

Sam Shepard's *Angel City*: The Broken Vision

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Sam Shepard's, *Angel City* represents a culmination of the first decade of his work. The play bears the unmistakable stamp of Shepard, the avant-gardist with its surrealistic dream structure and its creative transformations of character. It exhibits Shepard's bizarre sense of humour with its satanic attack on Hollywood. Shepard's America emerges largely as a land of failed promise and lost attachment. It is an economic jungle thriving on exploitation and excess profit. The American dream for success has lost its contact with the mythic past in which purity of self, cleanliness of life and dignified manners are upheld. The absence of the country's myth and the loss of certainty have been described in the plays of Shepard as the root causes of all misfortunes and disappointments.

Hence, Shepard creates in his plays some mythical and divine values of Gods and Angels and uses strong and resourceful cowboys as the mythic figures of the American west. Yet images on incest, nymphomania, and impotency abound in the plays, suggesting the moral degeneration and the poisoning of the culture. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard points out:

Myth always refers to a social reality, to the rites and institution of Society, and hence the truth of myth consists in its symbolic representation of the different rites. (5)

In so far as the study of Shepard's plays expose, he is much concerned with the spirit of the age, rejecting the systems which exploit human beings and ignoring their rights to self-fulfillment and social-upliftment, and regard them as mechanical tools. Shepardian world is filled with cosmic values. The images of the Sun, Moon, Blue sky, large ocean, lidless stars, which spring up in his plays, give the readers the impression of a different Shepardian cosmos. For the characters of Shepard, cosmic values are unimportant. What is significant for them is their familiarity with the material world, with economic prosperity and worldly comforts. They are not able to look at the Sun, Moon, and other planetary bodies with the same cosmic vision as the ancient people used to. It is that either they are acquainted sufficiently with the cosmic objects of that they do not want to include them in their worldly projects. Shepardian characters are blind-folded in a world of material success, which is simply an illusive and they never achieve real success. After a long nourishment of the vision of success, the characters get it uncertain, unfulfilled and broken.

It becomes clear when we examine Shepard's most applauded play, *Angel City*, in which a group of persons unite a dream about a new adventure in the Hollywood film industry. As Carol Rosen puts it, "*Angel City*, explores the playwright's own cinematic imagination, his impulse towards a filmic vocabulary, rooted in myths about power" (Rosen, 39). Having placed themselves far from the human reality, some men want to produce something new, which will be palatable to America's contemporary technique. Here, in the play, the characters like Wheeler, Lanx, Rabbit, Tympani, and Miss Scoons practice magic, trance states, dream visions and nightmares to create something new, in the Hollywood film world in the form of a surprise, which would certainly stun the people disturbed in their own situations. As wheeler states:

WHEELER: [...]. Not simply an act of terror, but something which will infact drive people right off the deep and end. Leave them blithering in the aisles. Create Mass hypnosis. Suicide. Auto-destruction. Something which will open entirely new facts in Sado-masochism. Penetrating every layer of their dark subconscious and leaving them totally unrecognizable to themselves. Something which not only mirrors their own sense of doom, but actually creates the possibility of it right there in front of them. (*Angel City and Others*, p.15)

In the same manner, Tympani envisions greatly and answers the question of Rabbit, the actor:

TYMPANI: [...]. In experimenting with various rhythm structures in the house of discovering one which will be guaranted to produce certain trance states in masses of people. (16)

But what ultimately the play projects are that all attempts end in disastrous failure as the characters lack co-ordination and imagination. So the play becomes a mocking Serio-Comedy which seems to discover the sickness behind the Celluloid dream machine through magic, trance states and fights of fantastical mystery. As a result, Wheeler sorrowfully expresses the ultimate failure of his great project:

WHEELER: [...]. It was gamble right from the start. I gambled on imagination and lost. My dream was to create an industry of imagination. Now look at it. Poisoned, putrefied. (42)
It is only a noble soul on earth that sees God and accepts cosmic values as the worldly virtues. But, on the contrary, the selfish and the vicious fail to get redemption with all integrity of soul. Hence, Shepard comes across hell as the only place for them to live in. Hell is psychologically a state of complete inner isolation in a motionless, soundless world. The dark world of hell seemed to lie, for the Shepardian characters stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars. The cosmic images like; hell, heaven, blue sky is metaphysical metaphors. Through the cosmic images, Shepard depicts loss and waste to all Social and Political institution. But, man's aloofness from all moral virtues has been instrumental in making the human world a hell with negative virtues.

