

## Delightful *Demon*

MTF's Antaeus Co. Bursts on the Scene With Gusto

BY NEAL WEAVER

It's hard to imagine a more auspicious debut than The Antaeus Company's inaugural production of Chekhov's *The Wood Demon* at The Mark Taper Forum. Director Frank Dwyer has mustered a capable and dedicated cast, and mounted a production that is richly nuanced, fast moving, and finely articulated. It modulates gracefully from farcical comedy to near tragedy and back again. And that's no mean feat in a play that might be described as a rollicking comedy about a suicide.

The play itself is a hybrid, a transitional piece. Chekhov grew up in the tradition of 19th-Century melodrama, with its dense plotting, sensational events, and smashing finales. In *Ivanov*, which immediately preceded *The Wood Demon*, he'd been careful to "give the audience a punch in the nose at the end of every act." But already he was working his way toward another kind of theater: quieter, subtler, and more firmly rooted in the ebb and flow of everyday life. And his comedy, too, oscillated be-

the evening's most fully-fleshed and touching character. Mark Harelik is a vital, virile, picturesque Wood Demon, and Rose Portillo is a wonderfully giggly Sonya. Marsha Deitlin is a brusquely wistful Yulya, and John Walcutt provides a nice satiric sketch of her clumsy and futile brother. Eric Allan Kramer is likeable, obnoxious, and very Russian as the outrageous and egotistical Fedya, and Jeremy Lawrence finds a streak of impish wickedness in the loquacious Waffles. Dakin Matthews is a perfect picture of pedantry and petulance as Professor Serebryakov, and Nicholas Saunders, as the sentimentally avuncular universal Godfather, offers considerable charms and contributes largely to the inbred provincial atmosphere. Even the smallest parts are handled with expertise: John Achorn, as the wordless servant Semyon, unleashes the broad, unbuttoned energy of vaudeville without violating the context of the play.

Only Lorraine Toussaint, as Yelena, inspires uneasiness. She's beautiful enough,

Sonya, for instance, is finely played. But though her character is repeatedly described as a lazy, languid mermaid, there's nothing languid about her. She's been directed too much of the time to stand ramrod straight, overseeing the action. (Perhaps director Dwyer should have provided her with the child's swing that Chekhov gave to her later incarnation.)

The adaptation, by Dwyer and actor Nicholas Saunders, is agreeably colloquial, avoiding both translationese and over-slangy contemporary idiom. D. Martyn Bookwalter's sets are beautiful and atmospheric, Holly Poe Durbin's costumes handsome and apt, and Theo Sanders' music and Jon Gottlieb's sound design unobtrusively enhancing.

The folks who make up Antaeus bill themselves as a repertory company, and so the players vary somewhat from performance to performance. That, however, should make very little difference given the caliber of this cast. This *Wood Demon* is a rare treat, and the Antaeus Company

### *The Wood Demon*

At The Mark Taper Forum through May 22.

