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# Sacha Baron Cohen: Outrageous comedian with serious point, and two Globes nods

From a tracksuited rapper to a bumbling Kazakh TV reporter in a green tankini, Sacha Baron Cohen has made his name with outrageous characters who expose real people's prejudices and hypocrisy. On Sunday, Baron Cohen's wild portrayal of the journalist Borat could win him a Golden Globe—but he could also take home a statuette for his work in a more serious role, as US political activist Abbie Hoffman in "The Trial of the Chicago 7". The characters created by the versatile 49-year-old British comedian are a world away from his upbringing in London as the son of an accountant who ran a family business of clothing stores. After attending private schools, he studied history at the University of Cambridge, where his cousin, Simon, is a professor and prominent researcher into autism.

During his time at university, Baron Cohen joined the Footlights theatre group that launched stars such as Hugh Laurie and members of Monty Python. His big break came performing sketches on the Paramount Comedy Channel, where he developed the character Ali G—a wannabe gangsta rapper from a nondescript town west of London. "Da Ali G Show", which followed on Britain's Channel Four in 2000, saw him ask increasingly shocking questions of unsuspecting politicians and other establishment figures.

The show also featured Borat, a naive Kazakh visitor to Britain who displays unthinking homophobia, anti-Semitism

and sexism, and Bruno, a flamboyantly gay Austrian fashionista. The show made Baron Cohen a household name. Later series were aired on HBO in the United States. Prince William even revealed that he and brother Harry taught their great-grandmother, the Queen Mum, to imitate Ali G by clicking her fingers and saying his classic "Respec". One interviewee was Donald Trump, who said last year of Baron Cohen: "That's a phony guy. And I don't find him funny."

## Cannes mankini

Ali G got his own film—"Ali G Indahouse" (2002)—as did Borat (2006), and later Bruno (2009). To promote "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan", he posed on the beach at the Cannes film festival in a green mankini that left little to the imagination. Along with an infamous nude fight scene, it showed Borat in cringe-making encounters with ordinary Americans. At a rodeo, he called for then-president George W. Bush to "drink the blood of every single man, woman and child of Iraq", to cheers from the crowd.

The New York Times said the film's comedy was "as pitiless as its social satire, and as brainy". It topped box offices in Britain and the United States. Baron Cohen, who is Jewish and uses Hebrew for Borat, won a Golden Globe for best actor, and the film grossed more



In this file photo British actor Sacha Baron Cohen (left) poses with actor Ken Davitian (right) at the 64th Annual Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP photos



In this file photo actor Sacha Baron Cohen and his wife actress Isla Fisher arrive for the 77th annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California.

than \$260 million worldwide. But the depiction of Kazakhstan as backward infuriated the Central Asian state, which banned the film's release. Baron Cohen told Rolling Stone magazine the joke was "on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist". Kazakhstan relented and last year even used Borat's "Very nice!" catchphrase in a tourism campaign.

## 'Never again'

The follow-up, "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm", unfurls against the tense backdrop of Trump's re-election campaign and the coronavirus pandemic. In one scene at a gun rights rally, Baron

Cohen-disguised as a bluegrass singer—encouraged people to sing along to lyrics about injecting former president Barack Obama and others with the "Wuhan flu". He ended up fleeing when his cover was blown. "We were surrounded by a bunch of people, an angry mob with guns," he told NPR, and vowed not to work undercover again. "I can't do this again... at some point, your luck runs out."

The film also shows Trump's lawyer and ex-New York mayor Rudy Giuliani apparently reaching into his trousers in a hotel room, after being interviewed by Borat's daughter. Giuliani, oblivious to the hidden cameras, insisted he was tucking in his shirt. Baron Cohen told NPR he

revived Borat in a bid to somehow influence the 2020 presidential election—against Trump. "We felt we had to do something, we felt democracy was in real danger," he said. The film was released on Amazon Prime Video last year. In addition to Baron Cohen's acting nomination, it is up for Golden Globes for best musical or comedy film, and best actress for Maria Bakalova.

## 'Weapons-grade offensiveness'

In 2018, he was nominated for a Golden Globe as best actor for his US satirical series "Who is America?" Baron Cohen, whose 2012 film "The Dictator" was described as offering "weapons-grade offensiveness", has also acted in non-comedy films including "Les Misérables". In 2019 he was nominated for best actor at the Golden Globes for playing a top Mossad agent in the Netflix series "The Spy." Baron Cohen rarely gives interviews out of character and is reticent about his personal life. "Some people love being recognized and getting the attention. I don't love it," he told NPR. He is married to actress Isla Fisher. The couple have said they bonded over studying at clown school. They have three children. In 2015, the couple donated \$1 million to help Syrian refugees. — AFP



In this file photo Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins attends the AFI FEST gala screening of "The Two Popes" at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. — AFP photos



In this file photo British actress Olivia Colman poses in the press room with the award for Best Performance by an Actress in A Television Series - Drama for "The Crown".