Shepard's World, however idiosyncratic, is of course, America. He has analyzed the American problem in which an assumed solidity of identity was exposed and the Social Components of that identity are being exposed through his conscious use of images. The characters reflecting the country and complicate state are represented at the edge of their despair. They are lost in a situation of pain, anguish and powerlessness. They are characters who are concerned, subjugated to the will of an overwhelming social setting. Shepard simply shows the pain, deformities, wounds, inertia and drudgery of the claustrophobic souls on stage. At the outset of the *Angel City*, Lanx, a stricken film maker, refers to a dingy, crime-redden American environment:

Lanx: [...]. (as though reading from a script). It's a great office. A great window. A great life. All hell passes before me, and I can watch it like a junkie. (7)

As Leonard Wilcox observes:

In *Angel City*, Hollywood represents an entropic principle, a decreative universe. It represents the "dream dumb", a region of exhausted cultural icons and debased fantasy. Moreover, Hollywood in the play represents not only a landscape of profound instability and entropy but one on which American vision of success has been betrayed. The play also reveals a

dark vision of “no exist” from the stimulated and mediated World of Hollywood and from the “already written” Universe of Pop discourses. (63-64)

Shepard wants its audience to realize the immanent problems engulfing mankind today, and to include those problems in their lives and learn the lessons out of it. Through his plays Shepard continues to draw the public attention towards mythic figures and cosmic values so as to bring about a distinction between the Angel city in which we live and the Angel city of the Gods and the Angels.

Infact, Shepard’s *Angel City* is a parody of modern lives mocking all the time, the wrongly chosen adventuresome dreams for reality. His *Angel City* is filled with, “Cripples and lames [...]. They come and go” (36). Having no correctness of vision and uniformity of thought, all the character are blind folded in a dark world in which they simply quarrel with each other without a solution. Their vision is terribly limited, as a result of which, they take ocean to be a place of gold. The cosmic image of ocean brings for the ideas of beauty and majesty, but in Angel city, the ocean is subject to materials exploitation in which the evil-tongued monsters, the men discover gold, pearl and oil, making the ocean empty and saline. Miss Scoons says that: “The ambition behind the urge to create is no difficult from any other ambition. To kill, to win. To get on top” (31). This is something Shepard seems to negate. The creative is that which is related to good feeling and this goodness has cosmic presence. Shepard’s theme in *Angel City* is power which he works out through the background of movies and their most powerful influence on our imagination and lives. Here, we note a conflict between the genuine ambition of the artist and the ambition for power. The artistic vision is a cosmic one independent of the worldly vices and earthly attachments. The artist enjoys total freedom so as to create a work of art, alluring, enduring and projecting something new to the world. But, instead, the Los Angeles, which Shepard describes in the play “is an accurate image born of American dreams, nurtured by drive-ins, gang-wars, carhops, and sci-fi- flicks”. (Rosen, 39)

In *Angel City*, the American dream centers around the Hollywood film industry. A group of Americans consisting of film Producers, actors, director, and musician exercise their trail and vision to belong to the contemporary competitive American Society and Commerce. They venture to challenge the unpromising atmosphere of the country with Hollywood myth. But the Hollywood myth fails to hold the central vision of humanity due to unimaginative estimation and the disease of the screen. As J.Auron comments:

[...]. Shepard’s *Angel City* is about the “ultimate disaster”, of the socialization process of Hollywood. Through Shepard’s powerful mixture of lyricism, theatricality, music and myth, the play becomes a bitter comic condemnation of Los Angeles, Physical and symbolic “Smog” created by the Big Business of the Movie industry. (415-16)

Like a witch-doctor and like a Shaman, Shepard, through his *Angel City*, has tried to cure the modern illness, the Hollywood Mania. The play has a dream-like structure and its characters continually slip in and out of dream states and fantasy. The desire and vision are utterly contained in a one-dimensional universe. The characters themselves are confined to one space, the “great office” of a Hollywood studio, which is hermetically scaled. The only reference to a world beyond this space is suggested by the “large suspended blue neat rectangle with empty space in the middle” (7). This suggests a screen, the place where dreams and wishes are represented. Miss

Scoons's "I look at the screen and I am the Screen" (21), suggests that the Cinematic Screen reflects and contains the locus of desire.

