When Matt Ryckman 11B was in tenth grade, he made short goofy videos and brought them to school, hoping to make his friends laugh. He and a crew of Emory friends made a short movie this year, but the audience it attracted wouldn’t fit in your high school hallway. The Gerstein Report, about a conscience-stricken Nazi scientist, was named Best Drama at the Campus MovieFest (CMF) International Grande Finale in Las Vegas in June.

Matthew Fennell 11C, who directed the five-minute film with Ryckman (they’re “the Matts” in Emory film circles) calls it “a great experience to spend time doing this with your friends. And we knew we had something special in our high school hallway.”

When Kurt Gerstein, a member of the dreaded Waffen-SS, says it was a challenge to inhabit the character, but one he relished. Kurt Gerstein, a member of the dreaded Waffen-SS, developed techniques for vermin control—including the infamous Zyklon B gas—then became consumed by guilt once he realized his role in the killings at death camps like Belzec and Treblinka.

Ryckman says his tenth-grade videos may have been made for laughs, but such early attempts “taught us how to see a film come together before it’s edited, what shot should follow what shot.” They all added lessons from Emory’s film studies department—including his, Fennell, and Ryckman. "When I first heard about this picture I thought, Are you nuts? You’re going to make a five-minute Holocaust drama. With twenty-year-olds. These are things you supposedly can’t do on a low budget, with a student cast. But the decisions they made were so smart. The film is shrewd, sincere, technically very competent, and ambitious without being overreaching. They took it right to the limit of what they could do well.”

And thanks to the movie magic arising from sound technique, it works. The Gerstein Report (readily available on YouTube) doesn’t look or feel amateurish. All three principals attribute this to luck, hard work, and more than a little help from their friends. The parts of General Wirth and Baron Von Otter, for example, were played by Derek Long 10G and Joey Shea 13C. (The French ambassador is film studies professor Bill Brown.) Giacomo Waller 12C did the sound, Stephen Yang 10C the score, and the cinemagrapher and line producer were Chris Knific 10B and Stephen Beehler 10B. It takes a village.

So what’s next after the MovieFest triumph? All three spent the summer in Los Angeles as interns—Ryckman in script development, Fennell in finance and development, Gerstein in cinematography—and they want to give Hollywood a try after graduation. It’s an exciting place, they say, fast-paced and competitive, and it turns out the clichés are true: every wasser is an actor, every bartender has a script. “I can’t say it doesn’t intimidate me a little,” Ryckman says, “but that’s why I want to do it. I don’t want to look back later and wish I’d tried. And I figure if you’ve got a dream, you have to chase it.”