

She Stoops to Conquer
Amateur Players of Sherborne
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Date seen: 1 December 2025
Director: John Crabtree

She Stoops to Conquer is sometimes considered as a late Comedy of Manners and, being of its period, is certainly a 'wordy' play. Productions of it run the risk of having a somewhat 'stilted' feel, as when characters deliver asides to the audience, but this production overcame any danger of that; it highlighted both the social satire and the more subtle humour and brought the dialogue and the characters to life through strong direction and great acting. Goldsmith's writing gives both a realism and a roundedness to the central characters, they feel more than just stereotypes or caricatures, and the cast really brought this out.

What was particularly striking was the strength across the board: set (superb), costumes (excellent, with great attention to detail and the period look), pacing (the whole thing flowed, with the story and emotion building) and acting (strong by all throughout, 'minor' and major characters alike). Congratulations to the Director (John Crabtree) and the whole team.

There was always great energy on stage, even during the more 'wordy' sections, and this gave an electricity to the proceedings, a sense of action, whether it was characters interacting with each other or individuals delivering soliloquies or asides to the audience. The pace kept up so that there was tension and drama around the various confusions and 'mistakes of a night'. The second half in particular crackled and fizzed with plot devices and twists such as the hullabaloo over the stolen jewels, Marlow's flirtation with Kate, mistaking her for a barmaid, and Tony Lumpkin's leading Mrs Hardcastle a merry dance in the carriage. The 'choreography', the way in which the characters moved around the stage, was impressive and helped the flow of the scenes.

The play opened strongly with Mr and Mrs Hardcastle in their domestic setting, establishing their relationship, and the context for what was to follow, with a few deft flourishes. Mr Hardcastle (Richard Culham) gave a slight roughness to his character and which worked well alongside the airs and graces of his wife. As the play developed he added in a subtle and rather endearing sense of bewilderment and of being beleaguered. The scene in which, keen to be the perfect host, he tried to recount his favourite stories about the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene, only to be rebuffed by Marlow and Hastings, was exquisitely painful and amusing and we felt for him when he faced the audience and said 'their impudence confounds me'. His interacting with his wife, his servants, his guests, his son Tony and his daughter Kate each had a slightly different shade to it, but each contributed to his feeling of bemusement. The way the various characters interacted with each other was crucial to the play and this was one of the great strengths of the production. Mr Hardcastle's and increasing infuriation, for example, was brought out by the skilful way Hastings and Marlow played up their sense of entitlement in being, as they thought, the patrons of an inn.

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Mrs Hardcastle (Bev Taylor-Wade) delivered an excellent performance, creating a wonderful character part and with a very nice West Country accent and superb clarity and projection. Her berating of her son Tony was lovely and the scene in which she discovered the loss of her jewels and was then teased about it by Tony ('I can bear witness to that') was a highlight. Her frustration and feelings of being 'put-upon' came across clearly and were given a further twist with her reactions to her horse-pond experience.

Tony Lumpkin (Cameron Thrower), also demonstrating great projection, was excellent, portraying a jolly, cheeky loveable rogue with great confidence, energy and swagger. He could be both rollicking and boisterous with his chums at the Three Pigeons and thoughtful and more subtle, as in his nice relationship with Constance Neville; his parents want them to marry but both them hate the idea, each having their own other agenda.

Constance (Christine Bingley) was convincing both in her own characterisation and in her interactions with others, particularly in her friendship with Kate and in demonstrating genuine love for Hastings. Her line 'I'll amuse my aunt by pretending to love Tony', for example, was very well delivered – winningly devious.

Kate Hardcastle (Catarina da Silva) gave a magnificent performance as the sassy and scheming daughter, acting with great skill and clarity to create a 'real' person to whom the audience could relate. She had a light touch and a stillness, with subtle and sparing gestures such as stroking the flowers in a basket when sitting, and the look of triumph on her face towards the end when Marlow's father appears, having heard young Marlow's declarations of love. There was a lovely little move when Kate was sitting on a stool beside her father and snatched the newspaper he was reading out of his hand. The scene in which she pretended to be a barmaid and Marlow flirted with her was another highlight, as was the delightful way in which she pretended to cry in mock indignation, having supposedly revealed to Marlow her actual status in the household.

Marlow (Sam Frost) and Hastings (Peter Sangston) made a wonderful pair of chums, with their contrasting styles. Marlow excelled in the duality of his character, switching effortlessly from his customary relaxed confidence and sense of entitlement to a cringing awkwardness when meeting Kate. He had great presence and could both strut like a peacock and shrink into his shell like a snail. His physical gestures were well-crafted and his surprise and confusion came across well, as when he looked at the audience with said with a slight smile, referring to Mr Hardcastle, 'he has got our names already!'.

Hastings had a gravitas about him, a still poise which, combined with a rich, resonant, mellifluous voice, enabled him to command the stage with the character's tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority. His emotions ranged, including a definite anxiety when his plan to escape with Constance seemed to be thwarted, but always with subtlety. To some extent he seemed to relax into the character the more play progressed. This was seen for example in the natural way in which he encouraged Marlow to talk to Kate Hastings becomes much more natural

when he's encouraging Marlow in talking to Kate; he was playing a game and seemed to be enjoying it.

Marlow's father, Sir Charles (Adrian Harding) was played with aplomb as the kind-hearted and understanding father and the same actor played to perfection two of the colourful country characters: Dick Muggins, one of Tony Lumpkin's friends and a regular at the Three Pigeons alehouse, and Diggory, a servant in the Hardcastle house. He demonstrated both vocal ability and great physical skill in creating the comic caricature of Diggory, with the way he held himself and moved, little twitches of the face and a shaking hand, and his bringing on of the pig's head on a platter (a superb prop in itself) was a masterpiece.

The four actors playing the other servants and those at the Three Pigeons were also excellent and created a range of delightful characters through strong acting, and, in the alehouse, some jolly singing as well: Jack Slang and Pimple (Gilly Savage), Little Aminadab and Roger (John Crabtree), the Barmaid and a maid in the Hardcastle house (Olivia Kippax) and a trio of lovely cameos (Roger Chadbourne) - Stingo the Landlord, Roger (a Hardcastle servant) and Jeremy (one of Young Marlow's servants). For the latter he played being drunk very well, including the delivery on cue of a comic belch.

The set was a triumph, recreating the 18th century settings: the alehouse, the Hardcastle house interior and the garden. An impressive giant beam had been set across the width of the 'ceiling', a large chandelier hung from a lighting bar and engravings of the Rake's progress hung on the rear wall flats. Thoughtfully chosen period music played as the maid, at the outset, set candles on the mantelpiece and 'lit' the fire. All this, combined with appropriate lighting, helped to create the right atmosphere and the ingenuity of the design, and the skill of the stage management team, was revealed when the side flats were swung smoothly and rapidly around to create the Three Pigeons alehouse. Later the rear flats were turned around to transform the set into the garden of the Hardcastle house at night, along with subtle lighting.

This was a great production which enabled the audience to follow the various twists of the plot and enjoy to the full the comedy. Their appreciation was shown both in their abundant laughter and in their rapt attention. Congratulations to everyone involved.

Martin Stephen
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