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THE VILCEK FOUNDATION PRESENTS
AMERICAN IMMIGRANT FILMMAKERS ON PROFILE

Six-Film Program Curated by the Hawaii International Film Festival

New York, November 3, 2008 – The Vilcek Foundation and the Hawaii International Film Festival (HIFF) present the New York City premiere of *American Immigrant Filmmakers on Profile (AIFP)*, a program that showcases the work of foreign-born directors and actors. This year's series includes three features and three documentaries, inspired by the unique experiences of immigrants from Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Samoa and Vietnam. The screenings will take place November 12–18 at the Vilcek Foundation's new headquarters and cultural space, 167 East 73rd Street.

Following the program's successful run at the 2008 Hawaii International Film Festival, the Vilcek Foundation is now inviting New York audiences to view the films as well.

"We look forward to introducing these films to a wider audience. The talented artists involved in these projects, both behind and in front of the camera, remind us how much the American filmmaking tradition owes to the contributions of immigrants to this country," said Rick Kinsel, Executive Director of the Vilcek Foundation.

The *AIFP* program was initiated by the Vilcek Foundation in 2007 in partnership with HIFF, as a way to advance the related missions of the two organizations. "No other medium is as effective in expanding and enriching our understanding of the lives of others, no matter how different," said Kinsel. "We know these films will go far in helping to achieve our goal, to increase public awareness of the importance of the immigrant influence on the arts and culture in the United States, and that of HIFF, to encourage a cultural exchange among the peoples of Asia, the Pacific, and North America through the medium of film."

The screenings are free of charge, but RSVP is required. Visit www.vilcek.org for show times, and to RSVP online. All film screenings will be followed by a Q&A session with the film's director and/or lead actor.

The Foundation will also host an exclusive meet and greet for all of the 2008 AIFP filmmakers and the press on Tuesday, November 11, 2008. This VIP reception will take place at 167 East 73rd Street from 6 – 8 pm.

FILM LINE-UP UNVEILED

Ocean of Pearls

Director: Sarab Neelam

Length: 94 Minutes

Language: English

Show time: Wednesday, November 12, 2008 at 6:30pm

Q&A with director Sarab Neelam after screening

Synopsis

In *Ocean of Pearls*, the conflict between Eastern philosophy and Western lifestyle is embodied in the person of Amrit Singh, a Sikh doctor (played by Omid Abtahi, an American actor of Iranian descent). Though born in North America, Singh's family adheres to their religious and cultural traditions, and his full beard, long hair, and turban brand him as an outsider. Yearning for personal acceptance almost as much as he desires professional success, Singh moves from Canada to Detroit in hopes of finding both. He throws himself into his prestigious new job as chief of surgery at a state-of-the-art transplant center, only to discover his conflict heightened and his integrity increasingly jeopardized. To ease the discomfort caused by his appearance, Amrit goes against his ethnical tradition and cuts his hair; and to navigate hospital politics and the injustices of the American health care system, he begins to make compromises that put the welfare of patients at risk. When those choices, in his mind, lead to the death of a favorite patient, Singh turns to confront the self he rejected. He volunteers at a Sikh camp for children, where he begins to understand the value of the teachings he grew up with. But his moral development is not complete until he returns to the hospital, where almost immediately he must make the choice between performing a costly procedure necessary to save the life of a patient and abiding by cost-saving administrative policies.

Filmmaker Profile

Ocean of Pearls, director Sarab Neelam's first film, is infused with autobiographical elements. He lived the early years of his childhood in India, where he fell in love with the movies and became inspired by the contradictions of beauty and poverty. His interest in Sikh history and culture he attributes to his grandmother, a survivor of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. At ten, Neelam and his family moved to Toronto, Canada, where, like Amrit Singh in his movie, he came face to face with the obstacles created by being different. About that time, he also started making home movies, using a Super 8 camera. For a number of years, that's as far as his film career went, for like his film's lead character, Neelam became a medical doctor; and he, too, was troubled early in his practice by the inequities of the American health care system. All the while, Neelam harbored his childhood desire to make movies. Eventually, he started taking classes in filmmaking, with the overriding goal to portray Sikhs fairly and fully on-screen. In the aftermath of 9/11, this became, for him, a moral imperative. *Ocean of Pearls* was awarded the Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Feature Film at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival.

