

WITH OLIVERA FINN, IMMUNOLOGY MAKES

A BIG SPLASH AT PITT | BY DAVID R. ELTZ

THE DIRECTOR

Drama was Olivera Finn's first love. Growing up in Nis, then an industrial Yugoslavian city of 100,000, she longed to become a theatre director. Often a teacher would gather together her class and pack everyone off to the national theatre for the afternoon. "Olja" (pronounced "Olya") would sit riveted before the stage as the actors played out Yugoslavian and Shakespearean drama, planning how she would someday run those same plays.

Her father had different ideas. A journalist and novelist who'd published theatre criticism, Dragi Jankovic, saw English and science as the wave of the future. As a first step toward preparing his girl, he enrolled her in an English class two nights a week at the local workers' university. She was in first grade. Her lessons lasted eight years. When it came time to choose a high school, Finn could attend either the arts and language school or the math and sciences school. Jankovic cut a deal: His daughter could pursue the theatre only if she graduated from the math and sciences school.

It was a nifty trick. But Jankovic's plan for his daughter's future took a detour. At 16, his English-speaking girl met Seth Finn, an American student from Brown University visiting Nis on a summer study program. Two years later, after he completed a Fulbright Fellowship and she finished high school, they were married and off to the States. Today, in a way, the Stanford-trained PhD is directing her own play. In October, Olivera Finn was appointed acting chair of the School of Medicine's new Department of Immunology.

She has a couple of hard acts to follow. Nobel prize laureate Niels Jerne, a leading theorist on the primary immune response whom some considered the "conscience" of immunology, was chair of microbiology at Pitt in the '60s. Frank Dixon, chair of the Department of

Pathology in the '50s, became one of the first immunopathologists. Finn is eager to build on this legacy.

At Stanford University in the early '80s she worked on then-developing research on the role of proteins that help activate T cells to fight cancer. At Duke University Finn set up a tumor immunology lab, where she discovered a tumor protein that T cells recognize as foreign. She created a synthetic version of the protein, and used animal studies and clinical trials to show how it can elicit an immune response to kill tumor cells upon first glance. She had, in effect, made a vaccine for such carcinomas as pancreatic and breast cancer, which she has patented and continued to test since moving to Pitt in 1991. (Her work continues to bear fruit—see the cover story in November's *Journal of Experimental Medicine*.)

Finn says it has been necessary for her to

Finn has developed a cancer vaccine, now she's ready to develop a program that uncloaks the immune system.

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try to change "the culture" through the years of those at the National Institutes of Health and Food and Drug Administration who hesitate to allow the vaccine to be used for cancer prevention. Her critics fear the vaccine will somehow trigger an attack on normal tissue. She has also encountered more than her share of people who say, "I agree with you," but still won't allow her to proceed beyond Phase I trials. "That still doesn't mean you shouldn't fight for what you think should be done," she says.

More than her own interests, Finn views her newly anointed mission much like Jerne and Dixon did theirs; she is

interested in pulling the cloak off the basic workings of the immune system. "I want to have people doing the newest immunology areas—immunogenomics, immunoproteomics, signaling—people who do immunol-

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ogy just to discover how things work," she says passionately. "We have great people here who try to understand how the immune system works in cancer, transplantation, and autoimmunity. We need to bring people here

who do immunology just for the hell of it."

One has the sense that Finn is more than up to the task of recruiting Pitt's next generation of immunology stars. At meetings with the cancer establishment she has convinced people at least to listen to her—no small triumph, as one colleague notes. Another colleague, Pramod Srivastava, director of the Center for Immunotherapy of Cancer and Infectious Diseases at the University of Connecticut, says, "I perhaps do not know anybody else who has the extraordinary ability to say the truth plainly, to say even the most unpleasant truth plainly, without offending anyone. It is a rare trait and invaluable for someone trying to build a department."

Perhaps it helps that Finn, a lover of things theatrical, has a flair for the moment. During her first year as a faculty member at Duke, the department chair sent her an invitation to a picnic. It was addressed to "Dr. and Mrs. Seth Finn." When she complained, the chair brushed it off—"You just don't know the protocol." Finn remarked, "That protocol needs to die a quick death."

She later discovered that in the department secretary's desk was a list of doctors' names, all male; wives were listed alongside in parentheses (as was Finn). Her husband was listed as the department member. Funny thing was, Seth Finn, though also a PhD, was a communications professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the next faculty meeting, Finn's motion to change the protocol passed. Afterward, the chair approached her. "Okay. What do you want me to call you?"

Finn smiled, saying, "I'm sure my paycheck doesn't say 'Mrs. Seth Finn.'" ■