

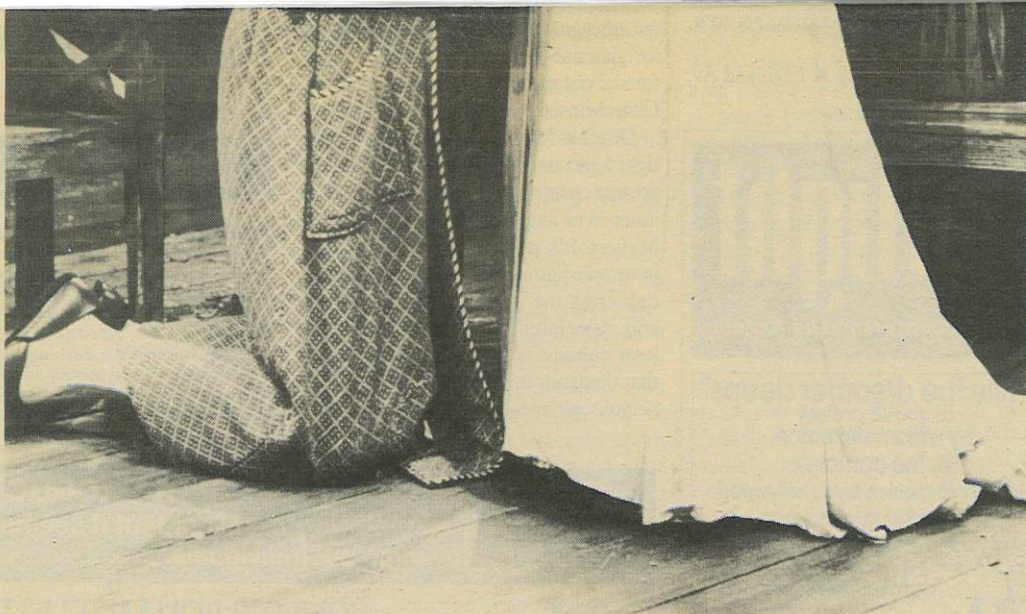
wicers or a *toika*), giving it a sumptuously colorful, compellingly performed staging at the Mark Taper Forum. With its rotating ensemble of actors — which ensures that even the most minor roles are played by people capable of handling the leads — this is probably the best production of *The Wood Demon* that any Chekhov fan could want.

Inevitably, though, the world-class presentation only makes more glaring the original text's shortcomings. With its faulty structure, rambling subplots, and pat ending, this work by the immature Chekhov is plainly not that of a fully developed talent, despite occasional moments that indicate his future genius.

*The Wood Demon* opens with a madcap, massive picnic scene, during which the entire ensemble devours a tempting-looking ham dinner — while the audience scrambles to figure out who's Yuri and who's Masha. Thankfully, identities gradually become clearer. Embittered, whiny mama's boy Zhorzh (Laurence Pressman) lives on the estate belonging to ailing retired Professor Aleksander (Dakin Matthews), who is married to the beautiful Yelena (Lorraine Toussaint). Yelena is very bored — and says so with convincing Chekhovian frequency. Not only is she married to an elderly and cantankerous invalid, but Zhorzh and the whiskered Cossack Fedya (Eric Allen Kramer) — both desperate Don Juan-abees — constantly try to relieve their own ennui by making passes at her.

Aleksander's daughter Sonya (Nike Doukas) lusts after her virile, idealistic neighbor, Khrushchov — a.k.a. "The Wood Demon" (Mark Harelik) — a doctor and a strong advocate of conserving the nearby forest. Hot on Sonya's tail, however, is the cretin Zheltoukhin (Raphael Sbarge), the brother of the crisply pragmatic Yulya (Janellen Steininger), who, in turn, has her sights set on Fedya. All of the romantic complications seethe and simmer, like the omnipresent samovar on the boil, until a fire burns Wood Demon's beloved forest and Professor Alek abruptly decides to sell the estate in exchange for cheaper palatial digs in Finland.

The most glaring flaw occurs at the end of Act Three, when the postprandial "Oh how dull life is" grumping is interrupted by one of the above characters shooting himself in the head. And then, in Act Four, those who are still alive are as cheerful as if the desperate event hadn't happened. Everyone returns to their charming picnics and gentle romantic entanglements without missing a beat. In Chekhov plays, joy and sorrow are usually intermingled — but the general trend goes from comic to tragic, with the comedy used earlier on to make us care for the characters. In this oddball piece, the tide goes from tragedy to comedy — which gives *The Wood Demon* a structure more peculiar — and creepier — than even that



The Wood Demon

of *The KTLA Morning News*, where a story about a grisly murder is often followed by chipper, inane banter.

But the Antaeus production boasts some outstanding performances. Best is Toussaint's gracious and sublime turn as Yelena, rendering lines like "Oh, I'm so unhappy!" with radiant depth. Doukas's Sonya is also endearingly innocent, and breathlessly energetic as she experiences the flush of first love, while Harelik's Wood Demon is affectingly idealistic. In their supporting roles, Pressman, John Apicella, and Nicholas Saunders are warm and funny as the local friends and hangers-on.

Saunders and Frank Dwyer's translation is as graceful and full of emotion as the material allows, and D. Martyn Bookwalter's set enthrallingly evokes the woody, luxurious, yet ultimately isolated rural Russian world. Dwyer's direction is textured, quick-paced, and intelligent, allowing the actors to flesh out their own personalities. The intended intimacy of the theater-in-the-round staging is thwarted, however, by the cavernous space, as, at any point, half the audience must strain to hear what is being said by the people whose backs are turned.

Ultimately, this is a play that Chekhov buried in the drawer beneath the socks and underwear for fairly shrewd reasons of his own — but the Antaeus Theater Company's vivacious staging is an affectionate and respectful tribute to his subsequent mastery of drama.