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## Mike Nichols and Dr. Huda Zoghbi to Receive 2009 Vilcek Prizes

### Inaugural Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise Go to Ham Tran and Dr. Howard Chang

*Annual Awards Presentation: Thursday, April 2, 2009*

New York, February 9, 2009 - Legendary stage and screen director **Mike Nichols** will receive the 2009 Vilcek Prize in the arts, and internationally renowned scientist **Dr. Huda Zoghbi**, a pioneer in the study of Rett Syndrome and related autism spectrum disorders, the prize in biomedical science. “We have been awarding these prizes annually since 2006,” said Dr. Jan Vilcek, President and Cofounder of the Vilcek Foundation, “and this year I’m proud to announce the expansion of our awards program with the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise, to recognize the successes of foreign-born individuals in the early stages of their careers in the arts and biomedical sciences.” Filmmaker **Ham Tran** and biologist **Dr. Howard Chang** have been named the first Creative Promise Prize recipients.

Of the new prize category, Marica Vilcek, Vice President and Cofounder of the Vilcek Foundation, explained, “We have always wanted to honor and publicize the contributions of a younger generation of immigrants working in the arts and sciences, to help them maximize their potential. Jan and I were in the early stages of our careers when we immigrated to the United States, and the professional support we received here was pivotal to our success.” The Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise are presented to foreign-born individuals, 38 years old or younger, in the fields of biomedical science and the arts.

At the awards presentation, to be held at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York City, Thursday, April 2, 2009, Mr. Nichols and Dr. Zoghbi will each receive a \$50,000 cash award and a commemorative trophy created by designer Stefan Sagmeister. Creative Promise Prize winners Mr. Tran and Dr. Chang will each receive a \$25,000 cash award and a plaque, also designed by Mr. Sagmeister. The four prize winners were chosen by independent panels of experts.

The Vilcek Foundation, in meeting its primary purpose, to call attention to the accomplishments of immigrants currently working in United States, also serves to remind the public of the immeasurable contributions of the foreign-born to this country throughout its history. Dr. Vilcek points out, “Much of the advancement of science in the United States from the first half of the twentieth century onward rests on the achievements of foreign-born individuals. The outstanding work of this year’s science honoree, Dr. Huda Zoghbi, underscores the importance of remembering this fact. The same is true in the arts. Mike Nichols, the 2009 Vilcek Prize winner in the arts, is universally acclaimed for his film and theater work, but few realize that he, too, was born

overseas, reminding us that the American movie industry in large part owes its growth and worldwide preeminence to immigrants.”

This year’s Vilcek Prize recipients demonstrate the truly global influence of America’s immigrants: Mike Nichols was born in Berlin, Germany; Dr. Huda Zoghbi in Beirut, Lebanon; Ham Tran in Saigon, Vietnam; and Dr. Howard Chang, in Taipei, Taiwan.

## About the Prize Recipients

### Mike Nichols

Through his groundbreaking work in improvisational comedy, theater, and film, Mike Nichols has, for almost a half-century, shown us that through honesty - in particular, the special brand of honesty conferred by humor - we can make some sense of life, and when we can’t, to laugh at it. Only the most ardent of film and theater buffs, however, knows that this virtuoso of the American entertainment landscape was not born on American soil.

Mike Nichols began life as Michael Peschkowsky, in Berlin, the son of a Russian-born father and a German mother. With the voice of Hitler still ringing in his ears, he escaped to this country in 1939. Smart and quick-witted, early on Mr. Nichols found the power in humor, and began to master its intricacies, often using his childhood experiences as seed for laughter. He worked the ground while at the University of Chicago in the early 1950s, where luck landed him among a talented theater group; full germination occurred when he met and paired with the brilliant Elaine May. For four years, the duo refined the art of improvisational comedy.

After the pair broke up, Mr. Nichols found something he was even better at than comedy: directing. In less than ten years (1963–1972), he directed five hit plays on Broadway and won four Tonys. In 1966, he made the move to Hollywood. Directing the film version of Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* earned him his first Academy Award nomination; the four leading actors were also nominated, a first in Academy history. He took an Oscar home for his second film, *The Graduate*, at the same time launching his reputation for audacious casting and an uncanny ability to bring out the best in actors.