Link: www.oceanofpearls.com

Chief

Director: Brett Wagner

Length: 21 Minutes

Language: English & Samoan (with English subtitles)

Show time: Thursday, November 13, 2008 at 6:30pm

Q&A with director Brett Wagner and actor Sielu Avea after screening

Synopsis

Semu Fatutoa is a highly ranked Samoan chief who passes his days behind the wheel of a taxi in Honolulu, transporting tourists and businesspeople to and from the airport. His legs, which he keeps hidden from view, tell the story of why he fled his ancestral village. On them are the ceremonial tattoos that mark him for life as a leader among his people. To him, however, they are the symbols of personal tragedy. For as he lay recovering from the painful ritual, too weak to move, his nine-year-old daughter drowned in the ocean. Blaming the tattoos for his inability to save her, Semu has spent the last two years driving, essentially in circles.

Those circles begin to close in on him via a series of events. A mysterious Samoan has been staking out his apartment in Waikiki, calling him on the phone, following him home from the beach. Why? More frightening is the earthquake that has struck the Big Island, and which threatens to unleash a tsunami on Honolulu. Everyone is leaving the city; but not Semu. Why not? He has become transfixed by a young Hawaiian girl, around his daughter's age, who he has seen wandering the city in her bathing suit. Twice in the same day she has crossed his path; twice he has watched her go by. But try as he might, he cannot ignore the sense that her appearance is a message to him, one he must answer, even as a wall of water looms over the city. Together, these circumstances conspire to force Semu to reclaim his responsibilities as Chief.

Filmmaker Profile

Brett Wagner directed *Chief*, starring real-life Samoan chief Sielu Avea. Born on the island of Savaii, Samoa, Avea has introduced the world to *fa'asamoa*, the Samoan way, and may be familiar to audiences from his appearances on *Oprah Winfrey*, *The Tonight Show*, and MTV and BBC television. Wagner's first movie, *Five Years*, was named Best Feature Film at the Victoria Independent Film Festival and received the Best Screenplay award at the Avignon Film Festival. *Chief* is garnering equal acclaim, having won Best Dramatic Short Award at the recent Los Angeles International Short Film Festival. It is the first Hawaiian-made movie to premiere at a Sundance Film Festival, and was named by *IndieWire* as one of the ten must-see shorts there. *Chief* is scheduled to premiere in Oahu at the Hawaiian International Film Festival in October. Wagner, who earned his MFA from New York University, is currently at work on a script for Terrence Malick's production company.

Link: chief-movie.com

Vietnam Overtures

Director: Stephane Gauger

Length: 64 Minutes

Language: Vietnamese (with English Subtitles)

Show times: Thursday, November 13, 2008 at 8:00 pm

Q&A with director Stephane Gauger after screening

Synopsis

Vietnam Overtures is a documentary about a rescue; but unlike most rescue stories from that embattled country, this one is about the recovery of a centuries-old classical music tradition, another casualty of the long war there. Through a program called Transposition, initiated in

Norway in 2005 and launched in 2007, and in association with four Vietnamese institutions—the Ha Noi Conservatory of Music, the Viet Nam National Symphony Orchestra, the HCM City’s Conservatory of Music, and the HCM City Opera and Symphony Orchestra—the classical music scene in Vietnam is getting a much-needed helping hand. Director Stephane Gauger chronicles the musical dialogue between these Vietnamese and Norwegian conservatories, as they work together to prove again that music is, indeed, a universal language.

