

# TES

press pack



by Steve Larkin

*"A modern retelling of Tess of the D'Urbervilles...  
One of the best shows at the Fringe, no doubt."*



*Vue Weekly Edmonton, Canada*

*"an Orwellian portrayal of Britain's rotting  
underbelly that slices like a rusty razor"*



*Victoria Times Colonist*

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## 1. About TES

TES is a contemporary theatrical adaptation of Thomas Hardy's celebrated novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles in which the tragic heroine is reinvented in the 21st Century as a teenage boy from the wrong side of the tracks who is found to be descended from a famous Romantic poet.

It is the creation of British writer and performer Steve Larkin, his second spoken word theatre piece following the success of 'N.O.N.C.E.' in 2011.

**Spoken word theatre** is a rapidly growing genre described by Lemn Sissay as:

*"a piece of theatre by a spoken word artist more likely a poet which is scripted and directed with theatrical sensibility maintaining the poets integrity."*

TES looks at Hardy's themes of historical determinism and the erosion of social mobility in the Victoria era and re-examines them in contemporary post-industrial Britain.

*"It's fascinating following the threads of Hardy's tale as Larkin reweaves them."*  
*CVV Magazine*

The show has, so far, enthralled audiences whether they be familiar or unfamiliar with the original. A spoken word story version was devised orally with directorial support from New York storyteller Martin Dockery to premier at The Victoria Fringe Festival in 2013 where it was a critical success:

*"one of the best shows at the fringe" Victoria Times Colonist, Sep 2013*



In 2014 TES was developed as part of an Underconstruction Theatre residency at The Old Fire Station Theatre in Oxford, UK.

Steve worked with dramaturge Lizzy McBain and Olivier Award-nominated sound designer Chris Full to create an expertly crafted immersive audioscape to enhance the theatrical experience of the intense and intriguing narrative:

*"An expertly designed soundscape makes the audience feel as if they are almost lost in his memory with him" - Edmonton Sun*



The fully developed one-man show which combines multiple character acting, dramatic storytelling, powerful performance poetry, and the new audio-scape has been touring Canadian fringe festivals in Regina, Winnipeg, and Edmonton in the summer of 2014 receiving astounding critical responses:

Regina Fringe Review: *"gripping, moving and occasionally hilarious"*

CBC Manitoba, 4 stars: *"remarkable storytelling"*

Edmonton Sun, 4 1/2 stars: *"prepare to leave stunned and inspired by the power of Larkin"*

Vue Weekly, 5 stars: *"One of the best shows at this year's fringe, no doubt"*

## 2. About Steve Larkin

Steve Larkin is an internationally respected 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 \*\*\*\*\*1/2*

***"The Spoken-Word Guru" Winnipeg Free Press \*\*\*\*\*1/2***

*"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 best." Vanguard*

***"Fantastic poetry" Billy Bragg***

He is one half of The Bold & Spiky Poetry Show which he formed with fellow performance poet Rob Gee. The show received critical acclaim in its first year:

***"Their revolutionary, elocutionary genius makes the occupation of "poet" seem dangerously cool again. It's a veritable poetry slamdunk!" See Magazine \*\*\*\*\****

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

In recent years he has 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. which was based on real life events that took place when he worked as a 'poet-in-residence' at a high security prison was a critical and box office success in Canada and the UK:

***"a modern tornado of SLAM" EdFringe Review \*\*\*\*\****

***"a darkly hypnotic, occasionally hilarious mini-masterpiece of slam storytelling" CBC***

### **The Educator:**

Steve is 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.

### 3. TES Press

Vue Weekly Edmonton - Aug 2014

5 STARS

*A modern retelling of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, TES is the story of a teenage boy of working-class background who is accused of a rape he didn't commit and the consequences for the rest of his life that stem from his condemnation. Writer and performer Steve Larkin manages to fill the tragic tale with humour, poetry, wordplay and enough pathos to leave the audience shaken. In addition, the show is a journey through contemporary Britain and the cracks Larkin sees forming around the culture. It's an involved show - it is, after all, based on a Victorian novel - but Larkin has the skill to weave the complicated plot together without leaving the audience behind. One of the best shows at this year's fringe, no doubt.*  
- Bryan Birtles

—  
Edmonton Sun - Aug 2014

4 1/2 STARS

*A modern reinvention of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles with an urban twist, Steve Larkin tackles dark subject matter in a tale that is as shocking as it was to its Victorian era audience as it is on stage at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival, reinvented with new and disturbing relevance in TES.*

