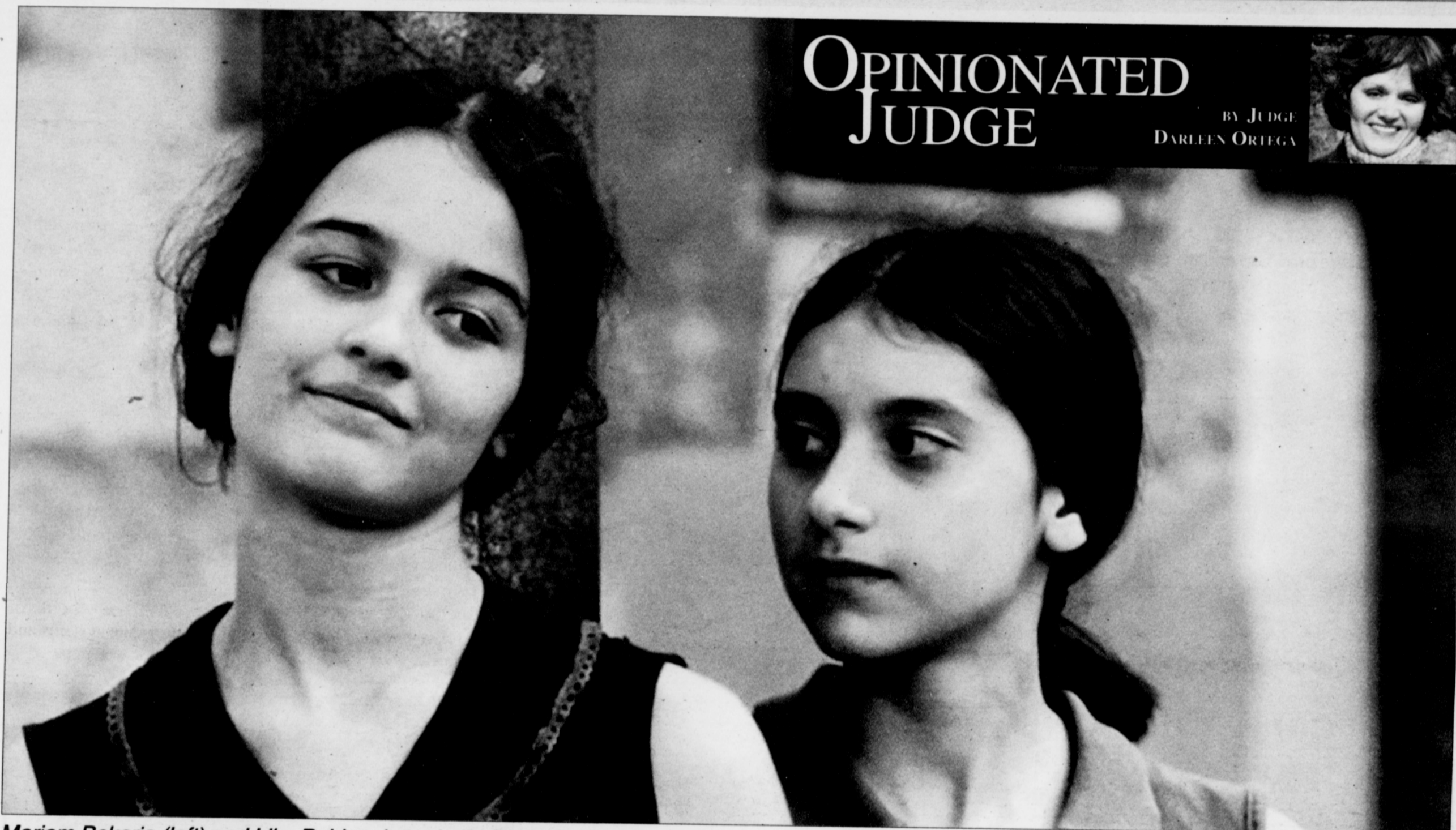


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Mariam Bokeria (left) and Lika Babluani star in "In Bloom."

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Navigating Character, Tradition and Fate

'In Bloom' has teenage friends dealing with world on their own terms

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov is often quoted as saying that if you introduce a gun (literally or figuratively) in the first act of a play, it had better go off by the last act, or it serves no dramatic purpose. Many of the reviews of "*In Bloom*" -- a Georgian film that was one of my favorites at this year's Portland International Film Festival and is currently playing at Cinema 21 in Portland -- mention Chekhov's principle, intrigued by the question of whether the film violates or complies with it.

To my mind, this observant and insightful depiction of the too-early coming-of-age for two 14-year-old girls embodies the principle in a way that captures the complexity of the experience of women and girls, specifically in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1992, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also more generally.

The two girls at the center of this story, Eka and Natia, display a familiar adolescent determination to deal only on their own terms with the external world of fighting parents, teachers who shame students, boys and breadlines. They are good girls, but not necessarily compliant ones, except when it suits them, and they act as though the adults in their world

should feel lucky for what they get.

But the world around them does contain violently fighting parents, and teachers who shame students quite mercilessly, and boys who will harass a girl walking home alone after school, and breadlines where adults will literally yell obscenities and fight a child for a place at the front. It is a world that is violent enough that when a boy who is sweet on Natia gives her a gun to protect herself, she barely registers a reaction. I watched this film in a continual state of anxiety -- but Natia displays no such concern. She is acclimated to a level of hazard and threat that makes it clear that you are worrying for her much more than she ever worries for herself.

Eka, more bookish and less popular with boys, worries a little. Where Natia's attitude toward boys, teachers, and parents is brash and openly confrontational, Eka is more quiet and watchful. Natia believes her friend needs to toughen up, and even instructs her to use the gun to scare off some bullies. Eka's instincts are still forming, but she tends to keep more to herself, and one guesses that she may have more considered intentions.

Much of the film is spent in very particular observation of the girls' daily routines, from their perspective. Nana Ekvimishvili, who wrote and co-directed the film with her husband, German filmmaker Simon Gross, based it on her own childhood experiences, and the film benefits from that insider's view. Even in a culture like this one, where girls as young as 14 can be kidnapped and forced into a marriage against their will, girls do not generally feel themselves to be vulnerable

victims. They may even adopt a kind of defiance. Their reaction to very real dangers may be much like Natia's attitude about the gun, detached and even playful. Watching these girls toy with the potential uses of a gun is a fitting parallel to watching them navigate the rest of their world.

The last third of the film is where those observations pay off. The gun goes off -- not the literal gun, but a figurative one -- and the film's triumph is in capturing the difference in the girls' reactions. Fearless Natia is disconnected; she even adopts a celebrative stance about a turn of events we know she did not want. When the figurative gun goes off, Eka is the one who fights, and who calls out a patriarchal community that shows no interest in protecting a 14-year-old girl. And then, when the entire rest of the community moves on as though no wrong has been done, Eka sits, sullen.

Then comes a deeply moving scene that is good enough reason to watch this lovely, perceptive film. Quiet Eka rises, and she seizes command of a dance floor at a wedding that she does not celebrate. She dances a traditional folk dance with fervor, co-opting a form of assent to the proceedings into a medium for her own voice. Even if no one understands her message quite the way she means it, Eka finds a way to re-engage with her friend, and to express her truth.

The world of these two girls shifts at that wedding. They remain friends, and the dangers they face are far from over. They are still surrounded by loaded guns, including the

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