

# N.O.N.C.E

press pack



*"a darkly hypnotic mini-masterpiece of slam storytelling"*  
by Steve Larkin

## [VIDEO TRAILER LINK](#)

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# 1. About N.O.N.C.E.

## Written and performed by Steve Larkin

N.O.N.C.E. or (Not On Normal Courtyard Exercise) is a critically acclaimed piece of dramatic storytelling based on events that took place around the time that the author worked as a 'poet-in-residence' at a high security therapeutic prison - helping dangerous criminals to escape... through creative expression!

In a departure from his usual comic performances Steve has produced a theatre piece with a narrative arc and subtly sophisticated interwoven themes, described as being:

**“a masterful rush of language that combines monologue,  
dramatic narrative and slam poetry”**  
*Canadian Broadcasting Corporation July 2011*

It is based on real life events that took place whilst performance poet Steve was employed as a lecturer in Performing Arts at Oxford Brookes University, a post which led to a year-long residency at HMP Grendon Underwood.

### HMP Grendon

Grendon was opened in 1962 as an experimental psychiatric prison to provide treatment for prisoners with antisocial personality disorders. It is today the only British state-run therapeutic prison in the UK.

It accepts serving category B & C male prisoners whom apply to serve part of their sentence in one of Grendon's autonomous therapeutic communities.

Incoming prisoners must have a genuine desire to change. They must also be committed to staying free from drugs whilst in therapy.

It has the lowest re-offending rate of any prison in the UK.

The success of this approach, which is celebrated in N.O.N.C.E. has been under threat from the UK government's programme of cuts:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/05/hmp-grendon-victim-of-its-own-success>

## 1. About Steve Larkin

Steve Larkin is an internationally respected writer and spoken word artist, a lecturer in performance poetry and storytelling, the founder of the UK's largest poetry slam organisation Hammer & Tongue, and a singer/song-writer.

### **The Poet:**

Steve has had his poetry broadcast to over 12 million people through the BBC World Service, has performed to the House of Commons, has toured extensively in North America and Europe and is one of only a handful of UK poets to have won an International Poetry Slam title.

In 2010 he was nominated for Oxford Professor of Poetry.

What people have said of him/his work:

"Larkin creates theatre that speaks equally to those who find their poetry from classic literary forms or subversive musicians. Run to his show!" Uptown Magazine

"Funny and biting, a pump-action powerhouse on stage." Edmonton Journal, Canada

"The Spoken Word Guru" Winnipeg Free Press

*"Prepare to leave stunned and inspired by the power of Larkin's spoken word" Edmonton Sun, Canada*

"That winning combination, usually the domain of comedians like Russell Brand, of biting wit served with a soothing accent" Oxford Theatre Review

"Part philosophy part hysterically funny humour" Nightshift Magazine

"Leeds' hybrid answer to Spike Milligan and Eminem... Poetry at its rawest glittering best." Vanguard-online

"Revolutionary, elocutionary genius makes the occupation of "poet" seem dangerously cool again." See Magazine, Canada

### **The spoken word theatre artist:**

Steve has, for a number of years, turned his attentions to spoken word theatre creating nuanced dramatic theatre shows that enhance his poetic works and create great entertainment for audiences. 'N.O.N.C.E.' was a critical and box office success in the UK and Canada, where it was nominated for "Best Male Artist" at The Victoria International Fringe Festival.

TES - Tess of the D'Urbervilles Re-imagined was similarly a critical success and was nominated for 'Best Theatre Production' and 'Best Male Actor' at the Buxton Fringe:

"Tragic tale with humour, poetry, wordplay and enough pathos to leave the audience shaken.

