

Don Juan Project

By Lawrence Bommer

DON JUAN PROJECT

Bailiwick Repertory

It's no accident that in almost every treatment of the Don Juan story the legendary womanizer never successfully seduces anyone. The most famous versions--by Moliere, Shaw, Musset, Dumas, and, in Mozart's masterpiece, Da Ponte--reveal him at the end of his career (or, in the case of Shaw, after that). Irresistible and cursed, arrogant and doomed, Don Juan is an object of ambivalence, the recipient of our sublimated sympathy for the devil. It's as if writers and audiences want to have it both ways--to vicariously enjoy the philandering after the fact, reassured by his punishment and smugly sure that after abusing hordes of women they'd never suffer damnation. We enjoy the fantasy and pull up just short of the nightmare.

In its ambitious "Don Juan Project," Bailiwick Repertory exploits the antihero as grandly as he did women. Three full-length shows--Don Juan, Dear, Hell, and Don Juan on Halsted--reveal dramatically different sides of the same serviceable tale. (The project also includes readings of works by Moliere, Horvath, Rostand, and others.) The idea is to question why this Western myth persists and whether it should.

Adapted by Brendan Baber (who also plays Don Juan) and director James Pelton from the 1844 versified costume drama *Don Juan Tenorio* by Jose Zorrilla y Moral, Don Juan is the most traditional telling. To the surprise of the author, who wrote the original play in a mere six days, it was wildly popular; it's still regularly revived in the Spanish-speaking world as part of the Day of the Dead festivities.

Watching this production, you can see why. The play offers lots of action and the quintessential Andalusian lover--suave and stoic, handy with pistol and sword. In the first act he's the arch defier of God and man and defiler of women, but by the second act Don Juan is chastened. His virtuous fiancée Dona Ines has died of a broken heart, and Don Juan is now obsessed with human suffering, daunted by the magnitude of a wartime massacre he witnessed. When Don Juan wannabes fell him, his rival Don Luis argues for the rake to be sent to hell, to teach him his insignificance before God. But in Zorrilla's lyrical apotheosis, a still-adoring Dona Ines saves her dying lover, quenching his last gasps with a potion of immortality.

No critique of the Don Juan mystique, in fact a kind of benchmark for the other plays in the "Don Juan Project," the Pelton/Baber version is unashamedly romantic, to the point of inserting intrusive excerpts from William Blake, Andrew Marvell, and Gerard Manley

Hopkins. But like the looming Spanish–baroque set, by Jacqueline and Richard Penrod, Pelton's richly hued staging is tinged with melancholy. Baber's confident, sensuous, empty Juan seethes with the bluster of a sinner who's failed even by his own standards. Combining Juan's desperate bravado with a palpable worldweariness, Baber conveys this stud's utter sterility.

Fast-paced and well-honed, Pelton's staging boasts rich work—Michele Gregory's fragile, impassioned Dona Ines, Darrel Ford's philosophical Don Luis, and Guy Massey as a noble sculptor. Ford has also choreographed the sprawling, pulse-pounding, scenery-smashing sword fights, rich as any rhetoric.

To George Bernard Shaw, ever the lover of paradox, the Don Juan legend was meant to be turned on its head. The triumph of the double bill that makes up *Dear, Hell*, Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" enjoys a captivating, rigorously intelligent staging by Brendon Fox.

Brilliantly argued, this philosophical interlude from Shaw's *Man and Superman* confronts us with a very unromantic view of the infamous lover—and with Shaw's peculiar underworld. Don Juan, long dead, converses with his former lover/victim Dona Ana, her father the Statue (his former victim, now a dear friend), and an epicene Devil. Juan has become bored with hell and its platitudes about love and beauty and argues eloquently for the virtues of heaven, "the home of the masters of reality." Having abandoned romance for a headier pursuit—that of truth, or the Life Force—Juan announces his intent to move to heaven, where he'll be free of hell's artistic cant and irrelevant search for happiness. He persuades Ana, now entranced by the woman's part in the Life Force, to join him.

