

## **The trouble with Brüno**

**SACHA BARON COHEN** is at it again, luring the unsuspecting and vulnerable into revealing their prejudices and fears. Racism and anti-Semitism have been his targets. Now, with *Brüno*, Sacha's latest mockumentary, those who hate homosexuals have been drawn into his sights. Brüno's career with Austrian television is in ruins after he wrecks a Milan catwalk with his all-in-one Velcro outfit. Disaster forces the gay Austrian, like Arnold Schwarzenegger before him, to make a bid for wealth and fame in America. Emulating Borat, Brüno travels across the US dismaying, disgusting, disgruntling, and discomforting, almost everyone he meets. Things got so bad that the gossipblog, *Defamer* (*Gawker's Column from Hollywood*), suggested that the film be called: *Brüno: Delicious Journeys Through America for the Purpose of Making Heterosexual Males Visibly Uncomfortable in the Presence of a Gay Foreigner in a Mesh T-Shirt*. Because this subtitle is reminiscent of Sacha's, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, many people have been lured into thinking that *Defamer's* spoof title is the real thing. It's not; the film is like Brüno, simply called, *Brüno*.

Now, Brüno is what people of a delicate sensibility like to call "flamboyant". For many years "flamboyant" was a euphemism for pansy, poof, turd-burglar, queer, and a host of other names resorted to by the more vulgar among us, when confronted by the love that dare not speak its name. Until recently, "homosexual" and "homosexuality" did not roll lightly off the tongue. There was often a rather clumsy emphasis placed upon the first two syllables resulting in a sort of hyphenated effect as the embarrassed and appalled

spoke of the abominable act or the vile persons as “*homo-sexual*” or “*homo-sexuals*”.

“Flamboyant”, of course, was an ambiguous term, which permitted one to talk about Quiz Show hosts, other family entertainers, and top variety show compères, particularly those with elegant long hands flapping around at the end of rather loose wrists, without causing offence or bringing up that unseemly and seemingly unpronounceable “*homo-*” thing.

This was all long before we learned the handy words “gay” and “straight”; it was also decades before flamboyant became simply “camp”. Of course, we always had Nelly Queens or, for those with a penchant for archaic spelling, “queans”. Brüno is this kind of flamboyant person, in fact he’s a Nelly Queen, or even a Screaming Queen, and as such he’s not only a problem for squeamish straight men and those outraged by the outrageous, he’s also a bit of a problem for the well-adjusted gay man, the modern homosexual, those with Partners, Civil or otherwise, those represented by lobby groups and Anti-Defamation leagues.

These new respectable *homo-sexuals* have come in from the cold, and with their two incomes and no children, have been gratefully admitted into wider society, enhancing decaying city centres with stylish life styles and generally brightening things up all around. Now, like the “straight-acting” Closet Queens before them, the modern *homo-sexual* likes to be thought of as risqué, even humorous, capable of the odd camp flourish in the office, or even a bit of flamboyance in the bar. However, he does not generally speaking like to be thought of as a Queen. He is not even a little bit like Brüno. He is not effeminate, mincing, or girlish; he doesn’t sweep through life with a carefully elegant gait, his neck held straight, and his nose in the air. This is because he is a “Man” who simply likes “Men”, not some fairy (or faerie).

The modern *homo-sexual* is not vulgar either. He is not, like Brüno, given to talking endlessly about

matters anal, douches or douching; he does not discuss shaving or bleaching his pubic hair. He might, in fact do all of these things, but he is not given to talking about them at dinner parties or with friends from work.

Consequently, Brüno is a bit of a problem. While the Human Rights Campaign, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Stonewall and other representatives of the modern *homo*-sexual have welcomed the film, there is some concern that not everybody might get the joke. They might think that all gay men really are effeminate Nancy Boys obsessed with anal hygiene, tanning, waxing, and given to indiscriminately propositioning every fella they meet. They might think that we're all like Brüno. Although, Cathy Renna of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance has insisted, gay people are "able to laugh at themselves" there is still the sense that with *Brüno*, Sacha might just have gone that little bit too far.

Of course, we all know that he has. There are many screaming queens, many girlish boys, and many gay men who cannot cross the road without endangering life and limb gawking at the lads, or as we used to say, "the trade". Gyms are full of gay men tanning and obsessing over their body hair and personal hygiene. Sacha's joke cuts both ways, it has to, or it wouldn't work. Stereotypes work because they refer to a certain reality; Brüno encapsulates the homophobe's idea of gay men by referring to everything they most fear about homosexuals, our surreal capacity to upset all their assumptions about their bodies, the stability of their sexual orientation, and the host of other certainties they need in order to get through their day. Despite the best efforts of modern *homo*-sexual campaigners many homosexuals really are disorderly, down and dirty obsessives, with only one thing on their mind; many really are excessively flamboyant, camp, and effeminate in that time-honoured mincing manner, and are still capable of bursting into histrionic song, mascara running, with "*I am what I am*".

As Brüno lays waste to bigotry and bad faith we should also remember that all of us modern *homo*-sexuals are also his target and we should – each of us - learn to take it, like a man, because Sacha's creation can only be good for us. This is particularly the case when Brüno decides that he wants to be normal; he wants to become heterosexual like Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Kevin Spacey. This is when he encounters a pastor who specialises in turning gay men straight. Such people really do exist and Sacha Baron Cohen must be applauded for revealing the awful extent of the malice and bigotry that masquerades as Christian charity.

This motley crowd of quacks and snake oil salesmen run curative programmes for SSA people: that is people struggling with same-sex attraction. By a mixture of evangelism and psychotherapy these Christian bigots seek to build upon the self-hatred felt by many homosexual people, by encouraging them to overcome their queerness with piety and restraint. They've moved beyond aversion therapy, electric shocks and induced vomiting, and now specialise in 'Reparative Therapy', 'Conversion Therapy', or 'Transformational Ministry'. Whatever the name, the aim is always the same, to bring the sexual feelings of the benighted queers into proper alignment with those apparently ordained by God in the Good Book.

These assorted Evangelicals and Baptists belong to the same camp as those Islamists who stone homosexuals to death, or perhaps more moderately, they share the outlook of the Supreme Leader, the Grand Ayatollah, Benedict XVI, the Vicar of Rome: they are committed to making sure that homosexuals disappear, or at least become more or less invisible; all these clerics, like the British National Party, want us to return to the closet.

Consequently, we should cherish Sacha Baron Cohen's creation. Brüno will certainly make us cringe, and at times wish we were anywhere else, rather than in the cinema watching his appalling carry on, but just think how the bigots are feeling, and rejoice!