The Lost Chord

By Murray Kempton

Three years ago, come August, Arthur Miller submitted to the New York City Youth Board a memorandum on a movie he hoped to write about a youth worker and his street gang.

That film was never produced, because it depended on the approval of Mayor Wagner and the Youth Board itself. The American Legion raised the issue of Arthur Miller's "questionable political background," and that was enough, as it seems always to be, to make the city administration fold up.

We might have that movie by now, and with it something we could send to the Cannes Film Festival without being a little ashamed of having done less than our best. The Youth Board would have had five per cent of the profits—at least enough to send another youth worker to the Bronx. Instead we have our purity.

Arthur Miller, in preparation for this lost project, lived two summer months of 1955 with street gangs. We have had no witness to their lives who has a talent and a seriousness so high as his. It occurred to me that, in our present time of trouble, there might be something that could speak to us in the memorandum he submitted to the Youth Board. He was kind enough to send it to me.

It was 25 pages long, and there is not enough room here for the details of the story line. Miller himself was rather proud of having skimped those details. "I am," he said, "withholding my inner commitment to any story until I am certain beyond doubt that the story of this film is *the* story of juvenile delinquency and not merely a persuasive fraction thereof."

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What speaks to us most compellingly are a few thoughts Arthur Miller set down in his memorandum. They are the thoughts of a sensitive man and a good father. It is sad to think of them buried in the lost file of an aborted project:

"When a Youth Board worker descends into the streets, he is going back into human history a distance of thousands of years. Thus, it is fruitless merely to say that the delinquent must be given love and care—or the birch rod. What is involved here is a profound conflict of man's most subtle values. The deeper into their lives the Youth Board worker goes, the more apparent it becomes that they are essentially boys who have never made contact with civilized values; boys without a concept of the father as the father is normally conceived, boys without an inkling of the idea of social obligation, personal duty or even rudimentary honor. To save one of these is obviously a great piece of work and it has been done time after time . . .

"The saved boy, in a word, becomes not merely a 'good citizen' or 'just like anybody else' after having been an outlaw. Having seen society from the very bottom, the insight he gains is remorselessly honest when he does gain insight. He cannot be 'conned'; he is immune to the easy solutions that bemuse the rest of us who are less tightly bound to reality; he is pragmatic and breathtakingly idealistic at the same time."

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Jerry Bone, the Youth Board worker of Arthur Miller's creation, quits at the end in a sort of "proud exhaustion."

"Finally Jerry's own children, having lived a life waiting for him, having lived, in fact, without his supervision, begin to show the dreadful signs of delinquency themselves. The thematic principle of this story, barely suggested here, is that we have time for everything but our children; but more, that sometimes it is beyond good and evil. Our world with its remorseless disciplinary demands —the machines must be tended, the mail opened, the phone answered —our world is organized without any reference to family life. And that is one—only one—cause of the bewilderment of our kids.

"Jerry Bone is a carrier of love, and this picture will be a kind of love story—his profound respect and affection for the young human being. But it is our tragic circumstance that we have only so much love for strangers; and, because we have not enough, these strangers are striking back at the loveless world we have made."

And, of the boys in his gang:

"Throughout the picture, their boredom will be like an insistent counterpoint to every movement, every act. They have nothing to do. The great city is building and rebuilding, the traffic is endlessly flowing, the phones by the millions are ringing, the lights are blinking on a thousand marquees, but they are afraid to leave their corner, especially alone, and they live without an inkling that people are supposed to occupy themselves, that their lives are supposed to be meaningful . . .

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"We read about gangs, we see pictures of them, and the image is one of fierceness. They are certainly fierce in battle—but that is only part of what they are. A gang fight rarely, if ever, lasts more than three or four minutes. The truth is that they are scared kids underneath it all, so scared that, as I have said, a gang war can be quickly mediated—if one is adept and knowing.

"What they must have in exchange for peace, however, is a shred of dignity. They are children who have never known life except as a worthless thing; they have been told from birth that they are nothing, that their parents are nothing, and their hopes are nothing.

"The group in this picture will end, by and large, with a discovery of their innate worth. And Jerry Bone will have been the carrier of that cargo. That is what the picture is about."

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Such is the gift that we have rejected; such is the peril from which Wagner and the Legion and Lawrence Gerosa have rescued us.

Arthur Miller said, after the city decided that his movie could not be made:

"Now let us see whether fanaticism can do what it never could do in the history of the world; let it perform a creative act; let it take its club in hand and write what it has just destroyed."

Fanaticism cannot do that, any more than it can take its club in hand and save a child.