

LEGIT REVIEWS

The Wood Demon

(Mark Taper Forum, L.A.;
760 seats; \$35 top)

A Mark Taper Forum presentation of the Antaeus Company in a play in four acts by Anton Chekhov, from a new translation by Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer; director, Dwyer; sets, lighting, D Martyn Bookwalter; costumes, Holly Poe Durbin; sound, Jon Gottlieb; music, Theo Saunders. Producing director, Robert Egan; artistic director, Gordon Davidson. Opened April 7, 1994; reviewed April 6; runs through May 22.

Cast: John Achorn, John Apicella, Anne Gee Byrd, Marsha Dietlein, Nike Doukas, Frank Dwyer, Mark Harelik, Dan Kern, Eric Allan Kramer, Jeremy Lawrence, Donald Sage Mackay, Dakin Matthews, Rose Portillo, Lawrence Pressman, Nicholas Saunders, Raphael Sbarge, Mary Stark, Janellen Steininger, Lorraine Toussaint, John Walcutt.

There's a reason Chekhov never allowed another performance of "The Wood Demon" after a disastrous 1889 opening. The play ran too long, had confusing dramatic action, minimal structure, and the fourth act was a nightmare. Besides, he borrowed its themes and some of its characters for a slightly better-known work a few years later, "Uncle Vanya."

Nonetheless, proclaims the Antaeus Company, "The Wood Demon" is worth resurrecting to

honor the Russian scribe in his early "happier" years. He was 29 when he penned the rural drama.

The result is a spectacular production of a so-so play with a terrific translation. Director Frank Dwyer and actor Nicholas Saunders, who collaborated on the adaptation, breathe life into this Russian corpse with brisk, playful language and loose, colloquial English that, for once in Chekhov, doesn't echo of a language primer.

The cast, as well, is up to the task, with actors rotating nightly in the 16 roles. Plot's typical of Chekhov, with several bickering, upscale families ensconced on a lavish country estate.

The rich landowner professor, Aleksander (Dakin Matthews), wants to sell his house and forest, a particularly galling concept to the Wood Demon (Mark Harelik), a handsome, ecologically minded doctor who lives to keep the Russian forests healthy.

Equally irked by the professor's decision is Zhorzh (Lawrence Pressman), the brother of his first wife, who will be left homeless by the sale.

Toss in a love interest for the Wood Demon in the professor's daughter Sonya (Nike Doukas), her nerdy jealous suitor Zheltoukhin (Raphael Sbarge) and a



Mark Harelik and Nike Doukas in Chekhov's "The Wood Demon" at the Mark Taper Forum.

romantic subplot between Fedya (Eric Allan Kramer), the son of a neighboring landowner, and Yulya (Janellen Steininger), sister to Zheltoukhin.

Confused?

If Chekhov wasn't, then the Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, which rejected the piece in the last century, probably was.

The play veers haughtily in various directions, taking stabs at sociological class warfare alongside denunciations of the plundering of the environment. In between social statements, it charts two love stories, but resolves them so awkwardly, they grow meaningless.

Dwyer turns this into a watchable piece of theater. He playfully explores how ridiculous human beings can behave (one of the play-

wright's typical themes), but not without maintaining a Chekhovian tension that hovers over his plays. Should we take it seriously? Yes, but remember they're just human beings. And they're all lunatics.

Harelik brings a stoic buffoonish quality to the Wood Demon, who struggles to maintain his moral code while falling desperately in love.

Matthews steals the show as the unyielding professor with a dry irascibility that begs attention. Pressman as Zhorzh also provides amusement in his angst-ridden pleas to be taken seriously as a lover by the professor's wife.

John Apicella offers a delightfully fey turn as the neighbor who churns the plot by eloping with the professor's wife.

D Martyn Bookwalter's sets and lighting are stunning. Scores of huge branches hang from the Taper ceiling and leaves clutter the hardwood stage to indicate the Russian countryside.

Costumes by Holly Poe Durbin are suitably 19th century rustic. And Jon Gottlieb's sound design offers a marvelous rain and thunderstorm in the midst of the squabbling indoors.

The troupe, which claims to be Los Angeles' first resident rep company, is dedicated to the classics. As a rep group, they're superb. Let's just hope next time, they're given a more worthy text for their talents. —Dan Cox

Medea

(Longacre Theater, New York;
1,095 seats; \$50 top)

A Bill Kenwright presentation of the Almeida Theater Company production of a play in one act by Euripides, translated by Alistair Elliot. Directed by Jonathan Kent. Set, Peter J. Davison; costumes, Paul Brown; lighting, Wayne Dowdeswell, Rui Rita; music, Jonathan Dove; sound; John A. Leonard; movement, Caroline Pope; production stage manager, Dianne Trulock; general manager, Stuart Thompson; produced in association with the Liverpool Playhouse. Opened April 7, 1994, reviewed April 6.

Medea	Diana Rigg
Women of Corinth	Judith Paris, Jane Loretta Lowe, Nuala Willis
Nurse	Janet Henfrey
Tutor	John Southworth
Creon	John Turner
Jason	Tim Oliver Woodward
Aegeus	Donald Douglas
Messenger	Dan Mullane
Children	Tyler Noyes, Lucas Wiesendanger

There can be few more daunting theatrical challenges than bringing Greek tragedy to life for a contemporary audience. Nearly two years ago, London's adventurous Almeida Theater Company premiered Alistair Elliot's translation of Euripides' "Medea" for a production starring Diana Rigg; the later West End production has now made its way to Broadway. Rigg is not likely to be as strong a box office draw here as

Turn to page 30