

Hollywood Etc.: Release of 'Borat' DVD prompts more bare essentials about co-star

by Norma Meyer

Ken Davitian is rhapsodizing about The Dip - and he doesn't mean his "Borat" co-star and nude wrestling bud, Sacha Baron Cohen. "When you go, order the pastrami or pot roast," says Davitian, owner of two French dip sandwich shops in Sherman Oaks and Hollywood, Calif., both called The Dip. In between acting gigs, he can be found in the kitchen of his eateries and occasionally busing tables.

The lunch crowds have picked up since the 53-year-old character actor rocketed to fame as Borat's obese, unkempt Kazakh producer, Azamat Bagatov. Even though his most memorable scene kills an appetite.

MORE BORAT - Sacha Baron Cohen, as Borat, celebrates with his neighbors in Kazakhstan his planned visit to America in the surprise hit comedy of 2006. CNS Photo courtesy of 20th Century Fox.

"I had to close my eyes," Davitian says, recalling the first time he watched himself on film grappling with Borat during their hilariously gross buck-naked fight in a hotel room. "My wife's response was the best; she saw it at the premiere. She oohed and aahed and I thought I'd get yelled at, and at the end, she said, 'Oh my God, I'm glad you didn't break your hip.' So I thought that was good. I was in the clear."

Davitian had a hip replacement two months before shooting began on the politically incorrect mega-hit.

As if he didn't bare enough, the just-released DVD of the mockumentary includes a sidesplitting glimpse of flesh-jiggling Davitian in a thong bathing suit. It's in one of the extras, a "Baywatch" spoof titled "Sexydrownwatch."

"Yeah, that really wasn't necessary was it? My wife's reaction to that when she saw it in on the DVD was, 'Oh my God, not again!' "

Davitian is doing this interview over his cell phone while he sits in a makeup chair at Universal Studios

having fake skin pulled off his face that aged him about 20 years. He had been on the set of CBS' "Ghost Whisperer" all day, in a guest spot playing the husband of a dead woman.

"It doesn't hurt, but I can see my face peeling off. It's very strange," he relates.

Weeks before and after "Borat" slammed into theaters last November, Davitian and Baron Cohen did interviews and appearances in character as part of the movie's marketing schtick. In the film, Borat is a naive, Jew-bashing, sex-crazed, Kazakh TV reporter who hopes to wed Pamela Anderson and with Azamat crosses the "U.S. and A." in a beat-up ice cream truck. Along the way, Borat has real-life encounters with unsuspecting Americans who are baited into revealing their anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism and sexism.

Even now, some people in the industry don't realize the droll Armenian-speaking Azamat is really an American-born actor who resides in the San Fernando Valley and has a list of largely TV credits, including "Six Feet Under" and "Boston Legal."

"I was at a casting call recently and they were, 'OK SIR,' " he says, talking loud and slowly enunciating every word. " 'PLEASE SIT DOWN AND WE'LL TALK TO YOU.' "

Davitian says one of his two grown sons urged him to answer the "Borat" casting call for a "frumpy Eastern European." He arrived at the audition in character, speaking with an accent, fooling Baron Cohen and director Larry Charles into believing he was a real fish out of water. Davitian had on an old suit from the '80s when he was 80 pounds heavier. (He later wore his same suit in the movie).

Instead of a professional head shot and resume, "I had a black and white 8-by-10 that I folded up and put in my jacket pocket - I made sure it had creases in it. I unfolded the picture, put it on my knee and straightened it out and gave it to them." Baron Cohen and Charles looked at him as if he was crazy; at one point they asked if he knew anything about improv, and after some confusion, he haltingly answered, "I take it in classes." When the audition was over, as he left he thanked Baron Cohen and Charles in perfect English in his regular voice and encouraged them to call. "That's when they got up and said, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa.' "

Once he landed the role, he says the filmmakers told him he'd have little screen time. "They said, 'Half your face will show, your hands will show and they'll hear your voice in the ice-cream truck - that's the only place you'll be. You will not be in the rest of the picture.' "

Eventually, more than 560 hours were shot for the 80-plus minute movie, which received an Oscar nomination for adapted screenplay. Borat's hefty droll sidekick with the bushy eyebrows ended up with much more than face time.

And now, the once obscure actor - who was in his family's trash pickup business until the early 1990s - says showbiz doors are finally opening. He's been pegged to play a sinister assistant in the big-screen spy comedy "Get Smart," starring Steve Carell. Before "Ghost Whisperer," he did a guest spot on "ER." Off-camera, he's creating new menu items for The Dip, which currently offers the low-carb At Ken's Plate.

"If you say it real fast, it sounds like Atkins plate. That was a play on words," he says. "It's two different types of meat, half a kosher pickle and roasted red peppers. No bread."

'BORAT' EXTRAS

Speaking of food, the DVD of "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" includes extended deleted scenes (some better than others). In one scene, Borat visits an animal shelter in West Virginia to look for a dog. You can imagine what happens when he asks how to cook a pup.

The over-the-top "Borat" became a surprise smash hit, fueled by buzz from pre-screenings, film festivals and the Internet, where the faux TV journo has his own MySpace page. The picture grossed \$128 million

domestically.

"When an audience laughs out loud during a movie, that is contagious," says Paul Dergarabedian, president of box-office tracker Media by Numbers.

The ribald comedy also spurred lawsuits by the duped and caused the Anti-Defamation League to voice concern that not all moviegoers would "get the joke." Baron Cohen, a proud Jew, used "humor to unmask the absurd and irrational side of anti-Semitism and other phobias born of ignorance and fear," the ADL said in a statement prior to the movie's release.

"It was funny," says Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership in New York. He suggests the movie made viewers examine their own biases. "One of the most important vehicles through which we get wisdom is comedy."

Of course, some who saw "Borat" absolutely hated it. In most theaters, though, audience members doubled over in laughter during the epic naked brawl between Borat and Azamat, which spilled into the hotel hallway, elevator and a ballroom filled with stunned mortgage brokers.

"Afterward, we had to make a getaway and jump in vans," Davitian says. He had to wait in the van for 30 minutes until a production assistant brought him his clothes. "No blanket, no nothing. I was freezing."

Cleanliness was crucial to the scene, he adds with a chuckle. Before they shot the sequence, Baron Cohen made him take more showers "than I could count. I made him take them, too. Everybody asks where his chin was. Nobody asks where my chin was."

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