One of the best shows at this year's fringe, no doubt." Vue Magazine, Canada

“An Orwellian portrayal of Britain’s rotting underbelly that slices like a rusty razor. An intelligent gut-puncher of a show that lingers.” Victoria Times Colonist, Canada

“A gripping story deftly delivered” Edinburgh 49

“Intelligently layered social commentary” Broadway Baby

"No dry polemic; it is an impressively woven play" Fringe Guru

### **The Educator:**

Steve has been one of the only university lecturer in Oxford dedicated to performance poetry, leading the Performance Poetry and Storytelling module as part of the Oxford Brookes University's Performing Arts Course and lecturing on Creative Writing with English and Modern Languages. Steve has extensive experience of leading workshops in schools, colleges, universities and prisons. He was Poet-in-Residence at HMP Grendon Underwood and regularly leads teams of performance poets, enthusing young people in primary and secondary schools about poetry. He independently runs accredited courses in writing and performing poetry. His workshops and lectures have been extremely well received:

“This course was a life changing experience” HMP Grendon Inmate

“My SAT's results have never been as good” S Donnahey (teacher)

### **The Promoter:**

Steve has been a pivotal figure in the growth of spoken word and performance poetry in the UK. He founded Hammer and Tongue in 2003 staging some of the best-attended live literature events that have taken place in the UK for some years. The Four Nations Slam in 2005 was attended by a capacity 500-strong audience at The Zodiac in Oxford, and was said to be: “the best collection of English language poets ever to perform on the same stage” (PoetCD.com) The organisation now has a national profile with a number of year-long regional programmes that feed into an annual final at the Royal Albert Hall.

“Hammer & Tongue has reinvented the medium for the hip hop generation” The Guardian

### **The Musician:**

Steve worked with electronica musicians “Valley Forge” recording spoken word over beats and synthesisers and now fronts **Inflatable Buddha** a popular “worldfolkpunkskiffle” band that tours internationally. The show 'Inflatable Buddha: Bigger than Jesus!' was a hit at Canadian Fringe Festivals in 2008:

“Inflatable Buddha are a blast, finding a point at which Ian Dury and The Straycats meet, they blow the cobwebs out of your ears, a curiously enjoyable entity” (Nightshift Magazine)

### 3. Press

#### UK Reviews:

Fringe Guru, July 2016



*After last year's success with TES, his reworking of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Steve Larkin returns to the Buxton Fringe with a more personal show – recounting his year as a poet in residence at a high security prison. It follows Larkin into some dark places, physically and emotionally, personally and professionally, but ultimately reaffirms the benefits of creativity.*

*N.O.N.C.E. opens with a disclaimer: the show is based on real-life experiences, but names have been changed to protect the innocent. And the guilty. We're straight into an account of two men discussing the role of accidental or deliberate ambiguity in poetry. One is Larkin; the other is a child murderer.*

*This unsettling juxtaposition, of intelligent debate and creativity with the obscene acts of the most reviled members of our society, runs through the show. Yet there is plenty of humour too, and unexpected practical considerations; Larkin and his colleague are desperate to get enough participants in their poetry and lyric writing programme, or they'll have to give the money back to the Arts Council. And they don't want to do that.*

*There are lines here that are difficult to draw and difficult to walk. Treating with humanity those considered to have committed inhuman acts; safeguarding the young female students that come into poetry workshops in a prison full of violent men, yet without being over-protective and patronising. At one point, after witnessing performances by these sex offenders in a prison, Larkin goes to perform at a feminist fundraiser – and recounts his own sexual desire for the student that accompanies him.*

*It's an intensely personal show all round, as Larkin weaves his prison experiences together with relationship problems in his personal life. The impact of constant exposure to talk of violence reduces it to banality (“Murder's just a word”), and we experience the strangeness of an environment where the repeated explanations of brutal sexual crimes reduce him to thinking, “I hope it's just rape”. What kind of world is this, he asks, and what is it doing to him? Is it making him casual in his attitudes to the use of pornography – even making him prone to anger and possible violence? The arguments over desensitization that we encounter in the media are addressed personally, directly and unflinchingly.*

*There is perhaps a looser feel to the poetry than there was in TES, but still an acute awareness of how its techniques heighten the impact or introduce ambiguity (there is an amusing nod to Prufrock, despite an early jibe at TS Eliot). Larkin is a natural performer at ease with the torrent of words, and he uses subtle shifts in posture and changes in accent to bring in other characters; the prisoners, their guards, academic colleagues and students. There are simple but effective lighting changes to change the scenes, the most effective*

*being the black-outs when he talks of his dreams. More than just emphasizing that it is night-time, they reflect the darkness of those dreams, as topics from prison directly impinge on his personal concerns in that uncontrollable unconscious world.*

