

Gimme an M!

A feel-good documentary, headed for OWN, makes a pitch for the arts — and viewers' hearts.

Most Valuable Players is crammed with familiar characters.

There is the shy teen who blossoms on stage as the star of the high school musical. There's the soccer jock who finds a greater bliss belting out numbers from *Bye Bye Birdie* than kicking goals into the net. Then there's the archetypal drama coach, inspiring her students to unleash their innermost thespians.

But these characters are no fictional, prime-time casting. *Most Valuable Players* documents a real and endearing collection of drama students from eastern Pennsylvania as they feverishly (and sometimes awkwardly) put on their schools' annual musicals. They then compete in the Freddy Awards, a yearly recognition of outstanding high-school musical theater that culminates before sold-out crowds — and a live TV audience — in the grandiose State Theatre in Easton, Pennsylvania, and rivals the Tony Awards for exuberance.

"I cried. I laughed," says Lisa Erspamer, executive vice-president, production and development, at the Oprah Winfrey Network, who chose *Most Valuable Players* to air in September as part of the recently launched OWN Documentary Club.

The film also makes a diverting argument for arts education.

"Not everyone is going to be captain of the football team," says producer-director Matthew Kallis. *Most Valuable Players*, he says, "is the

story of how the arts provide the same kind of camaraderie, teamwork, self-esteem and experience that kids get from participating in sports."

The idea for the documentary originated with writer-producer Christopher Lockhart, a story editor for William Morris Endeavor. He was knocking around YouTube one day and stumbled across an excerpt from the 2006 Freddy Awards. "It was like 'Americana Idol,'" says Lockhart, who was puzzled by the shrieking audience and the youthfulness of the singers.

He subsequently learned there are dozens of such high-school awards ceremonies, but the Freddy Awards is apparently the only one to air live on local television.

A lean production budget for *Most Valuable Players* precluded shooting in all of the area high schools. But the producers pinpointed several talented groups and squeezed in some extracurricular tension when it happened that two schools — cross-town rivals, no less — coinci-

dentally had chosen to perform the same musical, *Les Misérables*, on the same weekend.

"We were doing *Les Miz* before anyone announced their shows for next year," says Mark Stutz, theater director of Parkland High School, in the film.

"This year, this is what happened. So what!" responds Rita Cortez, choral director of Emmaus High School.

The camera crew parachuted in several times in early 2008. Each time they decamped, they left cameras in the hands of students to capture critical moments. "I made a prayer," Kallis jokes, "that I wouldn't be arrested for anything they recorded."

Kallis and Lockhart ultimately honed 300 hours to ninety minutes. And eventually their documentary landed on the desks of Erspamer and Rosie O'Donnell, curator of the OWN series, which debuted in May with *Becoming Chaz*, a film about the journey through gender reassignment of Chaz (formerly Chastity) Bono.

"We love real stories," Erspamer says. "We love immersive storytelling." *Most Valuable Players*, she adds, "is the kind of documentary that just makes you want to jump up and down."

—Ann Farmer