

British Theatre Guide

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The Country Wife

William Wycherley in a new version by Tanika Gupta
Watford Palace Theatre
(2004)

Artistic director, Lawrence Till's choice for the reopening of the Watford Palace Theatre after a two-year, £8.2m. refurbishment is a qualified success.

Tanika Gupta has got the taste for bringing English classics up to date and giving them an Anglo-Indian slant. Last year she gave *Hobson's Choice* the treatment and now she has picked on a 330-year-old comedy of English manners and reset it in Watford.

This version doesn't really know quite what it is. Up to the interval, it seems to be a slightly uncertain reworking of English comedy into contemporary language and cross-cultural attitudes. At times, it also has the feel of a musical, but without the songs.

Thereafter, it combines a serious debate about arranged marriages, religious assimilation and the battle between the sexes with parodies of film musicals, never quite forgetting Wycherley along the way.

The plot revolves around the eponymous heroine and mail order bride Preethi (Amanda Gordon). She is married to Rohan Siva's awful Alok but loved by handsome Hardeep, played by Stephen Rahman-Hughes. The country that she has come from is now not Devonshire but India, and Preethi, in beautiful turquoise sari, is strictly a Desi Wife.

Hardeep is an apparently reformed womaniser despite the temptations of a couple of slappers run by Mark Monero's Jazzy, and, reputedly, all of the women of the neighbourhood.

From there, the laughs rely on jealousy and surprisingly innocent sexual shenanigans. The happy ending works better in Restoration Comedies than it does today, where it is hard to believe in. However, the optimism shows an attractive innocence that we might wish for today.

The original storyline holds up pretty well, even as exchanging letters give way to texting, and the comedy, especially in some of the parodies, is great. There are too many sub-plots and ideas that are not fully explored. This means that the play currently lacks focus.

There are some good performances and in particular, Ryan Early as proto-doctor, rapper and warm-up man Quack, and Richard Sumitro as the sweetly gullible, foppish Sparks, are both extremely funny.

The Country Wife, bangra'd and disco'd up, will appeal to younger audiences and should attract an Asian following. It is a brave opening salvo by Lawrence Till and, despite its limitations (and ideally with a bit of a re-write), should prove successful.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)