*In the end, there is perhaps a rather swift resolution – moving from the grimness of incessant acquaintance with violence, to the catharsis of successful creative endeavour. But Larkin deserves his release from prison. It's hard to find fault with this difficult but superb spoken-word show; consider it essential viewing.*

Stephen Walker

[buxton.fringe guru.com/reviews/buxton-2016/nonce](http://buxton.fringe guru.com/reviews/buxton-2016/nonce)

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Oxford Theatre Review, Jan 2012



*How refreshing it is sometimes to get smacked in the face with a healthy truism, and this performance, gritty, witty and joyfully self-conscious just kept 'em coming. In N.O.N.C.E., you get that winning combination, usually the domain of comedians like Russell Brand, of biting wit served with a soothing accent; - one that doesn't need to be dressed up in RP or florid language to pack a creative and intellectual punch. The story demonstrates what happens when you cross the murky world of high security prisoners with, (as the implicitly left wing production implies) the perhaps even murkier world of high art, shining a magnifying glass on some uncomfortable truths and blurring the distinction between 'them' and 'us'. It is based on the real life experiences of the performance-poet and Oxford University Lecturer Steve Larkin, an 'underemployed' artist who finds himself teaching the notions of assonance and alliteration to yesteryear's Daily Mail headlines - think 'Man-gets- life-for-eating-own-wife' scenarios, whilst tracking the harrowing effects this has on his own perspectives. In particular, the play explores the issues of retribution and sexuality, the response to a life behind bars, and the uncomfortable parallels between life on the inside and the out. Oh, and I should mention that it is smattered with more than its fair share of brilliant comedy.*

*A powerful thread imbued in the production is Larkin's whole-hearted belief in making poetry that is both vibrant and relevant. On the dramatic front, this piece is a modern tornado of SLAM (an import from the US and basically the poetic equivalent of a rap battle), seen most notably in the scenes in which prisoners recite their own poetry, and a more general narrative prose which remains littered with quirky rhythms and rhyming schemes. The clever interpolation of these contrasting poetic styles and meters, (in part a consequence of Larkin performing all the various characters solo) resulted in a remarkably beautiful sonic experience, something that I hadn't expected, despite Larkin's poetic pedigree.*

*For an hour-long performance consisting solely of one man, an empty stage, and about two and a half sound effects, the impact of this play was immense - the definitive product that is 'more than equal to the sum of its parts'. On a serious level, it was a thoroughly creative*



*and thought provoking experience, and I couldn't think of a more effective response to the sticky issues raised by Larkin's experiences - art remains the most powerful conveyor of a message. Oh, and just in case you were wondering, N.O.N.C.E. Stands for Not.On.Normal.Courtyard.Exercise, that is, prison terminology for the sex offenders at the bottom of the inmates' hierarchy who are denied said pleasure. Slightly tricky to weave into a review, please accept my sincere apologies for not mentioning it until now.*

Anna Kaznowska

[www.oxfordtheatrereview.co.uk/reviews/event/TuOugGqQS9aL1iwOXDx6yg](http://www.oxfordtheatrereview.co.uk/reviews/event/TuOugGqQS9aL1iwOXDx6yg)

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The Public Reviews, Nov 2013



*'There's two men in a room' – this is a refrain from Steve Larkin's one-man show, not a description of the crowd at the Etcetera Theatre. Variants of it are used throughout with descriptions of the men he's talking about. Sometimes they are high security inmates, sometimes they are the inmates and Larkin, and sometimes they are just Larkin. The great strength of Not on Normal Courtyard Exercise (N.O.N.C.E.) is that you can never be sure who is being described, the philosopher poet may turn out to be a convicted paedophile, the man worried about giving in to his dark thoughts may turn out to be Larkin, and the audience is invited to consider whether any of them could be us.*

*The show is based around Larkin's year as poet-in-residence at HMP Grendon, Britain's only therapeutic prison, and his Arts Council funded project to run a rehabilitation through poetry course. As well as talking about the project, the prison, the prisoners, and the different categories of criminals among them, Larkin recounts his experiences of motorway journeys, nights in B and Bs, and the break-up of his relationship during the time he ran the course.*