Filmmaker Profile

Born in Saigon and raised in Orange County, California, Stephane Gauger’s first feature film, *Owl and the Sparrow*, won nine awards in 2007, including the Audience Award at the Los Angeles Film Festival and Best Narrative Feature at the San Francisco, San Diego, and Dallas Asian Film Festivals. Gauger has also received nominations for Breakthrough Director at the Gotham Awards in New York and the John Cassavates Award at the Independent Spirit Awards. Educated in theater and French literature, Gauger’s love of cinema took him from the stage to film sets; he apprenticed in film lighting under Matty Libatique, ASC, and worked in the camera and lighting departments on independent films in the United States and Southeast Asia, including Sundance winner *Three Seasons*. Also a writer, Gauger served as storywriter and second unit director on *Powder Blue*, a drama about four disconnected loners in the urban landscape of Los Angeles.

Prince of the Himalayas

Director: Sherwood Hu

Length: 108 Minutes

Language: Tibetan (with English subtitles)

Show time: Friday, November 14, 2008 at 6:30pm

Q&A with director Sherwood Hu after screening

Synopsis

An adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *Prince of the Himalayas* takes as its dramatic backdrop the majesty and mystery of the Tibetan landscape. It is here, in Kingdom Jiabo, where Prince Lhamoklodan returns after hearing of his father’s sudden and unexplained death. As disturbing to him is that his mother, Queen Nanm, has already been remarried—to his uncle Kulo-ngam—who has usurped the throne. The young prince, and rightful heir, becomes determined to learn the truth of his father’s death and take revenge. As his obsession begins to menace his spirit, it also casts a shadow over his love for Odsaluyang. Finally, as he threatens his uncle, the new king, at sword-point, his anguished mother tells Prince Lhamoklodan what he must know in order to face his destiny and reclaim his title.

Filmmaker Profile

Shanghai-born Sherwood Hu directed and co-wrote *Prince of the Himalayas*, his third feature film. Also adapted as a play, the script had a successful run on the stage in Shanghai, and was selected for the 9th Shanghai International Arts Festival. Hu’s first feature film, *Warrior Lanling*, an epic ritual film about ancient China, took the opposite route, evolving from a stage production, “The Legend of Prince Lanling.” It received an Honorable Mention from the Kennedy Arts Center. Hu’s second film, *Lani Loa: The Passage*, one of the first U.S./China co-productions, was executive-produced by Francis Ford Coppola and Wayne Wang. Hu has also directed a forty-episode television series, *Purple Jade*, for China Central Television. Hu received his Masters of

Arts degree from the State University of New York and his PhD in directing from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Following an apprenticeship at The Public Theater in New York under Joseph Papp, he began his professional career directing theater productions, including “Rashomon,” “Consant Prince,” and “The Chairman's Wife.” Hu’s film work has not weakened his strong connection to live theater— among his recent stage directing credits are A.R. Gurney’s “Sylvia,” Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Dirty Hands,” and a modern ballet called “Shakespeare and His Women.” Hu has also come out from behind the camera to perform in the lead role of Song Liling in several productions of [David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly](#).

Link: www.princeofthehimalayas.com

Someplace Else

Director: Kai-Duc Luong

Length: 70 Minutes

Language: English

Show time: Monday, November 17, 2008 at 6:30pm

Q&A with director Kai-Duc Luong after screening

Synopsis

Someplace Else is a moving self-portrait of director Kai-Duc Luong, recorded in film-journal form as he transitions from his corporate job, which he quits after realizing its benefits have lost much of their value to him, to what he hopes will be creative fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Co-directed by Avisheh Mohsenin, *Someplace Else* is also a tenderhearted journey through the blues—the director’s melancholy—symbolized by the music of acclaimed Chicago soul-blues singer and guitarist Vance “Candylicking” Kelly. Luong’s thoughtful ruminations on where he has been and where he is going are interspersed with evocative images of the Windy City and footage of Kelly and his Backstreet Blues Band. *Someplace Else* is something else in filmmaking, blending documentary and personal reflection.

