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She Stoops to Conquer

Oliver Goldsmith

Northern Broadsides

The Dukes, Lancaster

From 09 September 2014 to 13 September 2014

Review by David Upton



Howard

Chadwick and Gilly Tompkins in *She Stoops to Conquer*

It's always been a challenge to pin down the comedy style of Oliver Goldsmith's 18th century classic.

Is it a comedy of manners, a satire of the earlier restoration times, or even a time-honoured romcom? There's even enough entrances and exits to lend it full-blown farce status.

Certainly this production, from the always-anticipated Northern Broadsides stable, 'stoops' at nothing to entertain, but perhaps too often—and too easily—settles on pantomime as its default humour setting.

Director Conrad Nelson, in his programme notes, hints at a 'take it or leave it' approach to this production, after the more challenging performances from the company's recent offerings.

However by settling on physical humour, in fits and starts, it too often leaves this revival running out of breath and gasping for the comedy in the actual dialogue.

At least there's plenty of enjoyment to be had out of designer Jessica Worrall's overblown headwear and costumes, and her Gainsborough backdrop for Hardcastle Hall provides a wonderfully bucolic setting to the story of mistaken identity, social snobbery and stuttering romance.

As Mrs Hardcastle, and her lumpen son Tony Lumpkin, Gilly Tompkins and Jon Trenchard could totter, without any change in costume, straight into Christmas pantomime.

The latter is an especially flatulent fop, but even a joke like that runs out of wind after a while.

Hannah Edwards makes a witty transformation, from squire's daughter to a Scouse barmaid, as she woos Young Marlow (Oliver Gomm). He was a memorably hyperactive *Charley's Aunt* at Manchester's Royal Exchange and is no less nimble here, especially when becoming a tongue-tied lover.

In its trademark style, Northern Broadsides adds its own musical flourishes and the play's irreverent character—and disdain for London types—suits the company's Northern-centric attitude. But *She Stoops* doesn't quite conquer.

Hear director Conrad Nelson talk about this production in the BTG podcast.