Over the years, Mr. Nichols has proved to be consistently light on his directorial feet, moving deftly between stage, screen, and television; along the way, he added producer to his skill set. He is one of the elite in show business to have won all the major entertainment awards: Oscar, Tony, Emmy, and Grammy. He has twice more been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director (*Silkwood* and *Working Girl*), and once as producer (*The Remains of the Day*). In addition to his Oscar, his awards shelf is weighed down by an astounding nine Tonys (*Barefoot in the Park*, *Luv*, *The Odd Couple*, *Plaza Suite*, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *Annie*, *The Real Thing*, *Spamalot*, and *Whoopi*), one Grammy (*Best Comedy Album, An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*), and four Emmys (two for *Wit* and two for *Angels in America*). He is the recipient of the George Abbott Award, the Lincoln Center Lifetime Achievement Award, the Kennedy Center Honor, and the Directors Guild of America Lifetime Achievement Award; he also has been recognized by the American Museum of the Moving Image for his contributions to the film industry. He is a co-founder of the New Actors Workshop in New York City.

## **Dr. Huda Zoghbi**

Huda Zoghbi's first semester of medical school at the American University in Beirut was shattered by civil war. Determined to finish the year, she and her fellow students and their professors lived in the basement of the medical school building, attending class in "safe" rooms, with double-thick walls. Perseverance was to become a hallmark of Dr. Zoghbi's character, and be instrumental to the achievements of this internationally renowned child neurologist and molecular geneticist - notably, the discovery of the gene responsible for Rett syndrome.

Forced by the escalating war in Lebanon to complete her medical studies in the States, Dr. Zoghbi received her MD from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1979. She joined the pediatric residency program at the Baylor College of Medicine and, during a rotation in neurology, became "fascinated by the brain." A three-year residency/fellowship program in pediatric neurology followed, in 1982, at Baylor.

Intending to become a pediatric clinician, an encounter with a five-year-old girl at Texas Children's Hospital and an article on Rett syndrome in the *Annals of Neurology* redirected Dr. Zoghbi's professional path. Realizing that solving the problem of this mysterious disease would require research training, Dr. Zoghbi went back to school, in molecular genetics. Rett syndrome, would have to wait, however, as too little data was available at the time to make it the launch point of her new career. Instead, she focused on spinocerebellar ataxia type 1 (SCA1), a crippling, neurodegenerative disease that affects balance and coordination. In 1988, she set up her own laboratory at Baylor College of Medicine, and began a close collaboration with Dr. Harry Orr of the University of Minnesota, who was also working on SCA1. Astonishingly, in 1993, both cloned the SCA1 gene on the same day. Behind the scenes, Dr. Zoghbi continued to work on Rett syndrome. In 1999, sixteen years after first learning of the disease, she and her collaborators identified mutations in the MECP2 gene as the cause of Rett syndrome.

Today a professor of Pediatrics, Neurology, Neuroscience, and Molecular and Human Genetics at Baylor College of Medicine, and an investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Dr. Zoghbi says her ultimate professional goal is "to actually make a patient better" through treatments resulting from her discoveries in research.

Dr. Zoghbi is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine; she is also a trustee at the American University of Beirut. She has been honored with the E. Mead Johnson Award for Pediatric Research, the nation's most distinguished pediatric research award; the Kilby Award for Extraordinary Contributions to Society through Science, Technology, Innovation, Invention, and Education; the Sidney Carter Award; and the Bristol-Myers Squibb Award for Distinguished Achievement in Neuroscience Research.

## **Ham Tran**

In the films of Ham Tran, stories gone untold too long are unraveled, voices kept silent too long are heard. They are the stories of the Vietnamese boat people and the survivors of the reeducation camps, and they are not easy to tell.

Born in Saigon, Mr. Tran immigrated as a refugee at the age of eight to America, with his ethnic Chinese Vietnamese parents. The desire to regain memories lost during the process of assimilation—“institutionalized amnesia,” he calls it—drew him to poetry, prose, playwriting, and, eventually, filmmaking. Even before leaving college, with a BA in English Literature from UCLA and an MFA from the UCLA School of Film and Television, Mr. Tran’s multifaceted talent for storytelling on film became evident—he writes, directs, edits, and produces. His first two short films, *The Prescription* and *Pomegranate* were semifinalists for the Student Academy Awards; and his 28-minute thesis film, *The Anniversary*, about two brothers separated by the Vietnam War, qualified for an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short, in 2004, and has won more than 30 international film festival awards.

While working on *The Anniversary*, Mr. Tran became aware that no film had ever been made about the war years in Vietnam, from the Vietnamese perspective. His first feature film, *Journey from the Fall*, emerged from that realization. Inspired by a true story, it chronicles one family’s struggle for freedom as they flee their country after the fall of Saigon in 1975, as well as those forced to stay behind. *Journey from the Fall* was an Official Selection for the 2006 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for the FIPRESCI Award for Best ASEAN Film at the 2006 Bangkok Film Festival; it has won 16 international awards.

