



[She Stoops to Conquer](#) , National Theatre

Screened at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) March 2012

Following the National Theatre's production of [A Comedy of Errors](#) we have another of the classics of British theatre presented on the big screen - Sophie Thompson acts up a storm in ***She Stoops to Conquer***

. Oliver Goldsmith's 18th century masterpiece is a warm and witty comedy, and here we have a blissfully funny production by an ensemble of skilled comic actors.

The plot is the traditional one of mistaken identity with the added spice of sex and class. Our hero, Charles Marlow mistakes a private house for an inn, the woman he is supposed to be wooing for a barmaid and his future father-in-law for the landlord. To avoid social embarrassment the family, his future in-laws, play along with their error, accepting his disdainful behaviour.

Matters are further complicated by Marlow's nervousness around upper-class women, only when his fiancée Kate pretends to be the bar-maid of the inn can he woo her. This suitably complicated setting allows the characters full rein to explore the bizarre behaviour that can result under the pressures of social constraints or when trying to follow one's heart.



Mrs Hardcastle is played by Sophie Thompson with the faux-posh accent of one trying to impress the bright young things from London. Her performance is completely over-the-top and hysterically funny.

Steve Pemberton plays the prosperous householder mistaken for a pub proprietor and stoically enduring the insults of the superior young blade who has come to court his daughter. He epitomises the nouveau riche gentleman who must swallow his pride for social advancement. And once more the **National Theatre** has shown that a performer previously known from the small screen can shine on the stage.

In the same vein, Coronation Street's Katherine Kelly is forced to masquerade as a serving-maid (changing her accent and garb) in order to court Marlow, who can only fall in love with her when he thinks she is lower class. She brings superb assurance to the part showing wit and intelligence as her true self, and brimming with mischief in the barmaid scenes as ***she stoops to conquer***

. As a debut leading role on the National stage Kelly is marvellous.

Harry Haddon-Paton is superb as Marlow, the strutting, self-regarding love god when he flirts with the woman he believes to be the barmaid and entirely tongue-tied and incapable of eye contact when he thinks he is talking to a woman of his own class. There is a psychological truth in the relationship between the lovers which transcends comedy. David Fynn also shines as the country bumpkin, Tony Lumpkin, who initiates this tale of confusion. John Heffernan is his chum, Hastings, a whimsical fop who goes into sexual ecstasies over the prospect of a white-and-gold coat.

The whole cast play the comedy to the hilt, but it's the ultimate good heartedness of Goldsmith's play that ensures they remain just this side of farce. One senses that although the playwright is making fun of these characters, their vanity and snobbery, he likes them. This is comedy with kindness, not a lacerating wit.

Jamie Lloyd's production, including a delightful country house designed by Mark Thompson, is perhaps a little too loveable, but leaves the audience laughing happily. I have written before about the purpose of a **National Theatre**. One role is surely to preserve and revive the classics of British theatre and to show to a modern audience that a work first performed in 1773 can still reveal human and national characteristics.