*It's the personal insight and Larkin's willingness to focus in on himself that elevates the performance beyond the usual observations that high security inmates may be similar to us, and on to the more uncomfortable conclusion that we may be similar to them. That's not to say it's an unrelenting dark night of the soul style exploration however, a rich vein of humour runs through it, in the descriptions of the inmates, the public performances in front of female students, and Larkin's assessment of their poetry, whether it be unexpected beauty, dark malevolence, or just utter rubbish.*

*The inmates are a mixture of introverts and extroverts with varying degrees of psychological problems, and different explanations, if not justifications, for their crimes. Larkin gives them a sympathetic treatment, but at the same time doesn't pull any punches when it comes to revealing the impact finding out what they did has on his attempts to remain neutral and separate the person from the crime.*

*Linking it all together are the inmates need for validation, which they get through becoming poets, and Larkin's own need for validation, which he gets through becoming the Johnny Cash of poetry. It's as much the story of his year as it is the story of the project, and cut-away sections such as a summer tour of the Canadian fringe circuit, where you're only as*

*good as your last review, resonate with the underlying themes.*

*There are a couple of wrong moves along the way. A meditation on the legality of bestiality in Denmark and how this might be sold to would be tourists and animal abusers, comes before the characters and situations have been fully established and sounds more like an outtake from a stand up routine, than something with a place in this piece.*

*This still leaves a great sixty minutes where a strong story is told in a way that keeps you hooked, makes you laugh and makes you think, all at the same time. Larkin's messages emerge from the material rather than being laid over the top of it, and are far more effective as a result. It's thoughtful comedy that isn't preachy, and will leave you knowing more about yourself as well as more about the inmates of a therapeutic prison.*

[www.thereviewshub.com/not-on-normal-courtyard-exercise-etcetera-theatre-london/](http://www.thereviewshub.com/not-on-normal-courtyard-exercise-etcetera-theatre-london/)

**Andy Moseley**

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## **Daily Info, January 2012**

*A year spent working with sex offenders and murderers would not be for everyone; I'm sure I couldn't do it. Having to engage with – possibly even begin to like – someone who has committed the unforgiveable is beyond the comprehension of many. Doing it with the intention of making life better for them rather than their victims seems even stranger; why should anyone want to? Why do they deserve a break? The answer, for many people, is that they don't. "Lock them up and throw away the key" may be a Daily Mail war cry, but it's one that many of us can relate to.*

*But here's the thing: after watching N.O.N.C.E., I'm no longer sure. Suddenly, these people become more human. When someone says that all they have known since childhood is crime, you begin to think they might deserve a break. And, even if they don't, the rest of society does, and the only successful way of reducing crime is to rehabilitate the offender. That's where HMP Grendon steps in. It is the United Kingdom's only therapeutic prison community for the treatment of serious sex offenders and violent offenders. Inmates volunteer to go there and they can be voted out at any time by their peers. It is no coincidence that it has the lowest recidivism rate in the country.*

*Larkin opens his one-man show with some background information; he was there because he needed the money, the Arts Council would fund the course if he could recruit enough takers. He struggled to drum up interest and it seemed his efforts were in vain, but at the eleventh hour the men signed up and he got the green light.*

*On the first day prisoners were asked to name their artistic heroes then adopt their names as their own. Consequently, he found himself in a room full of the good and the great: Lennon, Mozart and Dali were there. So was Paul Weller, he turned out to be a great poet; Michelangelo was something of a philosopher. Larkin threw female students into the mix, it seemed to up the ante; the testosterone levels must have been off the scale. At the end of the year, all the "artists" put on a public performance. One of them described it as the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, adding "...and I've killed people."*

*Steve Larkin will always be Oxford's Professor of Poetry in my mind. The man is a genius, master of the spoken word, a great performer, hugely talented. There was never a dull moment. The North Wall audience was captivated and the hour just flew by.*



Judith Davies

[www.dailyinfo.co.uk/reviews/feature/6284/NONCE](http://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/reviews/feature/6284/NONCE)

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### **Oxford Theatre Review, Jan 2012**



*I love a good monologue, don't you? An angry rant, an anecdote, cruel impersonation; everything sounds better as a self indulgent soliloquy. Yet Steve Larkin's 'N.O.N.C.E' is quite unlike anything I've seen before. With his non stop rhythmic slam poetry prose approach he pops us behind towers and walls and into his shoes for his year spent as Poet in Residence at Grendon Prison.*