Mr. Tran is now working on his second feature film, *Distant Country*, about two Vietnamese illegal immigrants whose dreams of reaching the United States take them on a journey around the world. Another new project is a documentary film, tentatively titled, *Sponsored '75*, which traces the lives of Vietnamese families rescued from four American refugee camps in 1975, and their sponsors.

Mr. Tran is part of a new Vietnamese filmmaking movement called the Viet Wave, whose mission is to bring Vietnamese-content films to American movie houses through Wave Releasing, the first Vietnamese-American film distribution company. He is an active member of the Asian and Pacific Islander community and serves on the board of the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association. He has also directed a promotional video for the Vietnamese Overseas Initiative for Conscience and Empowerment, and worked with the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance to create a curriculum around *Journey from the Fall* to help change the way the history of the Vietnam War is taught in high schools across America.

## **Dr. Howard Chang**

Why do long hairs grow on our scalp, but not on our palms or the soles of our feet? How do cells decide where they should be located in the body? Unconventional questions such as these - in particular, those with a direct connection to human diseases - drive the research of Dr. Howard Y. Chang, a practicing dermatologist and Associate Professor of Dermatology and principal investigator in the Program in Epithelial Biology at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

With a disciplined mind even as a teenager, Taipei, Taiwan-born Dr. Chang remembers well the shock of his first day in junior high school in southern California, where his family had moved when he was twelve years old. He went on to earn his AB in Biochemical Sciences, from Harvard University, in 1994. He then joined the Harvard–MIT MD–PhD program, and together with MIT Professor David Baltimore discovered several key biochemical control mechanisms of how cells

self-destruct (a process called programmed cell death), which have important applications in the study of cancer, autoimmunity, and degenerative diseases.

Dr. Chang completed his PhD in two years, and while pursuing medical training in dermatology, began to pursue his postdoctoral research in Professor Patrick Brown's lab at Stanford University. There, he began a new research program to understand the basis of site-specific differences in human skin, resulting in novel modes of gene control that extends from cancer treatment to aging.

To understand why skin cells in diverse parts of the body have different characteristics - how cells know their "positional identities" - a fact that guides the diagnosis and treatment of many skin diseases, Dr. Chang and his colleagues are seeking to define in molecular terms how the expression of different genes in stromal cells determines their ability to affect the development of skin cells. The answers they have discovered so far reveal critical information about gene regulation; specifically, that cells are used to record the positional identity in human tissues, and that the "perturbation," the disturbance, of such programs plays a major role in cancer progression, especially in metastasis, whereby cancer cells spread to other parts of the body. These breakthroughs may suggest new approaches for the treatment of malignant tumors.

Dr. Chang is a highly productive researcher. He has published more than 60 papers in such journals as *Nature*, *Cell*, *Science*, *Nature Genetics*, *PLoS Genetics*, *Genes and Development*, and *Genome Research*, with more in press. Dr. Chang has received the American Academy of Dermatology Young Investigator Award, the Damon Runyon Scholar Award, and the American Cancer Society Research Scholar Award. He is a member of the Stanford Comprehensive Cancer Center.

### About the Vilcek Foundation

The Vilcek Foundation aims to raise public awareness of the contributions of immigrants to the sciences, arts, and culture in the United States. The Foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the Foundation was inspired by the couple's careers in biomedical science and art history, respectively, as well as their personal experiences and appreciation for the opportunities offered them as newcomers to the United States. In addition to awarding annual prizes in the biomedical science and the arts, the Vilcek Foundation showcases the work of innovative artists, filmmakers, and others, many of them immigrants who have yet to achieve critical or financial success, at its headquarters at 167 East 73rd Street, New York City.

Former recipients of the Vilcek Prize in the arts include: architect/urban planner **Denise Scott Brown**; artists **Christo and Jeanne-Claude**; and classical music composer **Osvaldo Golijov**. Previous recipients of the Vilcek Prize in biomedical science are: **Dr. Rudolf Jaenisch**, founding member of the Whitehead Institute at MIT; **Dr. Joan Massagué**, Chairman of the Cancer and Biology Genetics Program at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center; and **Dr. Inder Verma**, a professor and researcher at the Salk Institute.

For more information about the Foundation, please visit [www.vilcek.org](http://www.vilcek.org).

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