



Stars in Their Eyes

Liberal Arts alums make it
in Hollywood – and beyond

Story & Photos
by Leah Kolt

THE MARKET VALUE of a liberal arts education can be measured by the success of its alumni. Four College of Liberal Arts graduates have parlayed their Cal Poly diplomas into news and entertainment media careers they wouldn't trade for anything.

"As you can see from the careers of these alumni," says Dean Harry Hellenbrand, "liberal arts graduates are trained to be flexible and self-reliant. What career worth its weight in salt does not want people who can think critically, write and speak well, and understand what makes people tick?"



KEVIN FALLS

★ ★ (JOUR '78) ★ ★

Former "West Wing" executive co-producer Kevin Falls was "so intimidated" by his Reporting 2 course during his sophomore year at Cal Poly that he dropped the class and applied to another state university.

Professor Jim Hayes had a habit of "dissecting" student stories in the classroom. "Even though he covered up your name, it was still hard to watch your story projected onto the wall with varicose veins of red ink all over it," Falls remembers.

But the transfer never took place, as Falls fell in love . . . with both a woman and with Cal Poly. He even

took Reporting 2 again, this time realizing that Hayes was "a tough but a brilliant writer" who taught him not just writing, but professional courtesy. "It was definitely a learn-by-doing thing," he says.

After graduation, Falls took a job as a newspaper reporter. But one day, he drove to the top of See Canyon and looked at "those wonderful clouds over the Seven Sisters at sundown."

A "seminal moment" in his life occurred then. "I realized I didn't want to be a reporter. I wanted to write for television or film," he says. "My father had been in civic theater and my granddad directed light opera in Oakland. So I was always curious about the theater."

It was a tough choice but one that paid off relatively quickly. After authoring his first screenplay, Falls received an offer from Disney, which led to writing "The Temp," starring Faye Dunaway, Lara Flynn Boyle and Oliver Platt.

This success led to "the break of a lifetime," writing and co-producing for television on the 1999 series "Sports Night." Then, as success followed success, "West Wing" chief writer Aaron Sorkin invited Falls to join that show.

"Aaron did the bulk of the writing, but we each got to write a couple of scripts a year. He really elevated my game. When he left 'West Wing,' that solidified my decision to try something different," Falls says.

His next move was to write a pilot for a new series. "I was really proud of it, but the same day I heard that it wasn't going to happen, I got the call to work on a new show," he says.