*When Kes Byron's teacher discovers he is related to a famous poet, Lord Byron, the teacher woos her pupil over facebook with poetic sweet nothings and emoticons.*

*Almost swallowed by darkness on stage, Steve Larkin's sharp delivery paints the scene of the rape of a young boy from Newcastle, powerful poetics leaving the audience stunned, shocked and feeling utterly helpless.*

*Exposing the same social norms that kept Thomas Hardy's original heroine and Larkin's Kes Byron alike under thumb, Larkin — with direction from Martin Dockery — takes a shot at the modern grip of power and status that penalizes and stigmatizes Byron despite his innocence in the story of a boy struggling against a "midas touch in reverse."*

*An expertly designed soundscape makes the audience feel as if they are almost lost in his memory with him while lighting creates a shared sense of isolation, as if he Larkin is performing for a solo seat.*

*Despite the heavy content, Larkin's interpretation still manages to be lively and, at times, even funny.*

*Bring a pocket full of tissue before you embark on this emotional journey and prepare to leave stunned and inspired by the power of Larkin's spoken word.*

*Perhaps the only thing more tragic than this story would be missing this performance.*  
Claire Theobald

-  
CBC Manitoba - July 2014

4 STARS

*A few things you need to know about Tes. It's a modern retelling of the Thomas Hardy novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles. It's a 75 <sic> minute solo show. And there's a lot of slam poetry.*

*Still with me? Great. Because this is a solid show, well worth time in your Fringe schedule. British spoken word artist Steve Larkin has crafted an impressive script. With well-chosen words and a high-energy delivery, he deftly leads us through the life of Kes Byron. Kes is a teenager from the projects whose mother believes he's destined for greater things. (This being a tragedy, we know better). Larkin brings to life Kes's ever-hopeful mother, ever-drunken father, gangster friend, and posh teacher. He paints the bleak landscape of post-industrial England from the council estates of Newcastle to the streets of Leeds.*

*Through his marathon of a performance, Larkin drags us into the heart of class struggle, and face-to-face with the power of destiny to shape our lives.*

*Larkin creates a young hero we root for, though we know he's headed for an unhappy end. To me that's a sign of remarkable storytelling.*

Iris Yudai

-

Victoria Times Colonist - Aug 2013

*UK spoken-word artist Steve Larkin offers a gritty, modern reworking of a Thomas Hardy classic with TES, which reinvents Tess of the D'Urbervilles as a 21st century tragedy. Tess has been transformed into a working-class British teen who's told he's a descendent of Lord Byron. (In the novel, Tess is a peasant girl who learns she's related to the noble D'Urbervilles.) This impresses the lad's new teacher, an upper-middle class type who takes advantage of him, then claims she was sexually molested. After a prison term, the young man reinvents himself, finding success as a minor celebrity on the spoken-word poetry circuit. Ultimately, things turn out badly - with Larkin echoing Hardy's novel in a unique and memorable manner.*

*This is one of the best shows I've seen at this year's Fringe fest. Dressed simply in a grey hoodie, Larkin presents an Orwellian portrayal of Britain's rotting underbelly that slices like a rusty razor. The script is dense and requires attentive listening. The rewards are there, though - this is an intelligent gut-puncher of a show that lingers.*

Adrian Chamberlain

-

CVV Magazine - Aug 2013

*When his teacher discovers he's related to the famous poet, Kester Byron becomes the teacher's pet. Seduced by the boy's romantic DNA, the teacher woos him on Facebook with poetry and a heart emoticon. But the red rose quickly turns black. In a gender reversal, this raw reinvention of Tess of the D'Urbervilles has a woman raping a boy, and a war of words*

*pits the upper crust against the poor victim. Edgy as a switchblade, it cuts deep.*

*Steve Larkin paints play-by-play word pictures that are so graphic, one sees everything in the mind's eye though staging is often static. This is pure storytelling. The narration of the rape scene is a shock you won't easily forget, putting you in the backseat as a stunned witness. As he describes a dark and seedy world, Larkin stands alone in the spotlight on a stark stage, wearing simply a hoodie – just as the humble protagonist stands alone and ostracized. The votives on the table and moody music make it feel like we are all attending a vigil in someone's memory.*

