

## A 'LAUGHING' COMEDY

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For the better part of the 18th century, British comedies were not written to primarily produce laughter. Public taste had shifted away from the bawdy Restoration comedies of the 17th century in large part due to a fiery 1698 pamphlet titled, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, written by a prominent preacher named Jeremy Collier. Playwrights of the 1700s responded with “sentimental comedies” written to produce more tears of joy than laughter. These didactic plays depicted overly-virtuous middle-class protagonists who triumphantly overcome trials through the rebuke of vice, praise of morality, and the tearful reunion of families and lovers.

Frustrated by such rampant sentimentality on stage, Playwright Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) wrote *She Stoops to Conquer* as a satire of these so-called comedies. He thought the hesitation to let characters stray from virtue robbed these plays of the fundamental function of comedy: to ridicule human error with laughter. He even went as far as to call his play a “laughing comedy” in an essay circulated prior to the production, and echoed his sentiment through the character Young Marlow who reminds Miss Hardcastle: “The folly of most people is rather an object of mirth than uneasiness.” When *She Stoops to Conquer* premiered in London on March 15, 1773, Goldsmith asked his audience to embrace his characters’ stoop from virtue. And audiences responded with laughter.

Our performers today will no doubt receive the same response. Having explored various theatrical styles and vocal techniques in the classroom and on stage with their recent performance of Bruce Norris’ contemporary satire *Clybourne Park*, our second-year CWRU/CPH MFA actors



A portrait of Oliver Goldsmith painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, circa 1770.

are well prepared for this culminating performance of an 18th century satire. As these plays are not frequently performed, this is a rare and challenging opportunity to tackle lyrically heightened language, British dialects, stylized movement, and elaborate period costumes.

That our production will coincide with the 244th anniversary of the play’s premiere stands as testament to Oliver Goldsmith’s understanding of human need. Through his characters’ humorous stoop from virtue, we forgive our own shortcomings; in the conquering of their desires, we delight in the triumph of good intentions. We are imparted with the timeless wisdom to not take ourselves too seriously, and will hopefully leave the theatre with a healthy dose of the best medicine: laughter.