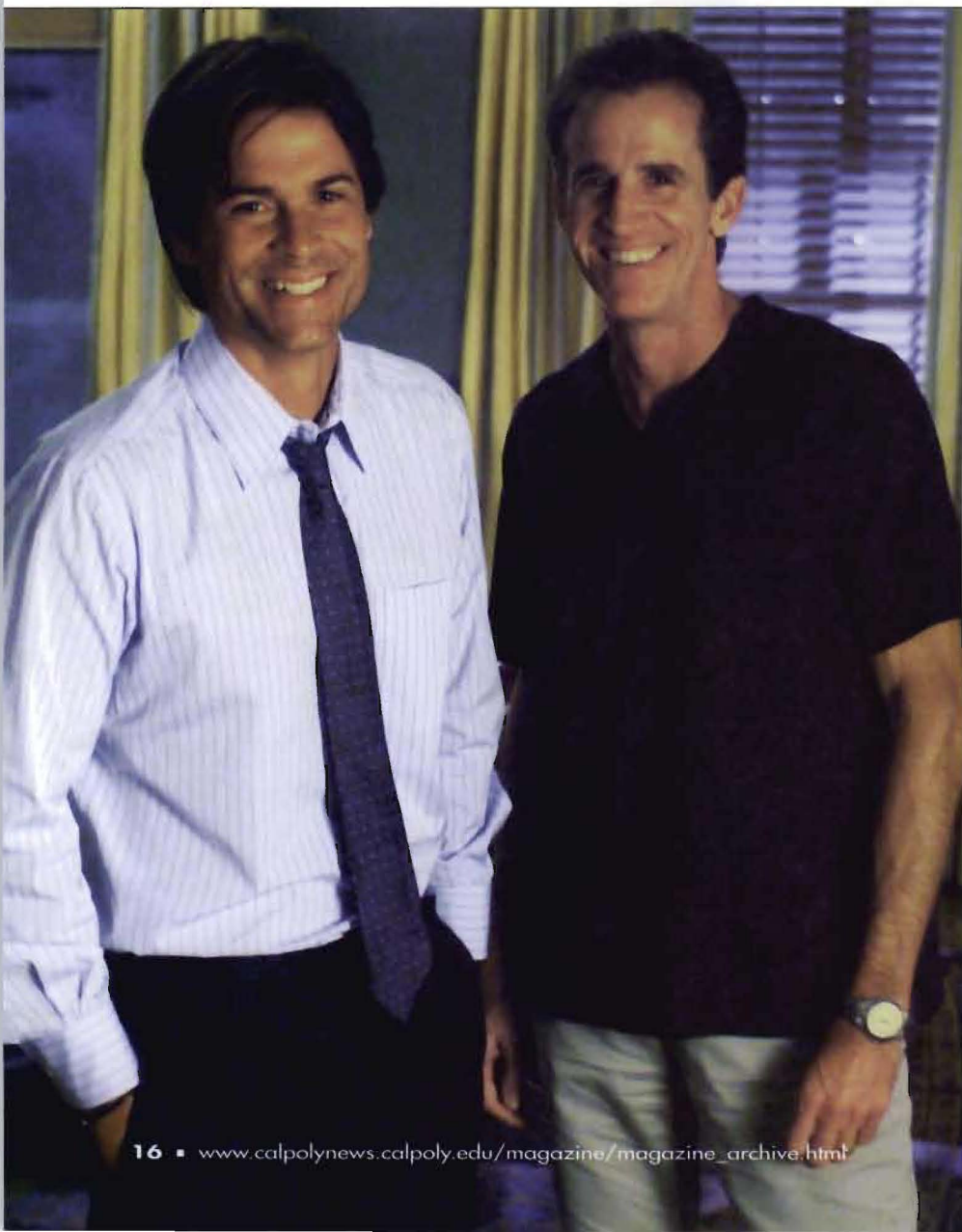
So Falls was off to Fox Studios, which was producing a show "about an idealistic young lawyer working in a legal clinic." In "The Lyon's Den," the main character – played by Rob Lowe – is somehow lured or leveraged into working for a big legal firm. Each week the episode solves some law-related story, but the greater mystery of why the character left the clinic remains unknown, Falls explains.

What advice does Falls have for students who hope to follow in his footsteps?

"Start out in journalism. First, there's such a paucity of good reporters," he says. "But also, journalism forces clarity and excluding the unnecessary. These abilities are key to writing for visual media, where the story has to move and the dialog has to be quick."

Screenwriter and producer Kevin Falls (right) with Rob Lowe, star of "The Lyon's Den."

Photo courtesy Fox Studios





Screenwriter, producer and director Jim Kouf

JIM KOUF

★ ★ (ENGLISH '74) ★ ★

Majoring in English and minoring in history – coupled with a mind that “works in movie mode” – helped Jim Kouf write his way to the Top 10 Movies list, not once but twice, with “Rush Hour” and “Stakeout.”

He is also the author and/or producer of scores of TV shows and other films, from “Con Air” to “White Fang.”

It was a class he took at Cal Poly that helped him realize his writing talent. “One of my favorite Cal Poly professors was Elizabeth B. Anderson in English, who taught playwriting, which is how I discovered I could do this in the first place. I did okay in fiction and non-fiction. But when I got to playwriting, it focused me completely in that direction,” Kouf says.

He also enjoyed the courses taught by the history department professors, especially Dan Kreiger. “I must have taken five or six courses under him. Now I incorporate history a lot in my writing,” he says.

In fact, as a writer, Kouf says he has used just about everything he

learned at Cal Poly, even logic.

“When you write, you have to be able to figure out the logic of the situation. A lot of people hated logic class,” he recalls, “but I thought it was fun.”

