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Kate Tempest ... from
bullied smart kid to a
wordsmith of power
and vulnerability

LOUD SPEAKER

Each time Kate Tempest – poet, novelist and performer – creates art she peels back another layer
By **Jane Cornwell**

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'There's a lot of pressure that comes with doing a sustained performance for 75 minutes ... Sometimes it takes me to a place that isn't easy to recover from'

Kate Tempest

Kate Tempest blows in through the doors of her local pub in Lewisham, southeast London, her hair a tangle of sandy red curls, her right hand clutching the leash of a large hairy dog with eyes almost as piercingly blue as her own. She looks around, taking in the day-bright room with its long oak bar, grubby patterned carpet and up the back, on the way to the beer garden, a life-size cardboard cutout of Jimi Hendrix. She looks determined, and vulnerable.

"So here I was/marching the town like a priest in my rapture/Muttering spells/So desperate for tenderness," the celebrated wordsmith might be about to say, as she does to powerful effect on *Thirsty*, the first track on her current (third) album, *The Book of Traps and Lessons*. Instead she comes closer, dog-cum-spirit animal by her side, and waits a few beats before saying anything at all. "Hello," she offers, unblinking.

She passes the leash to her female PR representative, here when I arrived, who takes the dog, Murphy – a cross between a Siberian husky and an Alaskan malamute – to an area out of earshot. It sits, ears tall, watching us coolly.

Tempest, 34, doesn't like being interviewed. She has often said she would rather let the words she writes speak for themselves, wished they could front up in places such as this, a drinking hole "where musicians and outcasts come and everyone has a story to tell", and be grilled by journalists such as me instead.

Still, here she is on the cusp of an Australian tour with dates in five capital cities, performing *The Book ...* in its entirety each time, accompanied by musician Hinako Omori on stark, shimmering keyboards. As with her recent UK tour, Tempest will begin with songs from her two previous albums, *Everybody Down* (2014) and *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2017), a hip-hop-based work that tells of seven characters awake in London at 4.18am, their narratives projected onto a capitalist landscape made rotten by greed, racism, the myth of the individual.

"Wake up and love more," is its concluding plea.

The Book of Traps and Lessons picks up the thread. "I came to under a red moon," begins what is essentially an epic poem divided into two sections (the traps and the lessons), and told from the perspective of someone (maybe Tempest, maybe a character from *Let Them Eat Chaos ...*) who finds it easier to decry the abhorrent aspects of society than examine their own detestable tendencies. Redemption, when it comes, manifests through love, humanity and self-acceptance.

"When time pulls lives apart, hold your own. When everything is fluid and nothing can be known with any certainty, hold your own," implores this diminutive poet, dramatist, novelist, performer and rapper, pacing a stage decorated with a large red silk circle. Her passion is palpable: she jiggles on the spot, chops the air with hip-hop fingers, extends pale, tattooed arms toward a spellbound crowd.

Combining nods to ancient mythology and the classics of literature with current concerns and inner-London parlance, Tempest's vast storied universe is one where lives are lived in the margins of a system riven by injustice, on an Earth that needs saving. Her fan-base is young and woke, culturally and socially aware, drawn to an aesthetic influenced as much by Wu-Tang Clan and [late maverick US writer] Kathy Acker as by Homer, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett – and impervious to criticisms that Tempest can tend to sound a bit, well, samey.

Her CV is star-spun with accolades including the Ted Hughes Award (for her 2012 spoken-word piece, *Brand New Ancients*, which imagines Greek gods as ordinary Londoners), two Mercury

Prize nominations (for her aforementioned albums) and a nomination for Best Solo Performer at the 2018 BRITs (think the UK equivalent of the ARIAs) after playing the likes of the Glastonbury Festival, dazzling the assembled masses with her heartfelt truth-to-power. It's all a far cry from the squat parties and rap battles Tempest performed at in her youth.

Does she feel the weight of expectation, the pressure that comes with being held up as a kind of prophet by disaffected youth? She stares at the question, thinking.

"There's expectation everywhere, even if you're taking your partner on a date or something," she says eventually. "But yeah, there's a lot of pressure that comes with doing a sustained performance for 75 minutes, and when it's entirely committed to memory, right? Sometimes it takes me to a place that isn't easy to recover from. So I've started doing certain things to help me weather the night."

What sort of things – yoga? Meditation? "Stuff like that. I definitely feel a responsibility and a desire to foster an environment for truthful connection between the people in the space. So it's about equipping yourself to deal with the pressures that come with the job."

Tempest's appeal is hinged on her realness. She has spoken of the delicate nature of the exchange that takes place between performer and audience and how easily it could go wrong, which partly explains why she bats away questions deemed too personal. Indeed, in the spirit of the title of her best-selling 2017 debut novel, *The Bricks That Built The Houses*, a drug caper and love story featuring four characters from *Everybody Down*, it's as if she feels that the slightest misstep – a guard let down, a sentence misconstrued – could send her career crashing.

"I don't talk about family," she says when I ask, as a lupine howl sounds from across the room: Murphy, his head thrown back, his body language restless.

"He probably wants to go and look in the garden." Tempest points past Jimi Hendrix as she yells over to her PR. "There are these cats he wants to see."

Tempest was born Kate Esther Calvert, the youngest of five siblings, and grew up in a large, noisy house in Brockley, a once-neglected Victorian suburb close to where we are now.

Her mother taught English as a second language; her father is an entertainment lawyer who sat on the boards of architects Zaha Hadid and Aussie designer Marc Newson, and rather fabulously, advised hip-hop mogul Sean Combs in his Puff Daddy trade name action.