*He looks like a normal bloke; far more normal than the bearded, bespectacled, droopy earringed Summertown audience around me. But this can only be a good thing, tired as we are of the overacting thesp types that seem to have been creaking Oxford boards since nobody knows when. And he begins, ensnaring me in the first five minutes with his unrelenting, unforgiving and consistently cleverly delivered account, dropping me off ninety minutes later with newfound opinions on the prison system I never before cared about.*

*The show is based on the poet's real life experiences working with convicted murderers and sex offenders in a breakthrough programme aimed at rehabilitation through poetry. And yet Larkin gives us more than just his day job- he shows us how fraternising with dangerous takes its toll on his social life, on his dreams, on his whole existence. In a flash his persona morphs from scouse inmate struggling with poetic self-expression, to therapist Dr Angus chatting on the drive home, to Larkin himself, reflecting on his new position: "I'm the Johnny Cash of poetry, I'm walking the f\*\*\*ing line!". More than just endlessly quotable, this is a show both minutely thought out and rapidly delivered, oozing with more lyrical jazz than I could soak in on first watch.*

*Refreshingly, this man doesn't hold back. Rather than the sex and violence, it's his candidity which draws the audience in, the abundant anecdotes that keeps us laughing. The laughs are there, but in the next breath we're thinking, examining ourselves and questioning our own judgement of Larkin's characters and their incarceration. No feature of his or the prisoners' lives is left unscrutinised; their past crimes, lost dreams, unspoken sexual frustration. "There's an elephant in the room", he muses "And its raping a panda with its trunk".*

*For lovers of prose or poetry, this is a must. For anyone tired of the snobby Oxford Scene or looking for a story from beyond the student bubble, this is for you too. But the appeal of N.O.N.C.E. is really much wider: you'll find that, more than just a call to change our approach to prison and punishment, this is a tribute to the spoken word itself, to the power of speech and its innate musicality.*

Stan Pincet

<http://oxfordtheatrereview.co.uk/reviews/event/TuOugGqQS9aL1iwOXDx6yg>

**Niches, March 2013**

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***N.O.N.C.E. (Not On Normal Courtyard Exercise)***

*It's a play, the blurb said.*

*Written, directed and performed by a slam poet, it said.*

*It's about his time as poet in residence at a prison, it said.*

*Poet in residence at a prison; I said?*

*Great, I said.*

*So I went and I sat in the relatively new black-box studio upstairs in Jersey's Opera House, secretly a little bit excited; there was something enthralling about the would-be thug featured on the poster. The lights went down and a man (Steve Larkin) I'd barely noticed at the back of the room walked into the space before us. A few white lights came up and illuminated the space he stood in. And he began.*

*What happened next is something of a very happy, very intriguing blur; an engrossing, funny, thought provoking blur of slam poetry and performance prose.*

*Through his tale of a poet, he himself, landing a job as poet in residence at a special kind of British prison where the psychological needs of the inmates are of the highest importance, we too stepped through the gates, past the guards and into the penal institution. The job; to stimulate prisoners into writing poetry for themselves as a kind of outlet, a form of self-written, self-performed counselling and creative therapy.*

*The privileged that sat in the dark, being carried along by this story of self-revelation for the prisoners, these murders, rapists and child molesters, as well as for the poet himself, were introduced to and given opportunity to know some of these funny, intriguing characters. Not all just funny of course; for all had a depth about them that was portrayed with skill by the performer. The characters came to life through their conversations with their new teacher and through their newly written poetry.*

*Real treats were given when Steve, either as himself or one of the prisoners, performed one of several poems within the piece. These dramatic highlights, bursts of lyrical energy which were cutting and bold, tinted with a manic spirit, edged closer and closer to something dangerous. It was these explosions of verse that provided the series of crescendos needed to shape the work not as storyteller telling his tale, but in dramatic form, as a play.*

*And so adept at moving from character to character, and backwards and forwards to himself, was Steve that there were no breaks in believability or great big green exits signs which we could have walked through, allowing ourselves to step out of the story. Oh no, we were there in the prison, and in the car, and we witnessed the ever growing cancer in his romantic relationship back home, and we too felt the dangerous symbiosis that was occurring, the question always hanging there; who was feeding who, did the prisoners need the poet or was it the poet that needed them?*

