

AMERICAN IMMIGRANT FILMMAKERS ON PROFILE (AIFP)

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AT THE
VILCEK FOUNDATION

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FILM SCREENINGS
CURATED BY THE
HAWAII INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL

THE VILCEK FOUNDATION

FILM SCREENINGS

The Vilcek Foundation sponsors programs that promote foreign-born artists and scholars living in the United States.



OCEAN OF PEARLS

Length 94 Minutes **Language** English

Show time Wednesday, November 12, 2008 at 6:30 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

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 ethnic 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 over-riding 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.



CHIEF

Length 21 Minutes **Language** English & Samoan (with English subtitles)

Show time Thursday, November 13, 2008 at 6:30 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

SYNOPSIS

Semu Fatutoa is a highly ranked Samoan chief who passes his days behind the wheel of a taxi in Honolulu, transporting tourists and business-people 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*'s 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*'s scheduled to premiere in Oahu at the Hawaii 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.



VIETNAM OVERTURES

Length 64 Minutes **Language** Vietnamese (with English subtitles)

Show time Thursday, November 13, 2008 at 8:00 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

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 Hanoi Conservatory of Music, the Vietnam 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 Break-through 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 story-writer and second unit director on *Powder Blue*, a drama about four dis-connected loners in the urban landscape of L.A.



PRINCE OF THE HIMALAYAS

Length 108 Minutes **Language** Tibetan (with English subtitles)

Show time Friday, November 14, 2008 at 6:30 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

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 Jjabo, 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 Master 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*.



SOMEPLACE ELSE

Length 70 Minutes **Language** English

Show time Monday, November 17, 2008 at 6:30 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

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 tender-hearted 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 film-making, 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 eleven 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.



LONG STORY SHORT

Length 54 Minutes **Language** English

Show time Tuesday, November 18, 2008 at 6:30 pm **RSVP** at www.vilcek.org or 212.472.2500

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 the 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*.