Hunted by such a desire the characters of the play want to make something new armed with the weapons of falsity, deception and fake objects. These people are misguided, having no idea of the demands of time and culture. In trying to make wonders, they fall into the pit dug by them. By this, they deceive nobody except themselves. They attempt to influence the Mass-Media by Hollywood's false value repudiating the time-honoured concepts of truthfulness and innocence. The following conversation between Rabbit and Tympani is an evidence of it:

RABBIT: You are always standing?

TYMPANI: Always. Waiting for it to happen.

RABBIT: What "It"?

TYMPANI: "It".

RABBIT: Oh. "It".

TYMPANI: The rhythm. The one special, never-before-heard-before rhythm which will drive men crazy. (22) As Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's, *The Glass Menagerie* describes to his mother, his own precarious condition:

I'm going to opium dens: Yes opium dens, dens of vice and criminals hangouts, Mother, I've joined the Hogan gang. I'm a hired assassin. I carry a tommy gun in a violin case: I run a string of cut houses in the valley: They call me killer, killer Wing-field. I'm leading a double life, a simple, honest ware house worker by day, by night a dynamic Czar of the underworld [...]. (252) And as Yank in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* ironically assesses himself:

[...]. I belong and he doesn't. He's dead but I'm livin. Listen to me. Sure I'm part of de engines [...]. I'm de end. I'm de start. I start some's and de world moves [...]. And I'm what make iron into steel. Steel, dat stands for de whole ting [...]. (16-17)

Likewise, in Shepard's *Angel City*, we find the same tone in Wheeler, the studio-owner, who speaks like Tom and Yank showing his ability but deceiving himself. He cries out to all others in the Studio:

RABBIT: I was trying to resolve the problem from spiritual angle.

WHEELER: (Standing again) WHAT PROBLEMS? WHAT SPIRIT! FOR GOD'S SAKE, ISN'T ANYONE GOING TO TELL ME WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE? DON'T YOU THINK I'VE NOTICED? (43)

In another dialogue of his, the Wheeler's audacity is very much explicit:

WHEELER: (to Rabbit) I'll show you who is dead. (63)

Thus, the cosmos of Shepard has been contaminated with personal vices of the characters without the greatness of humility. Though the characters deplore their fall from grace, they feel quite helpless, being victimized by pride, possession of power, and a false show of honour.

However, all the characters in the play have fantasies which are in one way or another structured by movies. Wheeler ultimately desires the immortality conferred by the charismatic image of film: "I'M IMMORTAL: I'LL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED (52)! He shouts at Rabbit: "Right now there're people all around me; watching and remembering. As long as they're watching I'll be remembered" (52). Lanx secretly wants to be a famous boxer who is sought after by the media and who does on-screen interview. Rabbit is "ravenous for power" – the power of the "vision of a celluloid tape with a series of moving images" (12). Tympani's fantasy to win a

dinner is shaped by nostalgic images of television and film: “One dinner. Basically green, pale green walls. Chrome stools with black leatherette seats. Everyone’s face is reflected in those stools” (33). Desire is always “mediated”, shaped and constructed by filmic fantasy. Though films provoke a regression into fantasy and dream, they also become the very content of dream and desire. As Leonard Wilcox observe:

The play seems to affirm some underground realm of desire, some primal recesses of fantasy untouched by the media. Shepard seems to suggest that films appeal to a primal level of dream and instinctual Id-forces – even to a deep “Freudian” desire to merge with the materials principle or with death itself. (69)

In one of the disjunctive moments in the play, when characters suddenly speak “out of character”, Tympani “stands on the chair facing front and shouts like a little kid to his mother upstairs”:

I just wanna go to the movies, Ma! I don’ care about anything else! Just the movies! I don’t care about school or home work or college or jobs or marriage or kids of insurance front lawns or mortgage or even the light of day! I don’t care if I never see the Sun again, Ma! Just send me to the dark, dark movies. (24).

