

THEATER

THEATER BEAT

Daryl H. Miller

Bard 'round the clock

If this weekend's openings of Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well" (at A Noise Within in Glendale) and Chekhov's "The Wood Demon" (at the Mark Taper Forum) don't sate your appetite for the classics, then drop by Will & Company's 24-hour Shakespeare marathon at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, beginning at midnight today.

Will & Company takes one-hour adaptations of classical works to area schools, as well as presenting full-length productions at the Theatre Center. Its fourth annual "Shakespeare 'Til You Drop" is a fund-raiser for its educational touring component.

The marathon captures the company's antic spirit. "We do classical works, but our whole credo is to make them accessible," said artistic director Colin Cox. Reaching out to diverse communities, the company's playful, fast-paced productions sometimes are performed in Spanish or American sign language.

The marathon begins with tonight's staging of "Romeo and Juliet," followed by

'Demon' offers hope amid tragedy

By Daryl H. Miller
Daily News Theater Critic

Toward the end of Anton Chekhov's "The Wood Demon," a forest fire begins to rage without anyone noticing.

The event is laden with meaning: In much the same way, the characters' lives go up in smoke — unnoticed — while they are distracted by petty cares and fruitless desires.

This is a Chekhov play, all right — its characters mired in stagnation and futility, doomed to tragic destinies.

Yet in this early work, a 29-year-old Chekhov offers considerably more cause for hope than in his subsequent plays. Although its humor is mingled with heartache (as in such later works as "Uncle Vanya" and "The Cherry Orchard"), this play expresses a buoyant belief in human potential and the possibility of happiness.

This enchanting play is little remembered today because, after a failed first production, Chekhov refused to allow additional stagings.

It re-emerges at the Mark Taper Forum thanks to the diligent efforts of the Antaeus Company. Devoted to the classics, this acting



Raphael Sbarge and Janellen Steinger star in "The Wood Demon," now being staged at the Mark Taper Forum.

action begins to make sense, and its issues prove to be universal. passible roadblocks are those they erect themselves.

actors change from performance to performance as part of a complex system of multiple casting, which enables actors to leave for short periods of higher-paying television or film work, having their role covered by an actor fully experienced in the part.

That said, it is impossible not to note the compelling work of Mark Hareluk as the bravely idealistic Wood Demon, Nike Doukas as the giddy young woman who loves him, Dakin Matthews as a crotchety intellectual who is angry at life's passing him by, Lorraine Toussaint as his enduringly faithful wife, Lawrence Pressman as the man most tortured by lost opportunities and Eric Allan Kramer as a particularly brash and arrogant young man.

For this production, the Taper's configuration has been transformed from modified three-quarter-around seating to full in-the-round. Elevated rows of seats have been erected on the stage so that, combined with the regular seating, viewers surround the central playing area. It creates a sense of community for what, in the end, is a universal story of people who can't see the forest for the trees.

THE FACTS