There wasn’t much Kouf didn’t like about his college years. “The whole thing was such a great experience. I lived in Baywood Park, Shell Beach and in town. I always had roommates with boats and other good toys,” he says. “I try now to take my four kids up there once a year. We like to go hiking at Montaña de Oro.”

How did Kouf break into the entertainment media industry? “I grew up in Burbank and have been trying to get out of town my whole life. I really thought I was going to New York to be a playwright, but I just didn’t have the money at the time,” he says.

So he went back to Los Angeles. He drove a truck. He sold paint. And after three years, he started making it as a writer for a series of low-budget films.

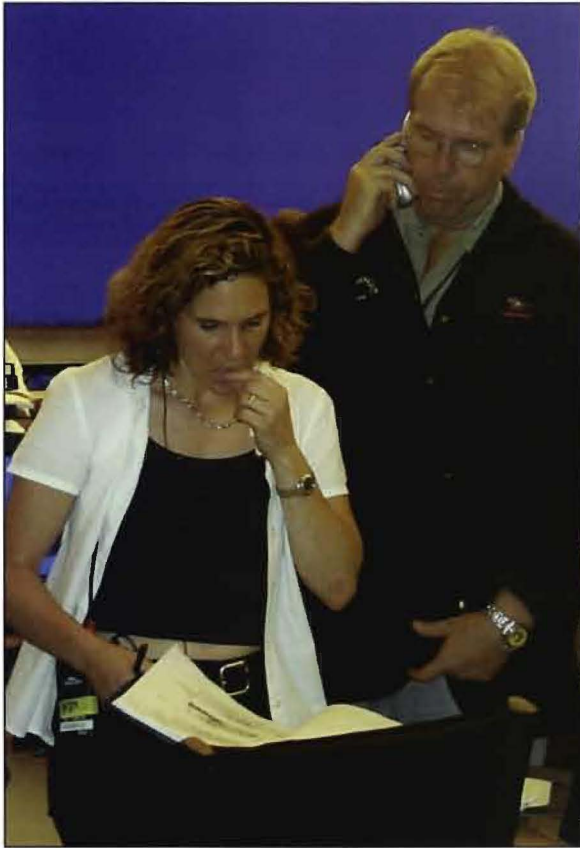
Writing is the best way to get into the entertainment media, in Kouf’s opinion. You can have “almost instant access” if you can

write well. You don’t need to make a big investment, “just paper, pencil and an imagination.”

He does acknowledge that it is a challenge for even talented new writers to get their work read. “Go in the side door to an agent, through somebody like me,” he advises. “Or come to Hollywood and start hanging around. Take a job as a production assistant, whatever you can get.”

On the topic of writing versus producing or directing, Kouf points out that writers have very little control over their work unless they produce and direct, too. He has produced and directed – even acted once. “But if you produce, you have to raise the money. So I do a lot of work for hire. Writing is really my preference. I only do the other things to keep some control or exert influence,” he says.

Kouf is considering teaching screenwriting at some point. “If I teach screenwriting, I will include how to sell yourself and your story. What you tell ... leave behind ... how to present it all. Lots of good writers have a hard time with this aspect of the business,” he says.



Lisa Satriano with "Spider-Man 2" producer Joe Caracciolo

Below, a scene from the first "Spider-Man" movie
 Courtesy Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. ©2003



LISA SATRIANO

★ ★ (ART '89) ★ ★

Pacing the set at Sony Pictures Entertainment studios, Lisa Satriano talks intently into her cell phone about such things as grips, cranes and platforms. "Spider-Man 2" is definitely an action film.

A first assistant director, Satriano has a great deal of experience with the rigors of the action genre, including shooting a 10-camera chase scene in downtown L.A. "We kept the locals awake, I'm afraid," she recalls. "They responded by throwing things like bottles. Someone even threw a statue at us!"

Not the future she envisioned initially, when she planned to study sports medicine. "But then I got interested in film," she says. "Since there wasn't a video program at Cal Poly then, I concentrated on photography, which turned out to be a great background for film."

