unsophisticated, Borat gains the trust of his interviewees and then through naive questions posed by a supposedly foreign journalist trying to understand American ways, he exposes the darker side of many social attitudes.

Previous Borat skits have had him poking fun at conspiracy theories by stating that when in America he travels by car "in case the Jews repeat their attack of 9/11."

He has satirized homophobia by asking an anthropologist, "Are you a homosapien? Because it doesn't matter if you are." He has lampooned political correctness and misogyny all at once by "innocently" extolling the virtues of *Baywatch* to a feminist gathering.

In the barroom scene, Borat leads the beer-drinking Texans in a round of "Throw the Jew down the well, So my country can be free, You must grab him by his horns, Then we have a big party." There is one guy who sits quietly throughout the sing-a-long looking a bit uncomfortable. But he seems to be all by himself at the back.

All of this is great satire, but it is also more real than we may care to think. In fact, Borat's song is reminiscent of the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser and his 1960s promise to "throw the Jews into the sea," which has been updated by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent statement that the Jewish state "cannot continue its existence."

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex and Israel should be criticized where its actions warrant.

A number of such critical sessions were held earlier this month at a conference organized by the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid held at the University of Toronto's OISE. Some of the commentary was fair and some was unfair, but

some of the sessions crossed well over the Borat line while the audience cheered.

One speaker cited a publication titled, *Israel, The World Bank and Sustainable Development of the Palestinian Ghettos*. The pamphlet, whose salient points were read aloud to a lecture hall of several hundred, notes that the primary culprit in today's international political and economic order is the World Bank, which is headed by Paul Wolfowitz, who is described as a "super pro-Zionist." It would seem that this international organization with Wolfowitz at its helm "embodies the common interests of global capitalism and Zionism ..."

What Wolfowitz's supposed "Zionism" has to do with the World Bank, and what the World Bank actually has to do with Israel, is anybody's guess, although the literature speaks generally of Israel being "supported by global capital" and its backers holding a "monopoly of global finance." It is difficult to see this as anything but a modernized version of an age-old myth about international bankers and usurers.

None of this is to say that Israeli policy can't be criticized or that the Palestinian story isn't sympathetic.

But those who advocate on the Palestinian people's behalf need to stop singing "Throw the Zionists down the well."

There is more than one lonely guy sitting uncomfortably at the back of the room and we can see through the euphemism. None of us is singing along.

*Jagshemash*, Borat fans.

Source: ANNA MORGAN, The Toronto Star, Oct. 29, 2006,