

CALENDAR

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THEATER REVIEW

Fighting a Chekhovian 'Demon' at the Taper

■ A superb budding ensemble performing in a new arena staging, brings to life the playwright's long, less-focused 'The Wood Demon.'

By **DON SHIRLEY**
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In 1899, Anton Chekhov wrote to a would-be publisher of his then-10-year-old "The Wood Demon": "I despise this play and am trying to forget I ever wrote it. . . . It would be a severe blow if anyone tried to revive it."

Too bad, Chekhov. The Mark Taper Forum has done the deed you so feared. The play lives. And in the hands of the Antaeus Company, the Taper's new classical ensemble, the play thrives in most of the first three acts, becoming forced only in the fourth.

Actually, many of its characters have lived over the intervening century in Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," which borrowed so much from the earlier play that it's easy to see "The Wood Demon" as a rough draft. These unhappy Russian gentry were even spotted at the Taper—back

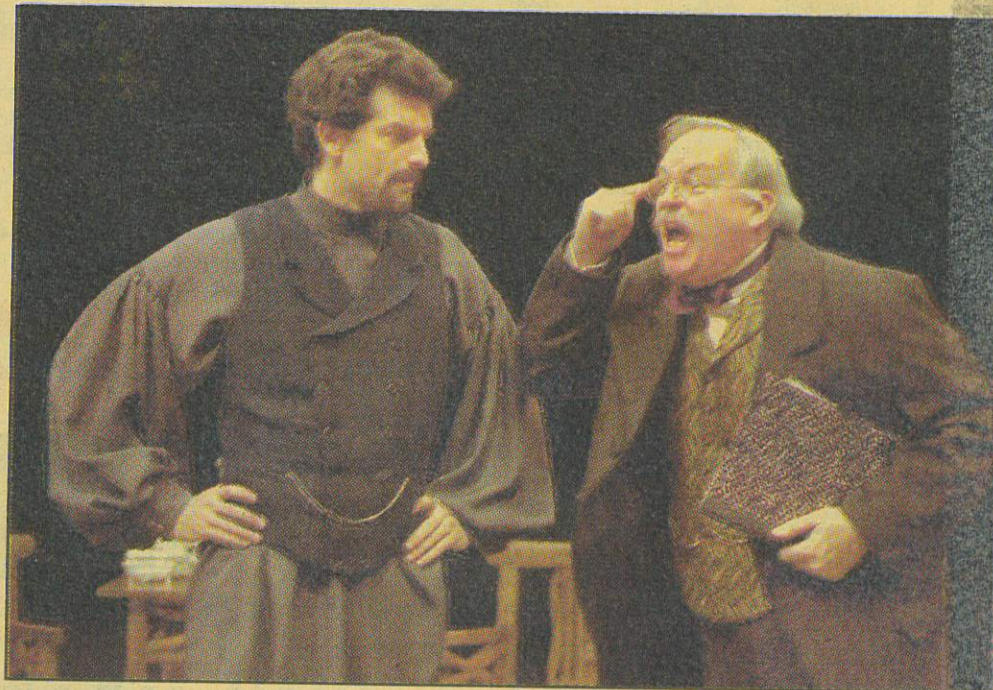
in 1969, when Harold Clurman staged "Uncle Vanya" there.

Once again, crotchety Prof. Serebryakov and his young, bored second wife Yelena are living on the country estate of the professor's late first wife. The deceased's brother (here named Zhorzh instead of Vanya), who also lives there, still has an intense and unrequited passion for Yelena.

The offspring of the professor's first marriage, 20-year-old Sonya, is still fascinated by a country doctor and ardent environmentalist (here named Khrushchov instead of Astrov but usually called "The Wood Demon"). Vanya/Zhorzh's mother still lives with the family, and they still have a garrulous neighbor nicknamed Waffles.

Less focused than "Uncle Vanya," "The Wood Demon" gives four additional friends and neighbors plenty of lines, mostly for comic relief. More characters mean more roles for members of the 69-actor Antaeus

Please see 'DEMON,' F18



Mark Harelík, Dakin Matthews in "Wood Demon": New translation is smart, spirited.

TAMMY LECHNER / Los Angeles Times

HOWARD ROSENBERG