Fox's skilled quartet, all in full possession of their characters, superbly orchestrate Shaw's symphony of ideas. Rob Nagle's flawless Juan pours out a fast-flowing stream of eloquence; Michael Weber's Devil (a part he's played twice before) is a smooth-faced sybarite and an elegant antagonist; Kate Fry is winsome as Ana moves from bewilderment to conviction; and Don Blair's bluff, no-nonsense Statue provides earthy common sense and comic relief.

Opening the bill is "Dear Juan," an ensemble-generated music and dance drama from the Abiogenesis Movement Ensemble, conceived and directed by Angela Allyn from a score by Robert Steele. Inventively performed but inert ideologically, the work skews the Don Juan legend by offering the perspectives of 14 of his victims. Here there's no single Don Juan; rather he's defined, not as the arch seducer, but as any man who's harmed a woman—whether by rape, battery, incest, betrayal, or scorn. The performers are dressed surrealistically as beauty-pageant contestants ("Miss Punching Bag," "Miss Vestal Virgin") and wear the number of their conquest by Don Juan. In song, dance, and speech they testify to male predation: a Mormon girl's sodomization by her date because the church doesn't consider anal penetration a sin; Don Juan's fornications with his mother, sister, and daughter; a Chinese woman's punishment for not pleasing her mate.

At the end we're told the show was not about Don Juan, "it's about ourselves." Not true—it's obsessed by him, so much so that the women have little identity apart from their victimization. They define themselves by his crimes.

Tartly written, Steele's sardonic songs are well wrought by the sure ensemble. But "Dear Juan" is a tract with costumes.

Revvng the Don Juan legend into lavender overdrive is *Don Juan on Halsted*, a witty new musical satire by R. John Roberts, who wrote the book and directs, and composer/lyricist Eric Lane Barnes. Here Don Juan is a gay blade called simply the Man who's managed to break the hearts of no less than four patrons of Giovanni's, a decline opera bar. Pacing about this watering hole of "failed love and failed business," these good-hearted losers discover that they've all fallen for the same busy bouncer—worse, they pinned their hearts to a Mr. Right they never really knew. As last call draws near, desperation mounts: Was he just the product of their imaginations?

More believable than this false fantasy are the catty bar denizens, neatly distinguished by Roberts's pungent dialogue and the stylistic gamut of Barnes's score, a pastiche that includes a country ballad, torch song, ragtime rouser, tango, and parodies of Jacques Brel and Cole Porter. Andy is needy, whiny, and as perky as a 30s chorus boy; leatherman/English teacher Jon knows the Man only through phone sex and the atrocious grammar of his semiliterate love letters; the aging Female Impersonator is decidedly not, he tells us, a drag queen; and Donna is a fag hag with a history of marrying gay men in haste and repenting in Reno.

When the Man shows up, the foursome dress him down in "You're the Bottom," a parody catalog of horrors (including in its list of downers a "Reader review"--is nothing sacred?). The Man's response is to give them an instant 12-step program: he urges them to get a love life by lowering their sights (practical advice, perhaps, but here clumsily didactic--besides, many would rather hold onto a fantasy than compromise). Obediently the four of them pair off to provide a peppy but forced happy ending.

Though Barnes, who also appears as a keyboard player, forces rhymes where even Sondheim would lay off ("aura" with "sayonara") and launches such lines as "Love is the lily of the valley of the shadow of death," he also takes sharp aim at tempting targets: the striptease number "It All Comes Down to Skin" is an obvious barb at Party, the nudity-rich gay comedy playing in the theater next door. And the bitchy "I Love Him" trio cleverly parodies the Polly-Lucy duet in Beggar's Opera.

Roberts's cast are rich in cunning contrasts--Marc Foster as Andy is resilient, Roscoe Fraser as the Female Impersonator provides whiplash putdowns, Natalie Ross as Donna is unflappably spunky, John Cardone as Jon shows a wry reserve, and Russell Alan Rowe as the Man offers a Method intensity. Playing an accommodating waiter, Rob Krahenbuhl is a smoothly effective foil to all the heartbreak around him.