

SECOND ACT

AFTER A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS CAREER, **MATTHEW KALLIS '86** FOLLOWED HIS DREAM TO BE BEHIND THE CAMERA. HIS LATEST DOCUMENTARY HAS CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF AUDIENCES, CRITICS—AND OPRAH.

BY AMANDA CHALIFOUX | PHOTO BY CATHERINE LEDNER

MATTHEW KALLIS '86 heard Oprah before he saw her. He'd been asked to attend the Sundance Film Festival for the announcement that OWN, Oprah Winfrey's TV network, had chosen his documentary film, *Most Valuable Players*, as a charter member of her new documentary club—the film counterpart to the famous Oprah's Book Club.

Kallis didn't know, however, that the pop culture queen was attending the event herself. At one point during the announcement party, he and pro-

ducing partner Christopher Lockhart noticed the crowd growing outside.

"I heard this huge scream and turned around. Suddenly, a few feet from me, was Oprah Winfrey," Kallis says. "The room was going insane. I said, 'um, hi, my name is Matthew Kallis.' She said, 'I know. You directed *Most Valuable Players*. I love your movie!' And she wrapped her arms around me."

Kallis chuckles at the memory, the disbelief still in his voice. "It was like being Charlie in the chocolate factory and being given the golden ticket. It was amazing."

Amazing. Kallis uses that word a lot

to describe the experience of creating the film. In the winter and spring of 2008, Kallis and a small crew followed three high school musical programs in the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania. They captured the inspirational and emotional ride of students and teachers during a musical theater season that culminated in a three-way horserace for the Freddy Awards, the high school equivalent of the Tony Awards.

Oprah's endorsement represented an affirmation of years of hard work—more than 300 hours of film was edited to create a 90-minute



◀ **Matthew Kallis '86** photographed where it all began, not far from the bright lights of Hollywood—on the stage of his alma mater, Beverly Hills High School, where he was part of the stage crew for school productions. Kallis screened his documentary, *Most Valuable Players*, and spoke to musical theater students at the school this winter.

documentary—but it was also just one more chapter in the story of the film’s success. *Most Valuable Players* premiered in New York and Los Angeles in August 2010; it has also screened in New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, and India. Besides being chosen as a charter film for the new Oprah Documentary Club, the movie had its TV premiere on OWN in September 2011 and was released on DVD in February 2012.

“Amazing” could also be used to describe Kallis’ journey from hedge fund manager and entrepreneur to documentary filmmaker. Though the occupations seem worlds away, he sees parallels between finance and film.

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EARLY WORK

Art—film, in particular—has always been a part of Kallis’s life. His father and grandfather created poster art for studio movies; his mother was a commercial artist. Growing up in Beverly Hills, Kallis made movies on his Super 8 video camera, co-opting his friends for roles in his remake of *Huck Finn*. And even early on, Kallis was working his connections: a friend’s father was Lalo Schiffrin, the film composer who

wrote the iconic *Mission: Impossible* theme music. When Kallis needed a soundtrack to one of his amateur films, Schiffrin stepped in.

But along with filmmaking, Kallis was also enamored with technology, robotics, and computer science. The latter led him to study at MIT, where he worked in a lab funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which commissions research for the Department of Defense. The lab, Arch-Mach, was the forerunner to the MIT Media Lab, developing one of the first virtual reality systems. While there, Kallis also studied in a film program run by Ricky Leacock, a British filmmaker who was one of the forefathers of *cinéma vérité*, which combines naturalistic and stylized approaches in documentaries. “In my mind, I was really headed for a career in the arts either working for a studio, doing special effects, or becoming a filmmaker,” Kallis says.

After graduating from MIT, he followed potential job leads at Zoetrope (Francis Ford Coppola’s studio) and the then-fledgling MTV Networks, where Kallis was told that the job was his, but he “wouldn’t be able to afford to sleep anywhere but on the streets.”

Soon, however, Kallis’s burgeoning interest in business came into play. “In college, I used to talk with people at my dad’s tennis club about investing

in the stock market,” Kallis says. One of those talks paid off in the form of a lunch invitation with a hedge fund manager. “He flew to Boston and offered me a job working for this thing called a hedge fund, which I’d never heard of, but it sounded appealing.”

His new employer quickly became a mentor and urged him to study finance at Columbia Business School. Kallis and a colleague started their own investment management firm after graduation, eventually selling it in 1996. Then, Kallis bounced through several start-ups. “I got to that point and said, ‘Do I really want to keep doing this?’ I had always wanted to do filmmaking. Why was I not doing that?”