The young Kate was the sort of boffin kid other primary school children would ask how to spell things, but became increasingly disruptive and detached in a secondary school "that didn't like smart kids". She encountered homophobic bullies (according to her 2014 poetry collection, *Hold Your Own*) in between devouring books and art, working in a record shop and attending dub raves with British-Jamaican friends. She'd sit on top of the speaker stacks, literally absorbing the vibes of a culture where music and storytelling went together.

By the time she left school aged 16 to study music at the BRIT School for Performing Arts (whose alumna include Adele and Amy Winehouse) Tempest had discovered the battle rap community – centred on improvised head-to-heads between rap MCs – and was hooked.

A white woman on the scene was unusual. But her reverence for the form and its displays of whip-smart tongue-fu convinced. She

revelled in taking on the testosterone-fuelled competition, grabbing the mic to spit rhymes, proving she was serious. Under the Shakespearean moniker "Tempest" she made her live debut on an upturned crate at Deal Real, a hip-hop record store in London's West End, but was always rapping everywhere; on picket lines and night buses, at police officers and bouncers. At 18 she rapped her way backstage to meet the Wu-Tang's GZA, impressing her hero with her skills.

In 2008 – the year she finished night classes in English literature at Goldsmiths, University of London – she formed a three-piece band called Sound of Rum. "I push bullets out of my chest/breathe raps-eat prose/hear rhymes scream when the breeze flows/drink, flow, clutch my touch, I – taste vision/a successor to Antigone's tradition," she spits over guitars, drums and samples on their only album, 2011's *Balance*. Sound of Rum toured internationally then split in 2012 when Tempest was commissioned to write her first play, the critically acclaimed *Wasted*.

"I'd been getting lots of gigs as a poet, doing 10-minute slots in clubs between bands to keep people in the space. It was 50 quid here and there each week, which meant I could pay my rent and keep the [music] demos ticking over."

"But this guy James Grieve from [new writing theatre company] Paines Plough had seen me doing various things over the years, or maybe he was programming a night ..." She frowns. "Anyway, he approached me to write a play. It was an opportunity to do something I never dreamed I could do."

Wasted portrays three south London friends in their mid-20s, meeting on the anniversary of another friend's unexplained death. Its 42-date national tour included "tiny theatres with only 30 people in them, and some with 150 people. It was a really exciting time", she says, eyes bright. "And quite terrifying."

"Lately I've been working on another play" – *Paradise*, a take on Sophocles's *Philoctetes* that opens in June at London's National Theatre – "which has a chorus of nine women. It's extremely collaborative, which is scary, as is [rewriting] a Greek legend. But the director [Ian Rickson] told me to see it as a cover version."

Tempest thrives on pushing back her comfort zones. "Each project has been a difficult challenge. Coming through the impossible opens up new pathways to go down. Like, getting to the end of my first novel was huge. I haven't managed to finish my second novel but lately I'm trying to start the sentences differently."

It was with her author's hat on that Tempest last visited Australia in 2016, delivering a powerful opening address at the Sydney Writers Festival that involved berating the spontaneous applause that met her reference to our country's "damaging and poisonous racism". Guilt is narcissistic, she declared, calling out the inaction in much white liberalism. Agreeing is not enough. As empathetic beings it is our duty to step up.

Tempest was jump-started into angry political engagement after attending the 2003 anti-Iraq War demonstration but over the past few years has grown disillusioned with party politics, and no longer engages in social or political activism. But surely she could use her status to rally young voters, spearhead campaigns she believes in? She shrinks back, pained.

"No. Agitation is not my motivation at all. It's the performance. There is something so extremely important about fostering an environment for connection," insists Tempest, who as guest director of the 2017 Brighton Festival in Sussex, England, programmed events that highlighted the role of the arts as an activator of empathy, a tool to bring people together. "This is what music, poetry and creativity can do. If you are that way inclined [artistic] then you are in service to that dimension and it should naturally be the case that you offer something of that world to everyone else."

Tempest is always writing, or thinking about writing. It's her way of making sense of her life, her friends' lives, of London and the world. Her most recent book of poems, 2018's *Running Upon the Wires*, is a deeply personal description of the end of a marriage and the start of new love, so self-exposing that reading it feels voyeuristic and any questions about its meaning inevitably left dangling. If only the words could be interviewed, I say, and she pulls the corner of her mouth into a smile.

Tempest's gift for wordplay has won her the services of big-name music producers including Dan Carey, who has worked with Kylie, The Kills and Bat for Lashes, and who produced both Tempest's debut and sophomore albums in his south London studio. The two friends continue to hang out and work together.

"I knew everything about Dan before I gave him my demo. I've always been like that, getting to know writers and musicians on my own terms. Like the first time I read Samuel Beckett I had to read everything he'd ever written" – eight-year-old Murphy is named after Beckett's debut novel – "and it's the same with musicians like, I don't know ... Jimi Hendrix." She smiles at the cardboard doppelganger.

She knew all about Rick Rubin before she and Carey flew to Malibu, California to record *The Book of Traps and Lessons* in the famed Shangri-La studios now owned by the co-founder of hip-hop label Def Jam. With Rubin's encouragement they brought Tempest's lyrics front and centre, toning down the interlocking beats in favour of space and minimalism. It was another pathway opened.

"Breaking our conventions felt counterintuitive, but we now have this raw, shocking beauty, which I'm really proud of," offers Tempest as her PR comes over to tell us our time is up. Murphy is bouncing impatiently. "There's more room for human connection, which is the most important thing."

She stands to go. "Very nice to meet you," she says.

Kate Tempest will perform on February 16 at Perth's Chevron Lighthouse as part of Perth International Arts Festival, then will tour to Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide.