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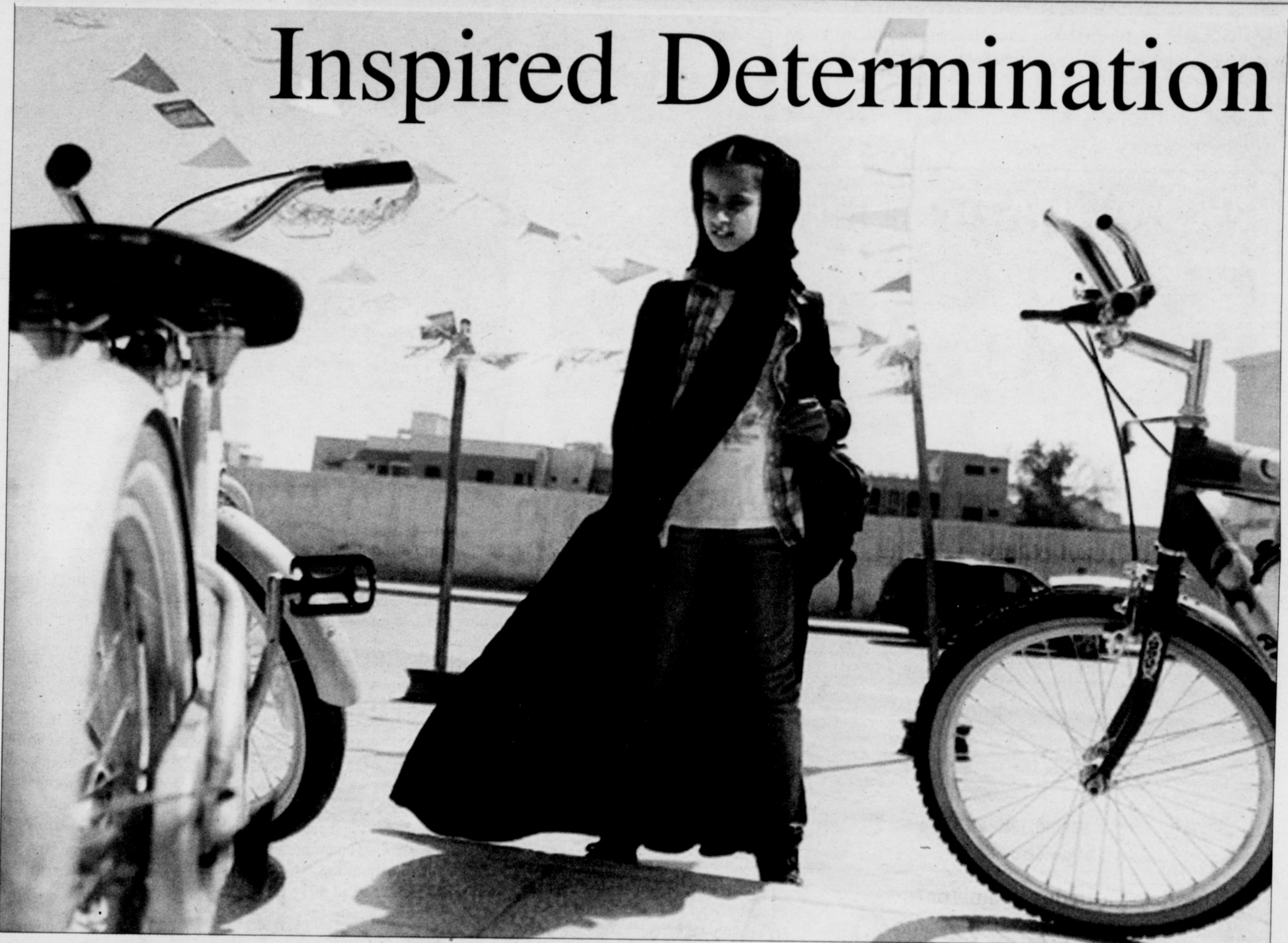


PHOTO BY SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Waad Mohammed plays a Saudi girl who wants a bicycle to race her young male friend in the film 'Wadjda,' a story that gives us a rare window into everyday life for women and girls in Saudi Arabia.

'Wadjda' offers windows into Saudi (and American) life

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

I imagine that American audiences watching "Wadjda" -- the first feature film shot entirely in Saudi Arabia and the first directed by a Saudi woman -- will be doing a lot of clucking over how restrictive life is for Saudi women and girls. Yet when I scanned for reviews after seeing the film, nearly all of them were written by men: Film criticism, like most other spheres of influence in American culture, is dominated by male voices. I'm guessing that most of us would not even notice that fact.

A film like this offers Americans some

OPINIONATED JUDGE

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DARLEEN ORTEGA



opportunities that we rarely get. Most obviously, it gives us a rare window into everyday life for Saudi women and girls. Director Haifaa al-Mansour gives us a fairly simple story of a middle-school-aged girl, Wadjda -- whose small rebellions evidence simply a desire to be herself -- and fills that story with particular details.

Wadjda's determined self-expression is evident, for example, in the hangers she has attached to the radio on which she listens to forbidden American pop music; in the black Converse high-tops she wears under the long, shapeless gray dress that

serves as her school uniform; and in her little schemes for earning the money she would need to buy a bicycle so that she can race (and beat) the boy with whom she shouldn't even be associating.

But the film also offers us an opportunity which I wonder if we are really up for -- the opportunity for self-examination.

It is easy for Americans to judge a culture like this because its flaws are readily apparent to us. How strange to imagine living in a society where a girl riding a bike is unheard of because of concerns that it will damage her fertility, or where a woman

is not allowed to drive a car!

Yet part of where the film succeeds is in demonstrating how inevitable such limitations seem to be for many members of that society, and how its norms are enforced, even by those who are oppressed by them. A film like this, which deftly deconstructs a culture that seems alien, has the potential to awaken our sensitivity to manifestations of oppression in our own culture.

The film is perceptive about the strictures of the girl's life, and that of her mother, classmates, and teachers. Wadjda's father mostly works and lives apart from her and her mother, a real beauty who works as a teacher but isn't allowed to manage her own money or drive herself to work. Instead she must pay a driver who addresses her with the disdainful tone one

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