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OVERNIGHT. Theater.

Feminists And Shaw Meet Up With Don Juan

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It is hard to imagine a more uncomfortable pair.

"Dear Juan" is a messy, ungainly cross between a musical, a Bacchic rite and a 12-step program: Its tribe of unhinged women come together from different social strata, generations and even centuries to bare their souls and supply mutual support. They wail and fight with one another, croon and waltz, do conjuring dances. They take turns declaiming their men-are-bastards testimonials. They get savage, get sad, visit bliss and lapse at times into incoherence.

"Don Juan in Hell," meanwhile, is the soul of erudition. It is an exquisite little theatrical conceit, written by George Bernard Shaw in 1903 to serve as part of his "Man and Superman." Its savagery is all rhetorical and it is never, ever incoherent.

No, the two of them are not an obvious mix. But yoked together for Bailiwick Repertory's ingenious Don Juan Project, they generate a Hepburn-and-Tracyish chemistry-and not merely because of the contrast. They also express an unexpected affinity. Once you get past the glaring differences in style, it turns out that they have real grounds for agreement.

The Don Juan Project is meant to offer a variety of takes on the legendary lover, and "Dear Juan" supplies a post-feminist perspective. Directed by Angela Allyn of the Abiogenesis Movement Ensemble, the piece introduces us to 14 of the don's thousands of conquests from across the last 740 years, presenting them in a sort of Parade of Victims.

A lot of what the 14 have to say isn't pleasant. We meet Juan's mother, sister and daughter, each of them shattered by incest. We meet victims of rape and patriarchy, of smooth lines and forlorn hopes. The women wear sashes that identify them, pageant-style, as Miss Dutiful Daughter or Miss Punching Bag. They tell their stories in graphic, angry terms.

But they also take a randy pleasure in their sexuality-especially Ruby, a Utah woman (marvelously played by Catherine Skillman) who tells how she worked her way out of the Mormon Church, one assignation at

a time. The Parade of Victims turns before long into a celebration of life.

"Don Juan in Hell" celebrates life, too, but on a much more rarefied plane. Shaw posits a meeting in Hell among Juan, Lucifer, a woman named Ana and Ana's father. The four of them take part in a debate that cannot possibly be summarized here except to say that it is a typically breathtaking Shavian exercise in turning social assumptions upside down and, therefore, right side up.

Brendon Fox's direction is as crisp as Allyn's is raggedy, and his company does him proud-especially Rob Nagle, with his relentless Juan, and Michael Weber, whose Devil resembles nothing so much as a very competent maitre d'.

"Dear Juan" and "Don Juan in Hell" run through March 6 at Bailiwick Repertory, 1225 W. Belmont Ave.
Phone 312-327-5252.