A NEW SCRIPT

Kallis’s transition to filmmaker didn’t happen overnight. “I had my own sensibilities and past experiences in the arts to draw on, but I had to teach myself from scratch how to be a filmmaker,” Kallis says. “Then, you need a lot of luck.”

Luck soon came in the form of Christopher Lockhart, who was giving lectures in the Los Angeles area about how to pitch a script in Hollywood. Lockhart works for WME (formerly William Morris Endeavor), the world’s largest talent agency, matching scripts with stars like Denzel Washington, Steve Martin, and Christian Bale. “His seminar was incredibly entertaining,” Kallis recalls. “It was like *American Idol* for screenwriters.”

Kallis was inspired by the seminar and thought it would be good material for a documentary. He presented the idea to a local cable TV station, and *The Inside Pitch*, his first film project, was born and would be nominated for a local Emmy. It was his relationship with Lockhart, though, that would prove especially useful in his new career. “Matthew was even-keeled, easy to talk to,” Lockhart says. “I’ve worked with a

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A The high school students featured in *Most Valuable Players* represent a fraction of the nearly 3,000 students who participate in musical theater in Pennsylvania and New Jersey's Lehigh Valley area and compete in the annual Freddy Awards.

lot of producers, and he was smart and low-key, which I appreciated.”

A couple of years later, Lockhart stumbled onto a YouTube video about the Freddy Awards. “I saw a performer on stage singing, but it was really well-produced,” Lockhart explains. “The audience was going crazy, and then I noticed they were all kids wearing stage show costumes. It looked like a cross between the Tony Awards, a rock concert, and *Let’s Make a Deal*.”

After more research, Lockhart was convinced the Freddy Awards would make a great focus for a documentary. He had film experience, having produced a feature horror movie, *The Collector*. But he needed funding, and more importantly—the right producing partner and director. “There were a lot of people I could have taken this project to,” he says. “But I had a feeling about Matthew—I just thought he’d get it.”

Kallis says that having been part of the stage crew for his high school theater group, the awards resonated with him. “I think we all remember that feeling of getting to high school and trying to figure out where you belong. The thing about the arts is that

it’s another family. This project was a chance for me to go back in time and live vicariously through these kids.”

Of course, Kallis sensed a ripe business opportunity, too—to tap into the growing “high school musical” market. Disney had just released *High School Musical 3*, and the TV hit *Glee* was about to debut. Before the filmmakers could capitalize, though, they had to find their story. In 2008 the plot was handed to them: two of the schools were performing the same show, *Les Misérables*, on the same weekend, creating a built-in rivalry; the third school featured in the film, Freedom High School, was performing *Bye, Bye Birdie*. Kallis says they gravitated toward Freedom because of the openness of the students and their teacher, Jennifer Wescoe; the producers even gave Freedom students handheld digital cameras to capture footage in between film-crew visits.

The film not only followed the students’ passion—tears and screams when the nominations for the 2008 Freddy Awards were announced, for instance—but also highlighted some poignant moments for the adults, including the cancer diagnosis of long-

time Freddy coordinator Vic Kumma. When they’d finished editing the film, Kallis and Lockhart knew they had something special but were hesitant about what lay ahead. Finding a distributor for documentaries is notoriously difficult. “I said to Chris, my dream is to make something that will get released in theater,” Kallis said. “He looked at me like, ‘are you crazy?’”

CENTER STAGE

Kallis got his theatrical release—not only at the IFC Center in Greenwich Village, but also at the famous ArcLight Cinemas in Hollywood—and then on screens around the world. The International Documentary Association dubbed *Most Valuable Players* the “feel-good documentary of the year” in 2011. And of course, there was Oprah, whose network made the film’s TV debut and DVD distribution possible.

“This project has been magical from the get-go. Films aren’t always like that,” Kallis says. “There’s so much going wrong in the world, and this is something that’s going right, that people can support and feel positive about.”

As for his next film project, Kallis’s lips are sealed—but he’ll certainly tap all of his experience to make it happen. “I’ve learned so much about this process now, but I really think if I hadn’t had the business background and education, there would have been many places I could have smashed the ship on the shore,” Kallis laughs. “Just like in business, you lay bets with your limited resources, work tirelessly, and hope you get a little lucky along the way.”

▶ Watch a trailer for *Most Valuable Players* and learn more at www.mostvaluableplayersmovie.com.