



Kate Tempest in concert,
8 March 2020

2.29

THE IRRESISTIBLE RISE OF KATE TEMPEST

1 Kate Tempest is a poet from Brockley, south London, and the youngest ever **recipient** of the prestigious Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, recognising excellence and **innovation** for her 2012 piece *Brand New Ancients*. But there's more to Kate than meets the eye. On the one hand, she's the soul of modernity: she began her career as a rapper and is still vastly popular on the rap circuit. She had a 'wayward youth', living in squats and getting tattoos, and her voice is hardly upper class: her London drawl is full of street slang and glottal stops. By the standards of the poetry world, she seems practically science fiction. Then there is the other hand. After leaving school with no A levels, she ended up gaining a degree from Goldsmiths*. In her straight poetry, Tempest's focus is firmly classical. She bases her subjects on the lives of the gods and monsters of Greek **mythology** – not, perhaps, what you would expect from an urban rapper who cites Roots Manuva and the Wu-Tang Clan among her other key influences.

2 Born Kate Calvert in 1985, Tempest is one of the rising stars of a young performance community that might be viewed with **suspicion** by some old-fashioned members of the poetry **establishment**. *Brand New Ancients* is an hour-long spoken word performance set over a live orchestral score. Through a combination of storytelling, lyricism and music, Tempest tells the epic story of two south London families as their respective generations grow and intertwine. On hearing her shortlisting for the award announced, Kate tweeted: '*Brand New Ancients* been shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for poetry!! And people love to say "performance" poets aren't proper. Yes, mate.' She spent the

afternoon before the awards performing her work for inmates in Holloway prison.

3 Tempest is a lyricist first and foremost. She 'fell into poetry' after attending a poetry slam. In 2014, her debut album *Everybody Down* was nominated for the annual Mercury music prize along with Damon Albarn and FKA twigs among others. In the very same week, she found herself named as one of 2014's Next Generation Poets by the Poetry Society for *Brand New Ancients*, joining a once-a-decade list of the brightest talents in the UK and Ireland. Then there is her novel, which more fully explores the plotline of *Everybody Down*, the three plays she staged over the years, and her phenomenal reputation as a spoken word poet. 'I feel extremely lucky to be in a situation where I can **indulge** all the different parts of my creative personality,' she says.



Kate Tempest attends the Mercury Prize nomination launch on 10 Sept. 2014 in London

4 When it comes to poetry, Tempest is fascinated by the distant past. Stories from the classical world were part of her childhood. 'These are the sort of stories that really infiltrate – about families, and archetypal human tendencies and raw, dark emotions. They never seemed dead stories to me, they always lived and were real.' But Tempest's poems aren't simply routine retellings of time-worn tales; rather, she picks up the fabulous, familiar characters, dusts them down and hauls them into the present. In *Brand New Ancients*, the gods are recast as two warring families whose lives highlight the immortal and very real truths of love and loss. Her full-length poetry collection, *Hold Your Own*, is based on the mythological figure of Tiresias, the blind Greek prophet who spent seven years transformed into a woman. In both works, Kate holds up a mirror to contemporary life in a direct and **provocative** way.

5 *Brand New Ancients* has been performed to packed concert halls on both sides of the Atlantic. On stage, Tempest has a genuinely mesmerising presence and is acutely responsive to her audience. Her physical presence is charming, **disarming**: both child-like and mature, with a confidence in how her body uses space but also maintaining the innocent wide-openness of a very young girl. Audiences are **captivated** by her spell, calling out encouragement. In her work, Tempest handles empathy for the **marginalised**, the powerless and the **dispossessed** as well as gender. Her voice raw, her posture vulnerable, she pleads with the audience to be empathetic towards our fellow human beings.

6 Tempest has helped to popularise spoken word poetry, reaching a whole new audience. According to Poetry Society director Judith Palmer, it's thriving among younger people. 'There's a lot of poets trying it, but it relies on festivals having the nerve to commission new work.' Festival Republic, which organises festivals around the UK, first booked Tempest to perform in 2008, and she has appeared at their Latitude Festival several times since. 'She was a strong voice and is quite unique. There are page poets and there are live poets and she's very much a live performance poet. Once you've seen her perform, you're quite mesmerised,' the organisers say. However, some would argue that *Hold Your Own* turned her from a performance poet to a page poet. 'Her ability to **defy** categorisation is a strength,' Palmer adds. 'A good writer can do different things,' she says. Whither now for Kate Tempest? I can't wait to find out.

In 2020, Kate Tempest changed their name to Kae Tempest and started using the pronouns *they* and *their* instead of *she* and *her*. Kae's new name should be pronounced like the letter k.

* Goldsmiths is a college within the University of London.