
She Stoops to Conquer has once again delighted audience members at The Stratford Festival, North America’s largest classical repertory theatre. With this year’s staging, Oliver Goldsmith’s rollicking comedy of manners has now seen four productions at Stratford and thus has been performed more than any other Restoration or eighteenth-century drama in the Festival’s history, beating out such favorites as The Country Wife, The Beaux’ Stratagem, The Beggar’s Opera, and The School for Scandal. Its continued success both at Stratford and on stages around the world has much to do with the drama’s seamless construction and warmhearted humor, and this year’s positive reception at Stratford is a credit to the Festival’s cast and crew and to the skilled directing of Martha Henry, a seasoned veteran who joined the Festival in 1962. But it is the drama’s location and set design that offer unique lenses through

From Left: Lucy Peacock (as Mrs. Dorothy Hardcastle) and Maev Beaty (as Miss Kate Hardcastle) in the Stratford Festival production of Oliver Goldsmith’s She Stoops to Conquer. Photography by Don Dixon.
which to view this production and Stratford’s approach to eighteenth-century comedy.

The Stratford Festival boasts a number of venues, one of which is the Avon Theatre (constructed in 1911), this season’s home to *She Stoops to Conquer*. Once spectators entered the auditorium of the one-time vaudeville playhouse and cinema and turned their attention to the stage, they beheld a verdigris-colored image of Harcourt Manor projected onto the act-drop—a potential homage by the talented set designer Douglas Paraschuk to the painted act-drops of eighteenth-century playhouses. A wooden frame around the image indicated that it was to be read as if it were a large wall painting. Below the image, positioned at the center of the stage floor, was a stuffed, toy kitten, seemingly asleep on a cushion. These bits of virtual reality (more virtual than real) troubled the suspension-of-disbelief supported by a modern proscenium theatre. If the proscenium frame simultaneously focuses attention to the activity inside its boundaries and disappears with the act of looking, at Stratford, the addition of a framed painting within the proscenium—a frame within a frame—produced the opposite effect: it made spectators consciously aware of those frames and of the act of framing itself. The kitten also invited a double take. “What is that?” “Is that real?”, I heard a couple of patrons ask. The projected painting and the kitten gestured emphatically toward themselves as representations and to the artifice of stage production.

Paraschuk carried this visual self-reflexivity into the stage set itself. When the curtain rose, spectators were transported into the very manor depicted in the painting. The interior of the stately, old-fashioned home featured the aforementioned stuffed kitten, curled up next to an unlit fireplace, along with numerous framed images (eight of which were prints of William Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress*)—echoes of the painting previously projected onto the act-drop. Paraschuk also unsettled modern, proscenium-theatre expectations by installing a circular platform in the center of the boards, rotated to reveal various backgrounds—a ceiling-free drawing room, boudoir, and alehouse—all in full view of the audience. Each of the above, from the projected painting and the kitten, to the framed images and the revolving platform, called attention to the drama as a work of art, a symbolic and compositional construct. By making spectators aware of representations as representations, these witty bits of *mise en scène* invited them to reflect on dramatic manufacture and on the act of looking itself. In effect, Paraschuk’s set design alerted spectators to their own, participatory role in the theatrical environment and drew structural attention to questions of perception central to the generation of humor and meaning in Goldsmith’s play and to dramatic comedy, more broadly.
The actor André Morin spoke a truncated version of David Garrick’s prologue, which meta-fictionally discusses the generic makeup of the play (*She Stoops to Conquer*, we learn, is not of the sentimental breed) and which, instead of acting merely as a poetic monologue directed toward the audience, goes so far as to solicit a verbal exchange between actor and spectator, blurring the onstage, offstage divide. After the curtain rose, Morin appeared on stage with other actors and in front of the rotating set, and prior to lamenting the demise of the Comic Muse, repeated the line, “Pray would you know the reason why I’m crying?” A collective, resounding “yes!” was the response from audience members, and just like that, their exchange further disrupted the potential for fourth-wall realism. Of course, to break the fourth wall is to perform a standard comedic tactic, meant not to disillusion spectators but to seduce them into the act of make-believe. As Northrop Frye stated, “The resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience side of the stage; in a tragedy it comes from the mysterious world on the opposite side…. The tendency of comedy is to include” (164, 165). While one could argue that this is the business of an eighteenth-century prologue, the fact was that Morin was speaking it in a twentieth-century theatre to a twenty-first century audience, sitting in a darkened auditorium. His pointed engagement with audience members—his pause in recitation, his emphatic repetition of the question, and their affirmative reply—helped, then, to cultivate an interactive environment more akin to that of a Georgian-era playhouse. It also produced a congenial atmosphere, one in which spectators became attentive and receptive.

