THEATER

Theater Beat
Daryl H. Miller

'B DEMON' offers hope amid tragedy

By Daryl H. Miller
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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 Antecus Company. Devoted to the classics, this acting company has eliminated possible 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 Harelak as the brashly idealistic Wood Demon, Christian Dowkas 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 endearing 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-round 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