

She Stoops to Conquer review – lively and absurd

Viaduct, Halifax and touring

This production of Oliver Goldsmith's 1773 comedy is absurdly funny – but they need to turn down the volume a touch



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Gilly Tompkins (Mrs Hardcastle) and Jon Trenchard (Tony Lumpkin) in Northern Broadsides' *She Stoops to Conquer*. Photograph: Nobby Clark

Hardcastle, an old-fashioned country gent (blustering Howard Chadwick), expects a visit from the son of his best friend. He has never met young Marlow, but hopes the lad will suit his daughter for a husband. Wanting to make his guest comfortable, he instructs the farm hands on how to wait at table. They must not, he warns them, "burst out a-laughing" if he tells a good tale. At this, Diggory brings up the one about the gun dog – 20 years old and still a snorter. Shared laughter is followed by a pause as all savour the recollection. A tiny touch – but it blazes with human warmth. As [Northern Broadsides' rumbustious new production](#) of Oliver Goldsmith's wildly ridiculous 1773 comedy shows, you learn a lot from people's reactions to a story.

Marlow bursts in with his friend, Hastings. Cocky London blades, they have been tricked into thinking the house is an inn and Hardcastle its

keeper. When their host tries to narrate an ancient anecdote featuring the Duke of Marlborough they interrupt and talk over him with a disdain that, under Conrad Nelson's direction, is simultaneously broadly comic and icily shocking. It's funny because we know the pups will get their comeuppance. Shocking because what decides their conduct is money: they pay for a service, so treat the person who provides it as a thing.

Hence Marlow's handicap with women: social equals reduce him to a quivering wreck; inferiors transform him to a strutting seducer (Oliver Gomm's Marlow takes toe-curling embarrassment on a comic tour of his person: a leg-twitching, shoulder-hunching, head-hanging exteriorisation of interior mortification). Miss Hardcastle, in her finery, is too frightening to look at; Miss Hardcastle in her plain housekeeping clothes is easily mistaken for a barmaid and therefore supposed to be eager for "work above stairs" – which Marlow will of course "honestly pay for" (the pseudo-suave, on-the-pull moves Gomm gives this confident version of Marlow are a compendium of the failed-cool posturings of flailing youths on disco dancefloors).

This could turn very creepy and nasty. But Goldsmith's characters aren't vicious. They are humorous, lively and absurd (in dress as in behaviour, thanks to Jessica Worrall's mixing of 18th-century gowns and leopard-skin prints). Wrong-headedness can be corrected – by right-feeling. Hannah Edwards as Miss Hardcastle and Lauryn Redding as her friend and Hastings's fiancée supremely succeed at the increasingly difficult task of making sensible women interesting, complex and individual, on a par with the men in wit, streets ahead of them in humour. The trickster Tony Lumpkin (Hardcastle's stepson) becomes, in Jon Trenchard's kaleidoscopic, comic performance, a Puck-like sprite: careless yet true-hearted, perpetrating and resolving the mistakes of the night. As Tony's over-fond mother, Gilly Tomkins radiates force fields of pugnacious protectiveness, later short-circuited by self-interest and fear. Live music (under Rebekah Hughes) adds to the atmosphere. At present, though, the energy and volume levels are pitched just too high: a touch of modulation would be welcome.

[She Stoops to Conquer tours until 13 December](#)