*It's fascinating following the threads of Hardy's tale as Larkin reweaves them. True to form, the main character keeps being pushed unjustly down into the gutter no matter what his talents or innocence. He has "The Midas Touch in reverse" as everything he touches "turns to shit."*

*Larkin assails us with spoken-word bullets, a cathartic wail from Kester. The end felt almost anti-climactic at first, but it stalks you all the way home. Long and intense, this play shows the futility of fighting back in a world that has turned its back on you, and how slander and hearsay can be the deadliest weapons. This fierce retelling of an old classic needs to be seen.*  
*Leah Callen*

## 4. Hardy's Classic

### A brief synopsis of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the Durbervilles

The poor peddler John Durbeyfield is stunned to learn that he is the descendent of an ancient noble family, the d'Urbervilles. After falling asleep and crashing the family horse and cart, killing the family horse Tess is obliged to obey Mr. Durbeyfield and 'claim kinship with the nearby d'Urberville family at their mansion.

Tess spends several months at the job offered by Alec D'Urberville, resisting Alec's attempts to seduce her. Finally, Alec takes advantage of her in the woods one night after a fair. Tess knows she does not love Alec. She returns home to her family to give birth to Alec's child, whom she christens Sorrow. Sorrow dies soon after he is born, and Tess spends a miserable year at home before deciding to seek work elsewhere. She finally accepts a job as a milkmaid at the Talbothays Dairy.

At Talbothays, Tess enjoys a period of contentment and happiness and meets a man named Angel Clare. Tess and Angel slowly fall in love and she eventually accepts his proposal of marriage. Still, she is troubled by pangs of conscience and feels she should tell Angel about her past. She writes him a confessional note and slips it under his door, but it slides under the carpet and Angel never sees it. After their wedding, Angel and Tess both confess indiscretions: Angel tells Tess about an affair he had with an older woman in London, and Tess tells Angel about her history with Alec. Tess forgives Angel, but Angel cannot forgive Tess. He gives her some money and boards a ship bound for Brazil, where he thinks he might establish a farm. He tells Tess he will try to accept her past but warns her not to try to join him until he comes for her.

Tess struggles. She has a difficult time finding work and is forced to take a job at an unpleasant mechanised farm. She hears a wandering preacher speak and is stunned to discover that he is Alec d'Urberville, who has been converted to Christianity by Angel's father, the Reverend Clare. Soon after, he begs Tess to marry him, having turned his back on his -religious ways. When the family is evicted from their home, Alec offers help. But Tess refuses to accept, knowing he only wants to obligate her to him again.

At last, Angel decides to forgive his wife. He leaves Brazil, desperate to find her. Instead, he finds her mother, who tells him Tess has gone to a village called Sandbourne. There, he finds Tess in an expensive boardinghouse called The Herons, where he tells her he has forgiven her and begs her to take him back. Tess tells him he has come too late. She was unable to resist and went back to Alec d'Urberville. Angel leaves in a daze, and, heartbroken to the point of madness, Tess goes upstairs and stabs her lover to death. When the landlady finds Alec's body, she raises an alarm, but Tess has already fled to find Angel.

Angel agrees to help Tess, though he cannot quite believe that she has actually murdered Alec. They hide out in an empty mansion for a few days, then travel farther. When they come to Stonehenge, Tess goes to sleep, but when morning breaks shortly thereafter, a search party discovers them.

Tess is arrested and sent to jail and is then executed for murder.

## 5. Notes to the editor

1. Initial directorial support was given by New York-based storyteller Martin Dockery. [www.martindockery.com](http://www.martindockery.com)
2. Lizzy McBain had an enormous impact on the development of TES through her dramaturgical work. [www.underconstructiontheatre.com](http://www.underconstructiontheatre.com)
3. Chris Full who helped create the audioscape for the show is an immensely experienced West End sound designer who has been an Olivier Award nominee and has worked on shows such as Guys and Dolls and How to Train your Dragon (World over people have heard dragon noises in theatres that originated from his mouth!).
4. To arrange an interview please contact Steve (44) 7906 885069 or skype thehugebrownlizard or email - [steve@stevlarlarkin.com](mailto:steve@stevlarlarkin.com)
5. More details / high-res images can be found at [www.stevlarlarkin.com](http://www.stevlarlarkin.com)
6. Steve Larkin was nominated for Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2010 [link](#)
7. TES is Steve's second narrative driven theatre show following the success of N.O.N.C.E. in 2011 [link](#)