

'She Stoops to Conquer' Straightforward, Ridiculously Funny

By Jim Lowe TIMES ARGUS STAFF

COLCHESTER – Viewers of PBS’s “Masterpiece Theater” and readers of Jane Austen novels will love Oliver Goldsmith’s “She Stoops to Conquer” for, though it was written in 1773, before Austen wrote her stories, it seems a delightful spoof of those most mannerly tales.

St. Michael’s Playhouse has created a production of “She Stoops to Conquer,” which opened Tuesday at St. Michael’s College’s McCarthy Arts Center, that makes this classic comedy as contemporary as any today – without changing a word – and hilariously, delightfully funny. Not only is the acting witty and wacky, the sets and costumes all come together to create an evening of heart-warming and ridiculously funny comedy.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle are English peers living in the country in shabby comfort. It’s a second marriage for both and they have a daughter and a son, Kate and Tony. Another member of the household is Mrs. Hardcastle’s orphaned niece Constance, who is unhappily betrothed to the ne’er-do-well Tony.

Mr. Hardcastle has invited the son of one of his peer friends, Sir Charles Marlow, to come and meet Kate. For, although the Hardcastles have never met Charles Marlow (the son), they hope that a marriage between him and young Kate will prove mutually advantageous. But the disgruntled Tony meets Charles and his friend George Hastings, who are lost at the local pub, and sends them to his parents’ house claiming it is an inn. Thus, the two mistake Mr. and Mrs. Hastings for lowly innkeepers, and Kate as a bar wench – and the fun begins.

Part of the fun is hearing the Jane Austen language while watching this bawdy action. The characters, story and action are all delightfully funny.

When the curtain opened Tuesday on the St. Mike’s production, directed by Sarah Carleton, revealed was the striking and colorful comic book-like depiction of the Hardcastle’s home, created by Laurencio Ruiz. For the first time in recent memory, a central Vermont theater has employed a set that truly contributes the character of the production. And this slightly off-kilter painted set, fake fireplace and all, creates the perfect room for this bawdy comedy.

Much of the cast was perfectly chosen. John D. Alexander’s Mr. Hardcastle is just the right combination of stodgy aristocrat and common sensible father. Mary Carol Magazini’s Mrs. Hardcastle was a hilarious parody of the mother in “Masterpiece Theater’s” “Pride and Prejudice.” Kathryn Blume was coquettish and devilishly funny as the wily Kate, while Christina Ames successfully masked Constance’s hard and practical side with beautiful fluff. John Gardiner’s Tony was the appropriately rustic and devious bad boy. John Hayden and Michael Mendelson were well-cast and effective as the young Charles Marlow and George Hastings, but were not entirely comfortable in their parts on opening night.

Period costumes by Maggie Lee-Burdoff and original music by David Volpe all contribute to making this comedy eminently satisfying. St. Mike’s “She Stoops to Conquer” is one of the most delightful and refreshingly straightforward comedies to come along in a while.