

Smile, You're on Candid Court

By Reg P. Wydeven
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In 2006, Sacha Baron Cohen released 'Borat', a mockumentary film about a fictional journalist from Kazakhstan who is trying to learn about American culture. In the movie, Cohen feigns ignorance and gets himself into embarrassing situations, often making his unwitting "co-stars" look bigoted, condescending or downright ridiculous.

To no one's amazement, 'Borat' resulted in several lawsuits. Not liking how they were portrayed in the film, many of those featured in it sued Cohen and 20th Century Fox for defamation, seeking huge damages. The lawsuits were only successful in generating more buzz for the movie – none of the plaintiffs prevailed, especially given the fact that all of the film's participants signed releases. In some cases, Fox even countersued and recovered attorneys' fees.

Well, last week Cohen released his latest film, 'Bruno', another mockumentary, and – surprise, surprise – Cohen has been sued again. The new movie follows the exploits of the title character, a gay fashionista and the self-proclaimed "voice of Austrian youth TV." Like Borat, Bruno was a recurring character on Cohen's television series 'Da Ali G Show.' Copying the successful formula from 'Borat,' Bruno interviews unsuspecting fashion icons to expose the pretentiousness of the fashion industry.

Cohen uses his trademark brand of sociopolitical satire to put Bruno in several compromising situations, such as attempting to seduce a onetime presidential hopeful, adopting a black African baby and provoking a riot at a caged boxing match in Texas. The lawsuit, however, involves a scene where Bruno disrupts a charity bingo game in Palmdale, California.

Unlike the suits stemming from 'Borat' where the plaintiffs alleged they were humiliated, the 'Bruno' lawsuit is for personal injury. In her lawsuit, Richelle Olson, the executive director of California's Desert Valley Charities, claims she suffered "life-altering" brain injuries after being allegedly physically assaulted by Cohen. Olson is seeking \$25,000 in damages from Cohen and Universal Pictures, the studio that released 'Bruno,' for the "two brain bleeds" she asserts she was diagnosed with, and has since been confined to a wheelchair and walker.

According to her suit filed last month, Olson was emceeding the bingo game in 2007 when she was accosted by Cohen in order to generate an emotional response for the camera. Cohen allegedly started causing a disturbance during the bingo game and used "vulgar and offensive language". When Olson tried to take the microphone back from Bruno is when she claims she was assaulted by Cohen and three of his cameramen.

Universal recently released a statement about the suit, claiming the allegations made by Richelle Olson are "completely baseless." The statement goes on to say that the entire encounter was caught on film, and "clearly shows that Ms. Olson was never touched or in any way assaulted by Sacha Baron Cohen or any member of the production and suffered no injury." Universal executives are confident that if Olson proceeds with the lawsuit, they expect "each of the defendants to be fully vindicated."

While the previous 'Borat' lawsuits just generated more publicity for the movie, it will be interesting to see if a personal injury suit will have a similar effect on Bruno or actually hurt the movie's box office results. I just hope Sacha Baron Cohen doesn't do a movie making fun of Star Wars or Star Trek fans.