*Steve Larkin had managed to take us on his journey and had dropped us off at the end feeling like we had embarked on a real adventure; now a little more knowing, but with so many questions there for us to ask ourselves. And there is the mark of good theatre, and of any art form in fact; the questions, the ghosts that stay with us. And they were there, and*

*this was in no doubt a very good piece of theatre.*

*Steve Larkin and N.O.N.C.E are currently on tour in the UK, so if you have the chance to see it, or to see Steve perform at one of the many spoken word events and poetry slams, then do not miss the chance; because whether you are a fan of poetry or not, I would defy anyone not to be intrigued and inspired by his work.*

Leon Fleming

[www.nicheshowcase.com/n-o-n-c-e-review/](http://www.nicheshowcase.com/n-o-n-c-e-review/)

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## Sabaotage 2012

***The Performer: Steve Larkin is a bit of a legend of the Oxford poetry scene.***

*In fact, some would say he's the reason Oxford has a poetry scene.*

*He set up and ran the infamous Hammer & Tongue night, which has now spread to other cities too, for eight years before backing down to concentrate on his own thing. His own thing being his new one man show, N.O.N.C.E.*

*If the title seems a little confrontational that's because it's meant to be. Steve's never been one to shy away from politics in his poetry, so a show about the year he spent as poet in residence at a prison was certainly going to be no exception.*

***The Concept: a one-man show?***

*Now, I know what some of you might be thinking. Yes, we've all seen the art of the one man/modern theatre show parodied so well on Spaced, The Big Lebowski, Family Guy, etc etc. Small theatre shows are generally treated with the same sense of general disdain as self published poetry pamphlets, possibly even more so, so it's difficult not to approach this without some sense of caution. I've seen Steve Larkin perform poetry before, I know how good he is, but a one man theatre show? Really? **Yes. Really.***

***The Show: Spoiler alert: This show isn't just good, it's really bloody good.***

*The basic storyline is that Steve and a Doctor (whose name I'm afraid I forgot to note) regularly go to HM Grendon to run a poetry workshop for the inmates. At first it appears to be met with a lack of enthusiasm, but as the prisoners who sign up get more into the course, the more the worth of what they're doing seems. This rise in professional success is offset by a deterioration of Steve's personal life, creating an interesting dynamic. I'm reluctant to go into much more detail, as the show's reveals deserve to be kept as such.*

***The Performance: Steve Larkin is a warm and very engaging performer***

*It's what made him such a good Hammer & Tongue host, so as he (and I'm loathe to use this phrase, but it really does describe it best) takes you on a journey through his year long placement, you go right along with him. It feels like he is talking to you, rather than at you (which in a full theatre is no easy feat). This presentation style is one of the main reasons why N.O.N.C.E. works as well as it does. It is never preachy, hectoring, judgmental or manipulative. Steve Larkin has the faith to just present his events and let the power of what's happening be what affects us.*

*One of the other main reasons that N.O.N.C.E. succeeds as it does is by repeatedly taking you through Steve's daily routine. This repetition is a clever trick, setting a framework for us to become quickly familiar with. It puts us in his place. He gets up, goes to work, certain same things happen, he leaves, stays in a B&B, calls his girlfriend, sleeps and dreams. By following this repeated routine, the changes are more highlighted and affecting. We are shown how Steve's progress with the prisoners was slow to start, and each 'Eureka' moment makes us take more notice of it, because it's outside of the framework. It's unexpected.*

***The Prisoners: These people are people***

*A large part of the show deals with the interactions between the prisoners and a group of students that Steve is teaching in another job. The bringing together of these groups*



*highlights a slight paradox in the way that the prisoners are taught and treated. These people are people, and when treated as such respond in positive ways and progress is made. Because they are people who've committed awful crimes though, they are never to be fully trusted. The interactions with the students highlight this conflict well, and it is a conflict that is never fully resolved.*

*There are a couple of uneasy moments in the Steve's personal life side of the show, which serve to highlight how easy it could be for any of us to make an error of judgement and end up in the prisoners' situation ourselves. It's an uncomfortable feeling to think that you could, in one simple, unthinking moment, end up in the same position as someone in HM Grendon.*