This rapport between stage and house was evident early on in the performance, especially in the scene when Mr. Hardcastle (Joseph Ziegler) attempts to transform a ramshackle group of farmhands—Diggory (André Morin), Roger (Gareth Potter), and Alfred (Paul Rowe)—into respectable house servants. The farmhands’ slapstick incompetence and Hardcastle’s frustrated chiding generated hearty audience laughter, but the remarkable moment occurred after Hardcastle instructed Diggory to refrain from laughing in the presence of guests, to which Morin replied, “Then ecod your worship must not tell the story of the Ould Grouse in the gun room: I can’t help laughing at that—he! he! he!—for the soul of me” (2.1). His response elicited a shared memory that caused Ziegler, Morin, Potter, and Rowe to burst into laughter. When this happened, audience members also joined in on the laughter—an expression not of understanding but of affective sympathy that made the audience appear (and perhaps feel) as if they, too, were in on the joke. While Goldsmith’s dialogue facilitated the shared laughter on stage, the rapport established between stage and house went a long way toward stimulating and supporting the offstage laughter.
Paraschuk’s set design, in addition to encouraging actor-spectator interaction, also attuned audience members to the work of misrecognition, masquerade, and misunderstanding at the heart of Goldsmith’s comedy. Props such as the mirror that Kate Hardcastle (Maev Beaty) peers into while arranging her dress and the spectacles that Constance Neville (Sara Farb) and George Hastings (Tyrone Savage) peep through when reading letters buttressed the drama’s emphasis not only on the visual but also on visual mediation—the idea that what we see is directed by the tools we use (e.g., mirrors, lenses), the environments in which we live, and the people whom we encounter. It is for this reason that things are not always as lucid or transparent as we imagine them to be, or as Garrick famously observed in the prologue to *She Stoops to Conquer*, “All is not gold that glitters.”

The actors played out these pitfalls of perception in spectacular fashion. In the drama, Charles Marlow (Brad Hodder) and his friend George Hastings are en route to Hardcastle Manor. Marlow—a man who easily seduces lower class women but whose awe for “women of reputation” reduces him to a blathering idiot—is making the journey to fulfill his father’s wish that he meet (and make a match with) Mr. Hardcastle’s daughter Kate. Hastings, for his own part, plans to elope with Kate’s cousin Constance. But the two gentlemen soon find themselves lost in unfamiliar territory. Upon entering an alehouse, Tony Lumpkin (Karack Osborn), in a retaliatory stunt directed against his stepfather Mr. Hardcastle, convinces Marlow and Hastings that the Hardcastle manor, located just down the road, is actually an inn where they can lodge for the night. So ensues Goldsmith’s comedy of false appearances and mistaken identities, and it turns out that Marlow and Hastings prove no better at reading the social landscape than they do the geographic landscape. On stage, the two gentlemen enter Hardcastle’s home as if it were indeed an inn, repositioning furniture, rejecting the dinner menu, and calling for punch, much to Hardcastle’s dismay. Marlow’s buckish confidence falters, however, upon meeting the elegant, attractive, and well-spoken Kate Hardcastle. Hodder’s Marlow could have been acted with more naïve bumptiousness than pompous egotism; however, his removal of his boots and socks so that he was inappropriately barefoot and barelegged, and his acting in the presence of Kate Hardcastle were superb. Hodder, surprised by Kate and with socks in hand, communicated his severe anxiety in meeting her through broken speech, pained cries of “ah!”, a slinking and collapsing posture, and an inability to stand or sit in one place for more than a few seconds. The Stratford audience roared with laughter throughout this mortifying encounter. After this scene, when Hardcastle and Kate confer regarding Marlow’s odd character, Kate remarks, “his mauvaise honte, his timidity, struck me at the first sight,” to which
Hardcastle replies, “Then your first sight deceived you” (3.1). To perceive, we come to learn, is hardly to know.

