and his corpulently pregnant wife, Lady Magdelena (Chris Edsley), have ensconced themselves in their fortress to watch the chaos from their balcony (no TV in those days). Possessing secret files on Bromley and others in the court (Ala Denett Salis), the inquisitive and coursey captain of arms (Peter Russell), advises his lord to let the city burn; after all, they're only peasants. Amidst the confusion, the Evil Duke Next Door (Steve Gunner) extracts an extortive compensation from Bromley, who stole food from the Duke. Existing as his serving woman (Carolyn Lardino [English] and her naggy sister [Lucy Ellison]), Bromley desperately tries to get out of the premise, with comic results. Director Roger Hampton unleashes an outrageous cast that goes overboard with accents, sight gags and slapstick, resulting in a very funny evening. It's too bad the casting wasn't also inspired by the upstage, for there are no people of color on the stage. Melissa Theater, 735 Seward St., Hiwydt., Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru May 29. (213) 660-5776. (Frank Hernandez)

MOUTH TO MOUTH Carol Schlanger has been around the block plenty of times since graduating from Yale Drama School, during which this hopeful actress lost her way and became a homeless hippie, an unwed mother and, ultimately, a somewhat fulfilled housewife. Now the 20-year-plus reunion of her Yale class prompts her to take another look at her life. Frying in and out of various characters in this 90-minute one-woman show, Schlanger alternately embodies and reacts to her former classmates as she compares their successes and failures with her own dullness. Her fuertest characterization is that of a narcissistic Carolan, now a famous stage actress who peppers her conversation with “dahlinghs” a la Tallulah Bankhead. More fascinating is Schlanger’s foray with an old pal who is now a big movie star. Bursting in and out of this reunion are flashes of her past, including her relationships with her wood-cutting husband and idealistic son, and her not-quite-required love affair with a much younger man. Director Mark W. Travis “keeps Schlanger’s wildly flowing emotions and actions just enough in check to allow the audience to stay centered; otherwise, he lets this free spirit run loose.” Theater Geo. 1229 N. Highland Ave., Hiwydt., Sun., 3 p.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.; thru May 8. (213) 486-1767. (Tom Provenzano)

SLOW CHILDREN Matthew Weiss’ romantic comedy about a policeman who transforms himself into a headstrong after being taken hostage by a glam rocker, adds up to little more than a one-act play with a couple of reversals thrown in. Good cop Doug (Ben Meyerson) finds himself handcuffed to a broken-lawpullout bed in a Hollywood apartment. Nikki (Craig Borton) says he made the citizen’s arrest because the cop was harassing him. Enter sweet-natured roommate and acous guitar at Tims (Wayne Perel). He and Doug become friends despite Nikki’s warnings. Doug buddies up with everyone else who arrives, sharing cooking tips with Tim’s girlfriend and even falling for Ricky’s girl. As Doug tries to talk Ricky into giving him his freedom, Ricky ends up unintentionally shooting Tim, not once but twice, with Doug’s gun. While Tim is bleeding to death, Doug’s fiancée also cop, joins the developing soap opera as a hostage. The big joke is the incongruity of seeing opposites attract—coppers and metal heads. The cast performs admirably, but to what end?

THE WOOD DEMON is inside all of us, according to one of the characters in Anton Chekhov’s 1890 warm-up to Uncle Vanya. The title character, here played with commanding verve by Mark Harelik, is an idealist (the fore runner of Uncle Vanya’s Astrov)—a local physician who plants trees in his spare time and bemoans the desecration of the forests. The Wood Demon may well be the first drama of the modern age to grapple with ecology as a central theme. But it’s not only Russia’s birches that are being wasted, it’s also time. So many possibilities for achievement, both professionally and personally, are stifled by inertia and pettiness, emerging through Chekhov’s prism of unrequited loves. Though many of the scenes are almost verbatim from Uncle Vanya, there are both plot variations and additional characters in The Wood Demon, here rendered in Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer’s fluid translation. Dwyer has directed the piece in the round with the Antaeus Company, an excellent classical repertory troupe that has mercifully strained away the morbidity that characterizes so many productions of Chekhov. With O. Martin Budelmann’s lush period set— with birch canopies draped over the girders—we’re treated to a funny, skilful, sensitive treatment of this bitter sweet comedy. The tricopy undertappings are brushed under the proverbial carpet in an interpretation that plays so hard for humor, it’s almost glib. Still, you have to be grateful for the life this group has breathed into Chekhov—a rare accomplishment in and for itself. Mark Tapert Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown., Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2:30 p.m.; thru May 22. (213) 355-3500. TID: (213) 680-4017. (Steven Leigh Morris)

OPENING THIS WEEK:


The Valley: Lysistrata. The Ways of the Heart

Beaches: Miss Pell Is Missing. The Secretaries

fron his parents with his sexual orientation. Celebration Theater, 7051 Santa Monica Blvd., Hiwydt., Wed., 8 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 10 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m.; indol. (213) 680-2727. (TP)

BARBIE’S DOLLS The high cost of beauty is dramatized in Karen Lofts’ play, Hudson Theater, 6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Hiywydt., Mon.-Tues., 8 p.m.; April 18-May 2. (213) 269-7424.

BARFLES Jay Parker’s dark comedy is set in an L.A. bar. Disgrace Bohnen, 4439 Fountain Ave., Hiywydt., Fri., 8 p.m.; in def. (213) 602-1597.

BEGUILED BY CHOICE One-act plays by Kerry Maddox-Lundstrom and Kevin Barry are both about infatuation. Movin’ Arts, 1822 Hyperion Ave., Silver Lake, Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru May 7. (213) 665-9891.

BEYOND THE ASHES In a series of short pieces, a number of writers (including Keith Antar Mason, Hector Tobar, Guillermo Reyes and others) react on L.A.’s 1982 riots. The Complex, 9476 Santa Monica Blvd., Hiywydt., previews Thurs.-Fri., April 14-15, 8 p.m.; opens Sat., April 18, 8 p.m.; perfs Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru May 8. (213) 466-1767.

BORDERLANDS Six women’s lives are changed by a crisis in this drama by Laura Hinton, Nancy Keystone, Kathryn Miller, Anne Ramsay, Jane Skibert, Valeria Spencer and Diane Stevens. Second Stage, 6500 Santa Monica Blvd., Hiywydt., Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru May 15. (213) 466-1767.

THE CHICAGO CONSPIRACY TRIAL Called from the 1989 “Chicago 6” trial’s transcripts by director/co-writer Frank Condon and Ben Sassi, this docudrama shows how the U.S. government conspired to convict key figures in the anti-Vietnam War movement by accusing them of staging the police-riot-ger-related violence that occurred outside the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. The trial became emblematic of the Nixon administration’s covert campaign to suppress political dissent. In the role he created in the original 1979 production, George Murdock turns in a starring performance as the sharp-tongued Judge Julius Hoffman, who relishes bending the law to suit himself. However, as the kangaroo court proceeds and the surrealism deepens, Allen Miller, as lead defense attorney William Kunstler, depicts outrage but little sense of shock or even confession. He waxes, with the theologians as, though he already knows what’s coming. It’s the lack of tension in this abbreviated courtroom account that alleviates but otherwise fine production to the rape of nostalgia. Odyssey Theater, 2655 S. Sepulveda Blvd., W.L.A.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; mats Sat., April 24, 2 p.m.; thru May 1. (310) 477-7055. (EK-4)

THE CHICKEN MOME TRIAL Who put a massive dose of laxative in the main course at Chefamia Rodriguez’s wedding reception? That’s the explosive question in Bob Hig.