*This is something we haven't been given a chance to think about before. All the inmates who take part in the workshop are given the names of their heroes. This is said to be to enable them to loosen up and engage in the program, but I suspect it was also done in order to separate each person from their crime, so that by detaching them from what they've done they've done, they could see them as people rather than monsters. It works for the show too, as that's the effect it has on the audience. It's a lot easier for us to root for someone called David Bowie, say, than someone we know as a convicted murderer. It's another little trick that really works in getting us involved in and sympathetic to the events of the show.*

**Conclusion: Moving, thought-provoking, superb theatre.**

*The ending of the show is superb. Again, I am reluctant to give too much away, but a couple of points are raised which confront us with our general perceptions and habits (both of which, I have to admit, I was guilty of), and this highlights another message of the show. We all have preconceptions, and these can often do a disservice to the people we have them of. For all the uncomfortable moments and uneasy feelings we are given though, N.O.N.C.E. is in the end an affirming and uplifting show. Its messages are positive ones, and they are delivered in a way that makes you think about them long after the show is over.*

*Steve Larkin has created a moving, thought provoking, and, most importantly, a fantastic piece of theatre. I would highly recommend this show to anyone who has a chance to see it.*

**Paul Askew**

[www.sabotagereviews.com/2012/02/27/n-o-n-c-e-steve-larkin/](http://www.sabotagereviews.com/2012/02/27/n-o-n-c-e-steve-larkin/)

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## **Canadian Reviews:**

**Uptown Magazine, July 2011**



*U.K. poet Steve Larkin delivers a riveting tale based on his own real-life experience serving as poet-in-residence at HMP Grendon Underwood, a high-security therapeutic correctional institution in England. Surrounded by rapists, murderers and pedophiles, Larkin introduces the inmates to creative writing, using the art form as a tool for catharsis and rehabilitation*

*in his antisocial pupils. Among his spoken-word narratives about criminal students with pseudonyms such as Paul Weller and John Lennon and his own personal battles, Larkin interjects his sublime slam poetry with a gripping rap cadence and brash punk rock style that's absolutely spellbinding. His account is enthralling and his execution superb. Larkin creates theatre that will speak equally to those who find their poetry from classic literary forms or subversive musicians. Run to this show.*

Julijana Capone

[www.uptownmag.com/arts/theatre/Five-star-Fringe-125911639.html](http://www.uptownmag.com/arts/theatre/Five-star-Fringe-125911639.html)

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**Winnipeg Free Press, July 2011**



*British performance poet Steve Larkin's life takes a turn for the perverse when he lands a job as a prison poet-in-residence in this semi-autobiographical piece.*

*At first, Larkin (2007's *Inflatable Buddha*) is just happy to have a job, but working with pedophiles, rapists and murders is complicated, not to mention awkward — "It's like there's an elephant in the room and he's raping a panda with his trunk."*

*A high-energy performer, Larkin goes to dark places, but he lightens the load with comedic flair. As he explores his relationships with the inmates and the women in his life, he's forced to confront disturbing truths — about the prisoners and his own multifarious nature.*

*And in a crafty final twist, he makes the audience follow suit.*

Pat St. Germain

[www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/fringe/reviews/NONCE-125382473.html](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/fringe/reviews/NONCE-125382473.html)

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**Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, July 2011**





*N.O.N.C.E. stands for Not On Normal Courtyard Exercise and refers to the type of prisoner Steve Larkin worked with as poet-in-residence at a British therapeutic prison. Larkin's job was to rehabilitate these criminals - whose crimes required they be segregated from other prisoners for their own safety - through poetry and creativity.*

*It's the kind of situation that only a man of unusual talents finds himself in, and Larkin is a man of unusual talents indeed. In a masterful rush of language that combines monologue, dramatic narrative and slam poetry, he tells the true story of how he tried to connect with and help those prisoners, and how they challenged and changed him.*

*If this doesn't seem like your thing, let me add that Larkin's talents include a razor-sharp knack for storytelling. He knows exactly when to change his narrative approach for maximum impact, employs the cadences of language like a virtuoso to give his performance pace, and projects honesty and charisma that defy his punk-rock stance.*

