



[The Art of Success](#) at [HOME](#)

Produced by [MMU School of Art](#)

Reviewed by [Stephen Bowler](#) April 2016

William Hogarth (1697–1764), the celebrated engraver and painter best known for *A Rake's Progress*

(1735), is the subject of *The Art of Success*

. Hogarth's zest for the lusty, dusty, gin-soaked underbelly of London life was matched only by his ability to capture its moral content on canvas. This quest is the key to Nick Dear's capacious, ambitious play, first performed in 1986 and now revived for a short run at HOME.

Much ground is covered in *The Art of Success*. Wider political shenanigans and closer personal encounters are framed in the context of the excesses of eighteenth century London life. Many and various parallels between then and now might be made, but the play sticks closely to its

time and subject and is all the better for it. Public and private collide and collude in the struggle to make a living out of the messy, interpretive business of artistic representation. 'I love human beings for their failings' says Hogarth (**Johnny Byrom**), 'otherwise I couldn't live with myself.' That such failings are colourfully replicated at all levels of society is the secret to Hogarth's enormous success, bringing the darker side of modern life to a huge new audience through commercially available prints.

Satyriasis and hypocrisy structures much of the play, affording lots of opportunity for bed-hopping bawdiness and raucous come-uppance in relation to power and poverty. But the main dramatic thread running through *The Art of Success* centres on the rage of a murderess who is sketched by Hogarth only hours before she is due to be executed.

Laura Ferries

is deliciously wicked in the role of Sarah Sprackling, who takes enormous offence at having been portrayed as a common prostitute: 'The whole reason I'm in here is because I'm not a whore' she declares, before murdering the gaoler in order to escape and reclaim the false image of Hogarth's imagination – an image frankly stated to be to his commercial interest. Woven into this narrative are the low censorious motives of Prime Minister Robert Walpole (

James Eken

), the high artistic ambitions of playwright Henry Fielding (

Jerome Dowling

), the prosaic domestic concerns of Hogarth's wife Jane (

Harriet Poole

), the tragic pathos of Louisa the whore (

Comfort Fabian

), and much more besides.

It is my understanding that the cast are all students at Manchester School of Theatre. If this is so, I can only conclude they run an excellent course. The energy and éclat of the players kept this large and relatively complex play fizzing all the way to the end. The 'nightmare things' in Hogarth's head were suitably nightmarish, but also historically situated, without ever being didactic. Enormous questions about the meaning of art were sketched and disputed in their time and place, and shown to be timelessly debateable. Great fun, and with depth too.