Indeed, in She Stoops to Conquer first impressions are most certainly not the last, as Kate goes on to perform the role of a housemaid to attract Marlow and gauge his real persona, as Constance feigns tenderness toward Lumpkin even as she plans to elope with Hastings, and as Lumpkin drives his mother in loops around the manor only to have her believe that they have traveled forty miles away from home. If what one sees does not necessarily reveal the truth, it is nevertheless through these very misrecognitions and misunderstandings—what Agnes Heller refers to as comedy's inherent “comedy of errors” (66)—that the truth about the characters and the environment they inhabit is made apparent. Within the illusory world of Goldsmith’s drama, the characters’ visual field shifts from an uncertain play of appearances to a state of recognition. Mr. Hardcastle and Marlow’s father, Sir Charles Marlow (Nigel Bennett), after hiding surreptitiously behind a screen, reveal Kate’s ruse to the young Marlow; Mrs. Hardcastle, after emerging from the pond muck and swallowing Lumpkin’s story about their being accosted by highwaymen, has her sight corrected by Mr. Hardcastle and becomes newly aware of her surroundings; and George Hastings and Constance Neville move out of the shadows to reveal their love for one another and their desire to wed. As Constance confesses, “I have been obliged to stoop to dissimulation … But I am now recovered from the delusion” (5.1). The same could be said by almost all of the main characters in She Stoops to Conquer.

By the end of the drama, the characters see things for what they are, and so, too, do audience members, particularly with regard to the actors’ performances. As with last year’s production of The Beaux’ Stratagem, Lucy Peacock carried the show. While her first lines on stage as Mrs. Hardcastle were rushed and unclear, she quickly warmed up to her role, and performed at her peak throughout, especially in the rib-tickling scenes where, hair frizzled and beribboned, she displays her flawed knowledge of London fashions to George Hastings and where, drenched and dirty, she pleads with a fictional highwayman to spare her and her son’s lives. In both scenes, Peacock executed the frustrated bundle of nervous energy that is Mrs. Hardcastle with perfect zeal and enthusiasm. Joseph Ziegler’s performance as Mr. Hardcastle was also top notch. To communicate the character’s sedate and affectionate nature, even as that character expresses increasing vexation and indignation over the antics of farmhands and guests, was a testament to Ziegler’s skill as an actor. Of the other actors, Maev Beaty as Kate Hardcastle, though her performance was much too neutral in tone for a title character, pulled off her role as a devoted yet independent-minded
daughter. Tyrone Savage as George Hastings acted especially well when he conveyed his desire for Constance through a clever bit of by-play: taking a light chair positioned between himself and Constance and pressing it toward and against her as he discussed their planned elopement. Karack Osborn played a captivatingly boisterous, if slightly overwrought Tony Lumpkin, and Sara Farb, who acted the role of Cherry in last year’s *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, performed with much more self-awareness and sophistication this year in her role as Constance Neville.

The production was a pleasing one. Paraschuk’s optical treats were matched by Charlotte Dean’s exquisite period costumes, with the central female characters in dazzling silk taffeta confections and the central male characters in laced shirts and embroidered velvet suits. When playing the role of a bar maid, Beaty donned a simple striped cotton dress and white apron—a sartorial shift that proves almost just enough to delude her unsuspecting beau. A vocal transformation is, of course, also requisite, and Beaty’s adoption of a dialect redolent with “true bar cant” cinches the deal (3.1). In this way, the visual feast was complemented by an aural one, with the characters’ clear delivery of lines and striking vocal range represented early on in the alehouse scene, where the contrasts between high and low became apparent both in costume and accent. Franklin Brasz’ selection of lively period music, recorded by Todd Charlton, was fondant on the Georgian-era cake.

In the final assessment, however, this production, while pleasant, attractive, and made with the best ingredients, wanted zing—the zestful appeal that its presentation promised. As the play progressed, it became more formal and more subdued, and I could not help feeling that the framed painting of Harcourt Manor projected onto the act-drop called attention not just to Paraschuk’s smart set design and to the work of the visual in Goldsmith’s drama, but to the potential perils of producing classic comedy in the modern age. For while Paraschuk’s staging encouraged spectators to engage with the action before them, and while the direction of the prologue and Goldsmith’s playscript furthered this aim, the direction and acting (Peacock excepted) progressively distanced the drama from the audience; this rendered it akin to a framed painting, an art object cordoned off from the world—a sort of relic of the past, positioned above a mantelpiece, to be viewed and venerated but not touched. Aesthetic self-reflexivity and the shattering of expectations gave way, in the end, to a conservative *modus operandi*, one that felt all too familiar, ordered, and secure. While audience members clapped rhythmically as the characters ended the drama with a dance, it was a gesture that felt more programmed than impromptu. *She Stoops to Conquer* teaches, in part, that fine women, while they may be
works of art, would rather not be observed at a safe distance—in Mr. Hardcastle's words, “girls like to be played with, and rumpled a little too, sometimes” (5.1). Likewise, to be appreciated, comedic art requires interactive and sometimes irreverent play. Paraschuk knows this. To have seen this conception borne out in the drama as a whole would have made for not just a pleasing production but a truly outstanding one.

Terry F. Robinson
University of Toronto

Works Cited