*N.O.N.C.E. isn't for the faint of heart, but those willing to look down a darker road as part of their Fringe experience will be rewarded with the kind of performance that can't be found elsewhere.*

*Kelly Stifora*

[www.cbc.ca/manitoba/scene/fringe/2011/07/15/nonce/](http://www.cbc.ca/manitoba/scene/fringe/2011/07/15/nonce/)

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**Edmonton Journal, August 2011**



Her Majesty's Prison, Grendon, in Buckinghamshire, specializes in violent criminals and sex offenders of the most heinous variety. Not even prisoners want to be around most of these people; N.O.N.C.E. stands for Not on Normal Courtyard Exercise.

*For a time, Grendon's poet-in-residence was Steve Larkin, a veteran of the Fringe circuit and, in his home country, a leading figure in performance poetry.*

*There isn't a false note in his onstage memoir of his experience, studded with performances of his own work, tragedies and near-tragedies in his personal life, and some generous insights into the humanity of the inhumane.*

*Larkin doesn't engage in many of the homilies and standards of the one-person show. He isn't devoted to sentimentality or happy endings, which is fortunate when you're talking about pedophiles.*

*He breaks his story down elegantly, with combative energy and simple truths. It's a vindication of the power of poetry without any embarrassing nonsense. Parents of grumpy teenagers who don't like literature, hint, hint, hint.*

Todd Babiak

Vue Weekly, August 2011



*Steve Larkin's recollections of being poet-in-residence at a "therapeutic prison" in the UK is a darkly hypnotic, occasionally hilarious mini-masterpiece of slam storytelling. Larkin's slam-poet style enlivens a clever, rhythmic monologue that's as engrossing as the handful of actual poems he scatters in among the unfolding events. Larkin doesn't shy away from anything in the story—this is a prison ward full of murderers, rapists and pedophiles that he's trying to teach—and his own obsession with these men goes to some strange, bleak places that damage his life outside the walls. But on just about every level, N.O.N.C.E. succeeds in making the story arc a gripping one to watch.*

Paul Blinov

[www.vueweekly.com/fringe/play/p\\_n.o.n.c.e](http://www.vueweekly.com/fringe/play/p_n.o.n.c.e)

**Possible pull quotes:**

"Superb spoken word show. Consider it essential viewing" Fringe Guru

"Larkin creates theatre that will speak equally to those who find their poetry from classic literary forms or subversive musicians. Run to his show."



Uptown Magazine, Canada

*"A masterful rush of language that combines monologue, dramatic narrative, slam poetry and a razor-sharp knack for storytelling."*



*Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*

"A darkly hypnotic, occasionally hilarious mini-masterpiece of slam storytelling... on just about every level, N.O.N.C.E. succeeds in making the story arc a gripping one to watch."



Vue Magazine, Canada

*"For an hour-long performance consisting solely of one man, an empty stage, and about*

*two and a half sound effects, the impact of this play was immense."*



Oxford Theatre Review

*"The man is an absolute genius - master of the spoken word"*

*Daily Info*

## **5. Notes to Editor**

1. Steve is available for interview – email [steve@stevelarkin.com](mailto:steve@stevelarkin.com) or +44(0)7906885069
2. N.O.N.C.E. is a slang prison term for a sex offender, an acronym that stand for 'Not On Normal Courtyard Exercise’
3. More details about N.O.N.C.E. including a video trailer and audio and video of poems featured in the show can be found at [stevelarkin.com/N.O.N.C.E.](http://stevelarkin.com/N.O.N.C.E.)
4. More print quality photos are available at [stevelarkin.com/press](http://stevelarkin.com/press) or upon request.
5. More details about the show and Steve Larkin can be found at [stevelarkin.com](http://stevelarkin.com)
6. Steve Larkin was nominated for Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2010 [link](#)
7. BBC Radio interview about N.O.N.C.E.: [stevelarkin.com/TV\\_and\\_Radio\\_Bits](http://stevelarkin.com/TV_and_Radio_Bits)
8. Guardian feature on the poetry residency at Grendon:  
[theguardian.com/uk/2007/aug/21/ukcrime.poetry](http://theguardian.com/uk/2007/aug/21/ukcrime.poetry)