In this file photo Steven Yeun attends the 2020 Sundance Film Festival - "Minari" Premiere at Library Center Theater in Park City, Utah.

## Lady Gaga's dogs safely returned

Lady Gaga's two French bulldogs which were stolen at gunpoint in Hollywood have been safely returned, Los Angeles police said on Friday. Koji and Gustav were seized after an employee walking them was shot and wounded Wednesday night, and the attackers escaped in a vehicle. "Both of Lady Gaga's dogs have been turned in to a local police station, and they have been safely reunited with Lady Gaga representatives," Los Angeles Police Department tweeted. A woman had found the dogs and reached out to the singer's staff to return them.



In this file photo Lead Actress nominee for "A Star is Born" and Original Song nominee for "Shallow" from "A Star is Born" singer/songwriter Lady Gaga arrives for the 91st Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills. — AFP

"The woman's identity and the location the dogs were found will remain confidential due to the active criminal investigation and for her safety," LAPD said. The "Poker Face" singer had offered a \$500,000 reward for the safe return of the two dogs. "My heart is sick and I am praying my family will be whole again with an act of kindness. I will pay \$500,000 for their safe return," she wrote on Instagram. "If you bought or found them unknowingly, the reward is the same." Lady Gaga's dog walker Ryan Fischer was shot and hospitalized in the incident, which is being investigated by the Los Angeles Police Department's robbery-homicide division. "I continue to love you Ryan Fischer, you risked your life to fight for our family. You're forever a hero," Lady Gaga said. Two suspects had got out of a vehicle and demanded Fischer hand over the pets at gunpoint. — AFP



In this file photo shows singer Tina Turner poses on the red carpet for the fashion show by designer Giorgio Armani at the 798 art complex in Beijing. — AFP

## Tina Turner doc, lockdown films headline virtual Berlin fest

The world premiere of a documentary about music legend Tina Turner and an "impressive" pack of pandemic-era movies will take the spotlight at an all-virtual Berlin film festival starting tomorrow. With theatres shuttered due to the coronavirus outbreak, Europe's first major cinema showcase of the year was pushed back by a month, put online and divided into two parts as the movie industry struggles to find its feet. The Berlinale, now in its 71st year, will hold the competition for its Golden Bear top prize March 1-5 virtually for critics, reporters and rights buyers.

For the second stage, organizers hope to invite stars and screen the films for the general public in June, mainly at open-air cinemas. Last year's event, one of the last before the pandemic, sold more than 330,000 tickets. The festival has also gone "gender neutral" with its acting awards—best actress and best actor prizes are history, replaced with best lead and supporting performance. Industry watchers say that despite severe restrictions on making and screening movies, the Berlinale has managed to pull together an exciting lineup. "I'm pleasantly surprised that they were able to get what looks like a pretty impressive collection of solid movies together for this festival," Scott Roxborough, European bureau chief for The Hollywood Reporter, told AFP.

## 'Uncertain times'

One of the hottest titles is "Tina", a star-studded HBO documentary about the queen of rock'n'roll by Oscar winners Dan Lindsay and T.J. Martin ("Undeclared") to be released on March 27. The film features never-before-seen concert footage, interviews with the 81-year-old superstar and recollections from the likes of Angela Bassett and Oprah Winfrey. Directors including Emmy winner Maria Schrader ("Unorthodox"), German-Spanish actor Daniel Bruehl ("Rush") and France's Celine Sciamma ("Portrait of a Lady on Fire") will be premiering new work in competition.

All 15 contenders for the top prizes to be awarded on Friday are films that were made or in post-production during the pandemic. Berlinale artistic director Carlo Chatrian said the selection captures "the uncertain times we are experiencing". Bruehl, who starred in the bittersweet German comedy "Good Bye, Lenin!" and is now part of the Captain America franchise, will make his directorial debut with "Next Door", a black comedy about gentrification. — AFP

## Five things to watch for at the Golden Globes

There will be no red carpet or star-studded audience today at the Golden Globes, but much remains at stake at the first major Hollywood awards show of the year. Millions of viewers are expected to tune in for the ceremony honoring the best in film and television, but what should you be watching for? Here is our quick guide to the event, which will take place in Beverly Hills, California and New York:

### Netflix? And still...

This time last year, Netflix was the envy of Hollywood, placing copious bottles of champagne on ice ahead of the Globes. An overwhelming 34 nominations appeared certain to signal the streamer's official coming-of-age in Tinseltown with a deluge of wins. But the ceremony didn't follow the script, and Netflix ended the night with a paltry two wins.

So will this be the year the giant entertainment disruptor truly marks its newfound dominance? With a staggering 42 nods across television and film categories this time, the odds look even more favorable. But after last year's near-washout, who knows?

## So who are the people who decide on the Golden Globes winners?

While the Golden Globes are watched by millions of film fans around the world, the 90-odd people who decide who wins the coveted awards largely remain in the shadows. The membership of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) is minuscule when compared to the nearly 10,000 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which hands out the Oscars.

### Colman/Cohen: Double double?

One of Netflix's rare wins last year was for Olivia Colman, whose star turn as Britain's Queen Elizabeth in "The Crown" proved irresistible to Globes voters. That wasn't entirely surprising—Colman has never lost a Golden Globe, having converted previous nods for "The Favorite" in 2019 and "The Night Manager" in 2017. This year she can go one better, with dual nominations for another season of "The Crown," and best drama film contender "The Father." If she succeeds, she may not be the night's only double winner. A fellow Brit, Sacha Baron Cohen, is a strong contender for two very different film acting roles, with "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" and "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

### Eighth time lucky for Hopkins?

Colman's "The Father" co-star, the legendary Anthony Hopkins, is a serious awards contender every time he appears on the big screen. Surprisingly though, he has never won a competitive Golden Globe, despite being nominated on seven previous occasions dating back to 1979, and even earning a lifetime achievement award. When he won an Oscar in 1992 for his terrifying turn in "The Silence of the Lambs," Globes voters somehow plumped for Nick Nolte in "The Prince of Tides." If the Hollywood Foreign Press Association chooses to right that wrong this year, they will crown the 83-year-old Hopkins as their oldest ever best actor. Standing in Hopkins' way is Black Panther himself: the late Chadwick Boseman.

### 'Minari': The new 'Parasite'?

In recent years, few Globes categories have stoked more controversy than best foreign language film. American immigrant stories such as "The Farewell"

(2019) have repeatedly been barred from the "main" best film award categories because half or more of the script was not in English. Critics have pointed out that the rule did not seem to apply to previous heavyweight contenders such as Quentin Tarantino's multi-lingual "Inglourious Basterds."

This year, "Minari" is the subject of much hand-wringing, with "Farewell" director Lulu Wang tweeting that she has "not seen a more American film" than the acclaimed Korean immigrant family drama. Of course, being in the foreign language section at last year's Globes did not harm South Korea's "Parasite," which went on to win the biggest prize of all—the best picture Oscar. Can "Minari" repeat the trick?

### The Globes go 'bi-coastal'

With the pandemic raging, and Los Angeles still under tight restrictions, this year's Globes were always likely to be a remote ceremony—especially after the team behind September's Emmys pulled off a near-flawless award show from an empty theater. But organizers sprung a surprise by announcing that returning co-hosts Tina Fey and Amy Poehler will anchor a "bi-coastal" ceremony from New York and Los Angeles.

The move should allow more high-profile guests to present awards in person—including Big Apple-based Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones—even if the nominees have to stay home. With the Oscars now planning to broadcast from multiple locations, the Academy will be watching closely to see if Fey and Poehler can strike up their usual rapport from opposite sides of the country. — AFP

access to exclusive press conferences and screenings.

Studios are keen to ensure that HFPA members have seen their films and television shows—sometimes under rather luxurious conditions, according to some involved who have spoken on the issue on condition of anonymity. Most HFPA members are correspondents who work regularly for well-known media outlets, such as France's Le Figaro, Spain's El Pais, or Britain's Daily Mail. But the group's reputation lost some luster when it was revealed that a small minority of members didn't work at all that often—one was a former Russian bodybuilder who did some acting in B-list films, while another was the widow of an actor who wrote on occasion for Tahitian media.

And some major media organizations including France's Le Monde newspaper and The Times of London lashed out when their correspondents were denied entry into the HFPA. The group has also been criti-

cized for its lack of diversity, with a Los Angeles Times report this week revealing the HFPA does not have a single Black member. "So many crazy things about the @goldenglobes and the Hollywood Foreign press but this is awful," said Judd Apatow, one of several prominent showbiz celebrities circulating the hashtag #timesup-globes. The HFPA released a statement recognizing that "we need to bring in Black members, as well as members from other underrepresented backgrounds."

The association has had its share of scandals. When Pia Zadora won a Golden Globe in 1982 for what was widely seen as a dismal performance in incest drama "Butterfly," many cried foul and suggested her then-husband, an Israeli billionaire businessman, had bought the voters by inviting them to Las Vegas for a screening. — AFP