Wheeler is very much confident of theirs achievement. His vision is strong against any impossibility. For him, “curiosity breeds invention” (38). Miss Scoons the realist fells, “the ambition to transform valleys into cities” (32). Rabbit expects to, “come up with a character that nobody’s even seen before” (20). But their high expectation is not supported by the city. Their dream for building the castle with Hollywood myth is not sanctioned by the city. They are only dreamers for dream’s sake, whereas the situation demands to be practical and an ever wining athlete. Wheeler so realizes that they are being eaten up by the city, which is turning them poisonous like snake. For the sake of nourishing the demand of the modern life, the world permits all the artists to turn “into snake” (14). Art has been poisoned and the free values of art remain unrealized by mankind. Rabbit feels that the modern art making is a disease:

RABBIT: I mean you’ve got all of us turning ourselves inside out for you, but nobody really knows what it is you’re suffering from.

WHEELER: That’s my business.

RABBIT: It’s no business! It’s a disease. (42)

With the death of old myth the diseased myth does not bring about the prosperity, on the other hand, the adversity. Miss Scoons well realizes the out come of their endeavours:

MISS SCOONS: [...]. None of us has got a thing. We’re only going in circles, we’re only going in and around, we’re only getting nowhere fast. (30)

That is why, the city is dead. All the living beings are the replacements for the dead. Such reality makes the Rabbit exhausted. He says:

RABBIT: I’m exhausted. I can’t keep up with this. I’m just going to look out the window for a while. May be something will come to me [...]. (41)

Likely, after being completely disgusted, Wheeler, looking up to the cosmos but not following the real significance of it, speaks out in an unhappy tone:

WHEELER: [...]. The moon raced across the sky. The planets howled performed a conversation in empty space. (50)

But, how can the moon have a racing power when it lacks illumination, and how can the planets howl in space when they are totally powerless and depend upon the Sun for the power of illumination? However, Tympani gives a good answer: “This earth is a place of trouble and death where deranged citizen rule” (28). Hence, in the cosmos of Shepard, we smell only hell in which junkies live a care-free life with all kinds of dopes and drugs. The Angel city is clearly transformed into hell, where all the characters lead the lives of emptiness, derangement and endless agony. Finally, “the city thunders with the hollow moon of despair” (16). The long nourished vision of the inhabitants of the city is broken. The play concludes with the apocalyptic vision. Wheeler yet expects, “Anything is possible here” (46). Shouting at Rabbit, he says, “I’M ESTABLISHED: I’M in the business. I’m in pictures. I plant pictures in people’s heads” (52). He makes his ambitions clear: “It is going to open up the world. It’s going to get me out of here”.(53)

But, the banality of Hollywood film engulfs the play’s world as the characters are engulfed by the green slime that oozes from Rabbit’s machine bundles. The world of the play is turned inside out: everything becomes filmic representation. The primary space the characters inhabit is transformed into the cinematic screen, as Lanx and Miss Scoons take their positions upstage, eat imaginary popcorn, and impassively watch the “on-screen” action between Wheeler and Rabbit. Wheeler tries frantically to communicate with them, but as Rabbit tells his “All they’re looking at is a moving picture show” (52). Then in another dramatic shift, filmic representation encompasses the entire fictional world of the play as Miss Scoons and Lanx themselves become actors in a movie, mouthing the script of a 1950s teenage “Juvenile delingnat” film:

MISS SCOONS: (to Lanx) I’M not supposed to stay for the second one Ya’know, Jimmy.

LANX: Yeah, Yeah.

MISS SCOONS: Well, I’m not I’m supposed to be back before eleven.

LANX: I just wanna stay for the titles.

MISS SCOONS: Last time you said that we never get back until, there in the morning.

LANX: That was last time.

MISS SCOONS: I almost got sent to Juvie. I don’t wanna’ got sent to Juvie again.

LANX: Relax, will Ya’. You’re not gonna get sent to Juvie, for Christ’s sake. I just wanna’ see the titles. (53-54)

The play is thus a kind of self-annihilating Mobius strip. Its “apocalypse” is the text culminating in an enactment of its own obliteration.

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