

VILCEK FOUNDATION

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2016 Vilcek Prizes Honor Immigrants in Theatre and Biomedical Science

Blanka Zizka and Dan R. Littman receive \$100,000 Vilcek Prizes

Winners of Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise receive \$50,000 awards

New York, NY, February 2, 2016 — The Vilcek Foundation is pleased to announce the winners of the annual Vilcek Prizes, recognizing immigrant contributions to the American arts and sciences. The Vilcek Prize in the Arts, this year focusing on the field of theatre, is awarded to Blanka Zizka, artistic director of Philadelphia's Wilma Theater. The Vilcek Prize in Biomedical Science goes to Dan R. Littman, professor of molecular immunology at NYU School of Medicine. Each prize includes a \$100,000 cash award.

"From improving healthcare access in underserved communities to developing institutional models that invest in artists and actors, the 2016 Vilcek Prizewinners demonstrate that immigrants are impacting all aspects of American society for the better," said Rick Kinsel, executive director of the Vilcek Foundation.

The Vilcek Prize in Theatre goes to **Blanka Zizka**, who was born in Communist Czechoslovakia and immigrated to the U.S. in 1977. She has been the artistic director of the Wilma Theater since 1981, and under her leadership, the theater has grown from a volunteer-run collective to a 296-seat theater that is among the most respected in the nation, known for its commitment to ambitious, contemporary works from an international repertory rarely seen elsewhere in the U.S. Zizka was an early champion of Czech-born British playwright Tom Stoppard, premiering Stoppard's master epic *The Invention of Love*, and she has also worked closely with dissident playwright (and later Czech president) Vaclav Havel. Zizka is a proponent of reforming theater practices in the U.S., establishing a long-term collaborative ensemble of actors at the Wilma to that purpose. She received the Zelda Fichandler Award from the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation in 2011.

Dan R. Littman, born in Romania, receives the Vilcek Prize in Biomedical Science for his fundamental insights into the workings of the immune system. In the mid-1990s, Littman and his collaborators uncovered crucial aspects of the mechanism by which HIV infects the human immune system, leading to the development of pharmaceutical treatments against HIV. Later, his team identified a gene switch, called RORgammat, which plays a crucial role in the genesis of immune cells that mediate inflammatory and autoimmune diseases, paving the path toward future therapeutic treatments. More recently, Littman has been studying the interplay of the immune system with the body's resident microbes, with findings that suggest that manipulating the human gut microbial mix might help augment or tamp down the immune responses underlying many diseases. Littman has received numerous honors, including memberships in

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the United States National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Medicine, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The Vilcek Foundation also awards the Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise, given to younger immigrants who have shown substantial talent and ability early in their careers. Each prize includes a \$50,000 cash award. The winners in theatre are:

Sarah Benson, the artistic director for New York's critically acclaimed Soho Repertory Theatre, is known for bold, immersive stagings that make production design central to the interpretation of a play. She often takes on challenging new dramas, including Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, David Adjmi's *Elective Affinities*, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon*. This season, her production of *Futurity*, a new musical by Cesar Alvarez and The Lisps, was presented at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and in New York as a co-presentation of Ars Nova and Soho Rep. Benson was born in the U.K.

Desdemona Chiang co-founded the Seattle theatre company Azeotrope in 2010, with a mission to produce new and contemporary stage productions about the invisible and marginalized. Her most recent Azeotrope production, Don Nguyen's *Sound*, was staged simultaneously in English and American Sign Language. Her many new play credits include regional premieres by Christopher Chen, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Rajiv Joseph, and Adam Rapp. She has also directed classics such as Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, scheduled for the 2016 Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Chiang was born in Taiwan.

Yi Zhao has earned a national reputation for his innovative lighting designs. Zhao draws upon his training in photography and the arts to create subtle and thoughtful designs that serve a wide variety of theatre productions and aesthetics. His national credits include a staging of Plato's *Republic* by Brooklyn company Hoi Polloi; the world premiere of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *War* at Yale Repertory Theatre; *Hamlet* at Philadelphia's Wilma Theatre (directed by Vilcek Prizewinner Blanka Zizka); and *Futurity*, presented by Ars Nova and Soho Rep (directed by fellow Creative Promise Prizewinner Sarah Benson). Zhao was born in China.

The winners of the Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise in Biomedical Science are:

Fernando Camargo's work has led to major technical advances in researchers' ability to track circulating blood and immune cells, and it has uncovered insights into their origins. Contrary to a long-held view that blood cells arise from hematopoietic stem cells, Camargo showed that blood cells are generated by progenitor cells. Because progenitor cells are more abundant and long-lived than hematopoietic stem cells, the findings bear implications for improving the efficacy of blood transplantation. Camargo has also unraveled the role of a cellular signaling protein called Yap1, which controls cell growth and organ size. He is working on developing ways to boost or suppress Yap1 in cells for an array of clinical applications. Camargo, an associate professor at Harvard University and Boston Children's Hospital, was born in Peru.

Roberta Capp found that, largely due to systemic barriers to primary care, many patients on Medicaid often depend on emergency departments for non-urgent conditions. To address the issue, Capp conducted a trial program with patient navigators, trained professionals who work closely with patients to help them obtain timely primary care from diagnosis to follow-up. The trial showed that such services made a significant dent in emergency-department use and hospital admissions. Capp is working with Medicaid officials in Colorado to improve health care access and delivery for underserved communities. Her work has implications for making health care accessible, affordable, and patient-centered. Capp is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, and she was born in São Paulo, Brazil.

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Houra Merrikh's work on the mechanics of DNA replication and gene expression in cells has uncovered hidden conflicts between the cellular machines that use threads of DNA as a template to carry out these life-sustaining functions. Merrikh has shown that such conflicts can lead to genetic mutations, which can serve as a substrate for evolution. More importantly, such mutations may underlie a raft of clinically relevant phenomena, such as the development of antibiotic resistance in bacteria and the onset of cancer in human cells. By unraveling the mechanism of the conflicts, which appear to be a common feature among genes, Merrikh's work has thrown open a window on the molecular minutiae of gene evolution. She is now exploring precise ways to predict how such conflicts influence human disease. Merrikh is an assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine and was born in Tehran, Iran.

The prizewinners were selected by panels of experts in each field; they will be honored at an awards gala in New York City in April 2016.

The Vilcek Foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the foundation, to honor the contributions of immigrants to the United States and to foster appreciation of the arts and sciences, was inspired by the couple's respective careers in biomedical science and art history, as well as their personal experiences and appreciation for the opportunities they received as newcomers to this country. The foundation awards annual prizes to immigrant biomedical scientists and artists, and sponsors cultural programs such as the Hawaii International Film Festival.

To learn more about the Vilcek Foundation, please visit Vilcek.org.