Already savvy about lighting and composition when she went to

graduate school for a filmmaking degree, she was able to hit the ground shooting. While the other students were still trying to figure out f-stops, she was interning on the hit TV show "Knot's Landing."

Satriano's big break came when she worked as production assistant for two movies of the week, directed by the same people who later directed the movie "The Babe," starring John Goodman and Kelly McGillis. The director was Arthur Hiller, who was also president of the Director's Guild of America. "He was my mentor and advisor, reviewing my work and giving me pointers. I got into the director's guild on "The Babe," she says.

Satriano continued racing up the learning curve, studying other directors such as Tom Hanks. When Hanks directed his first movie, "That Thing You Do," she was there as second assistant director. New to the director's chair himself, Hanks was "quite humble and actually solicited input," she says. As he listened to his crew, so did she.

Although Satriano's list of credits is long and impressive, the production closest to her heart is the independent film "The Setting Son." A winner of three film festival awards, the movie is also doing well in foreign distribution.

The star is a friend of hers who had Hodgkin's disease. "What he wanted to do more than anything was make a movie," she explains. "So when he inherited \$100,000 from his granny, we did it. The storyline is about an Olympic sailor who goes back to help his brother, who has a life-threatening illness."

It's lunch break on the "Spider-Man 2" set, but Satriano's cell phone rings again. This time she discusses a "shoot out." No, not a gunfight – just filming all of Doc Ock's scenes first, so that actor Alfred Molina can work on another movie. "Happens all the time now. We shot Kirsten Dunst out at the beginning of this movie, so she could start another movie," Satriano explains. The action never stops.

STEFFAN TUBBS

★ ★ (JOUR '92) ★ ★

When Steffan Tubbs first visited ABC's Prospect Studios lot in Los Angeles, he had no idea he would work there one day.

At that point he was a Cal Poly student interviewing for an Associated Press scholarship. Now he is a national correspondent for ABC News.

Tubbs has covered such meaty stories as the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11th tragedy in New York City. His

assignments have included the 2002 Winter Games, the World Series and Super Bowls. Currently, he is reporting on the Laci Peterson and Kobe Bryant cases.

On the road 83 days in 2002, travel "sometimes seems constant." One of his favorite stories, though, he found closer to home.

For two years Tubbs had been trying to profile Del Mar announcer Trevor Denman, a racetrack legend. As luck would have it, the story finally aired just two days before the movie "Seabiscuit" premiered this past summer, winning his

mini-documentary a whopping six minutes on ABC's "World News Now."

"The main thing I like about my job is I never know what I'm going to see next," Tubbs says. "The most fun I've had on a story was when Mark McGuire was in pursuit of Roger Maris's record in 1998."

He also enjoyed the 2002 World Series in Anaheim, when he and fellow Cal Poly journalism grad David Voros met up with Cal Poly alum and baseball legend Ozzie Smith.

While at Cal Poly, Tubbs recalls that his greatest challenge was persuading the campus radio station to do newscasts. On the other hand, he also found a lifelong mentor on campus in the late Herb Kamm – veteran journalist, teacher and *Mustang Daily* advisor.

"He meant the world to me. He was my inspiration in college and throughout my career. Even as recently as last year, I was calling him from Jerusalem," said Tubbs, who delivered a eulogy at Kamm's memorial service last year.

A Stanford Media Fellow himself, Tubbs enjoys keeping the Kamm tradition alive, returning to campus to mentor those journalism students he considers to be "diamonds in the rough." He tells them, "I really believe in everything I say and I am passionate about my job. If you are not passionate, you're not in the right business."

He also advises students to study the broad spectrum of journalistic skills. "You have to be able to do it all – radio, television, even the Web. When I'm out in the field talking on the phone to a director, it's not just on TV or radio. It's also being posted as breaking news on *ABCNews.com*," he explains.

Future plans include covering the summer Olympics in Greece in 2004. "I'm also working on a master's in humanities, history, at Cal State Dominguez Hills," he says, "but my grand plan is to retire in SLO."

Steffan Tubbs (left) with baseball legend Ozzie Smith and another Cal Poly alum, David Voros

Courtesy ABC News

The ABC News correspondent in his studio office (below)

