**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. Marlyn 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.


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, doesn't evoke the Russian forests healthy. Confused?

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

The play veers haughtily in various directions, taking stabs at social 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 playwright'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 steams the show as the unyielding professor with a dry irascibility that beggs attention. Pressman as Zhorzh also provides amusement in his angsty-ridden pleas to be taken seriously as a lover by the professor's wife.

Apicella offers a delightfully fey turn as the neighbor who churns the plot with 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 provides amusement in his angst-ridden pleas to be taken seriously as a lover by the professor's wife.

John Turner, as Zhorzh, offers a marvelous rain and thunderstorm in the midst of the squabbling indoors.

The troupe, which claims to be London's adventurous Almeida Theater Company premiered Alistair Elliot's translation of Euripides "Medea" for a production starring Diana Rigg; the latter West End production has now made its way to Broadway. Rigg is not likely to be as strong a box office draw as

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**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 Truax; 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  
Ageus ........................ Donald Douglas  
Messenger  .................. Dan Mullan  
Children  .................... Tyler Noyes, Lucas Wiesendanger  

Here 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 as

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**Legit Reviews**

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**The Wood Demon**

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