

Funny, Political ‘The Dictator’ with Sacha Baron Cohen

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Ali G, Borat, Bruno and the Stationmaster Guy in “Hugo” is now “The Dictator.” Sacha Baron Cohen puts on another character mask and produces his usual style of cheap laughs with a surprising sense of political sharpness. Anna Faris and Ben Kingsley go along for the ride.

Bottom line, this is a funny film, with an economical story that punctuates the laughs with both whoopee cushion-type gags and a sordid excess that pushes the nose of USA hubris right into its own excrement. Cohen is a fine practitioner of “Trojan Horse” comedy – while hiding behind an obnoxious character, he is free to point out the hypocrisy of those who are just as obnoxious around him, but are presumably the “good” people. It’s a hit-and-miss strategy, but when it does hit the target, the points are sharp and sink deep.

Sacha Baron Cohen is General Aladeen, the supreme dictator of the oil-rich North African nation of Wadiya. He lives a clueless life of wretched excess and egotistic folly as the self-centered overlord of a fearful nation. When he’s not sleeping with a bevy of celebrities, including Megan Fox, he is developing nuclear weapons to collect even more power. This causes the United States to get involved, and they want him in New York City to speak at a session of the United Nations.



Sacha Baron Cohen (General Aladeen) Arrives in ‘The Dictator’
Photo credit: Melissa Sue Gordon for Paramount Pictures

Unbeknownst to the General, his closet advisor Tamir (Ben Kingsley) is plotting to overthrow the government. Right after they arrive in New York, Tamir sets up a double to replace the dictator and captures Aladeen with the intention of having him killed. The tyrant manages to escape, but he is left in the American city without money, power or his signature beard, which has been shaved off. When Aladeen tries to expose the overthrow, he is mistaken for a protester, and is adopted by a kindly hippie named Zoey (Anna Faris). Now the Dictator must team up with an ex-countryman named Nadal (Jason Mantzoukas) to get back what is rightfully his.

Cohen loves the cheap laugh, which is better than no laugh. There are potty references, stereotypes, slapstick and obvious visual puns – the man is obsessed with body hair jokes – that depending on the humor meter goes into the red zone or falls flat, but overall the film does deliver as a comedy. There are four screenwriters on the project, including Cohen, and that does translate to an obvious mix of styles within the gags.

The supporting cast helps to make everything work. Anna Faris gets to play a completely different comic character than her usual “House Bunny” type, and although she is a bit handcuffed in the hippie earth mother mode, manages to garner some laughs just by playing against the more flamboyant Dictator. Ben Kingsley is effective as Tamir, especially as he tries to handle the goat herder double. There are many cameos, including the nutty John C. Reilly as a torturer, which Aladeen is able to outwit just by making fun of his torturing tools.

As with the characters Borat and Bruno, Sacha Baron Cohen uses the Dictator's ignorance as a smoke screen for the ignorance of the social/political climate around him. There are some sharp indictments of America, its allied nations and their hypocrisy, such as the observation the country was “built by black men and owned by the Chinese.” Other leaders at the U.N. are shown as sellouts or buffoons, and in contrast to the corrupt Dictator are just as idiotic. Like Charlie Chaplin in “The Great Dictator,” Cohen uses the sharp stick of humor to reveal the dishonest and pretentious nature of power.



Anna Faris (Zoey) Confronts the Exiled Despot in 'The Dictator'
Photo credit: Melissa Sue Gordon for Paramount Pictures

And also like Chaplin in his Dictator film, Cohen makes a climatic speech to the world of nations that cuts right to the heart of truth, especially about America's state of the union. But instead of Chaplin's poignant plea of brotherhood, Cohen uses blunt honesty about how this country uses democracy as a facade for their own brand of power. It will be interesting to see how it penetrates an American moviegoer who thinks otherwise.

“The Dictator” makes a good kickoff summer comedy out of this blend, and Sacha Baron Cohen creates another extremely visual and morally stupid man to compliment his comic rogue's gallery. Even though some gags may not work, the authenticity behind them delivers the greater message.

“The Dictator” opens everywhere on May 16th. Featuring Sacha Baron Cohen, Ben Kingsley, Anna Faris, John C. Reilly, Jason Mantzoukas and Megan Fox. Screenplay by Sacha Baron Cohen, Alec Berg, David Mandel and Jeff Schaffer. Directed by Larry Charles. Rated “R”



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