Filmmaker Profile

Director, screenwriter, and editor Kai-Duc Luong’s own journey to creative fulfillment was a long one. Born in Phnom-Penh, Cambodia, at the beginning of the Khmer Rouge tyranny, he survived the killing fields and, still an infant, was taken to Paris shortly after his father’s death. In France, he studied for the Grandes Ecoles before coming to the United States in 1997 as an exchange engineering graduate student. But his version of the American dream did not feature engineering; since childhood, Luong knew he wanted to be a filmmaker. He has been living that dream for the past 11 years, currently in Chicago. In addition to *Someplace Else*, Luong’s other directing credits are *Vacant*, *The Texture of Time*, and *Sami and Binx*.

Someplace Else co-director Avisheh Mohsenin also has followed a circuitous path to her creative career. Born in Grenoble, France, she moved with her parents and sister to Tehran, Iran, in 1976, and so endured the years of the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Twenty-plus years later, she came to the United States to undertake graduate studies in Economics. Her lifelong dream, however, was to create art—in particular, contemporary photography. She considers herself a self-taught photographer who lives a parallel life as an economic consultant.

Link: someplaceelsethemovie.com

Long Story Short

Director: Christine Choy

Length: 54 Minutes

Language: English

Show time: Tuesday, November 18, 2008 at 6:30pm

Q&A with director Christine Choy after screening

Synopsis

Long Story Short recounts the professional lives of Larry and Trudie Long, a pioneering Asian American vaudevillian couple of the forties and fifties, whose popularity on the Chinatown nightclub circuit eventually wins them a spot on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, then the pinnacle of recognition in show business. Their daughter, actress Jodi Long, who wrote and narrates the documentary, is moved to record her parents' memories and experiences when she wins a part in the Broadway revival of "Flower Drum Song"—her father appeared in the original production forty years earlier. The film also chronicles the behind-the-scenes struggle of the pair to forgive the injustices suffered by Asian Americans during World War II, a particularly difficult problem for Trudie, who was incarcerated in [Japanese internment camps](#). Theirs is a tale of fortitude, to overcome and to challenge media stereotypes, and what it often costs personally to leave behind a legacy of positive change.

Filmmaker Profile

Filmmaker Christine Choy has received more than sixty international awards for her work in film, including an Oscar nomination in 1989 for Best Documentary for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* and Best Cinematography award for *My America... Or Honk if You Love Buddha* at the 1997 Sundance International Film Festival. Shanghai-born Choy trained as an architect before shifting gears entirely and moving to LA, where she earned her Directing Certificate from the American Film Institute. To date, she has more than seventy works in various formats to her credit, which have appeared on HBO, PBS, the Sundance Channel, Lifetime, NHK, and many other stations. Her films have been shown worldwide, at festivals in Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, Chicago, Montreal, Hong Kong, and Pusan, as well as the Asian American International Festivals in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. In her companion career as educator, Choy is the founding director of School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, and a member of the Project Vetting Committee of the Film Development Fund, Hong Kong. Her teaching credentials include New York University's Graduate Film/TV Program, Yale and Cornell Universities, and SUNY-Buffalo. Choy can now count among her film accolades the Audience Award for Documentary Feature at the 2008 Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival for *Long Story Short*.

Link: www.longstoryshortdocumentary.com

About the Vilcek Foundation

The Vilcek Foundation aims to heighten public awareness of the contributions of immigrants to the sciences, arts and culture in the United States. The mission of the foundation was inspired by Jan and Marica Vilcek's careers in biomedical science and art history, respectively, as well as their

personal experiences and appreciation for the opportunities they received as newcomers to the United States. For more information about the Foundation please visit www.vilcek.org.

About the Hawaii International Film Festival

Established in 1981, the Hawaii International Film Festival is dedicated to the advancement of understanding and cultural exchange among the peoples of Asia, the Pacific and North America through the medium of film. HIFF is the premier international film event in the Pacific and has won the praise of governments, filmmakers, scholars, educators, programmers and film industry leaders throughout the world. For the discovery and exhibition of Asian and Pacific features, documentaries and short films in the nation, it is a primary source. The festival has premiered such movies as *Once Were Warriors*, *The Piano*, *Shine*, *Shall We Dance*, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

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