



# Closer to Kae Tempest

**ELLA GAUCI CHATS** to the spoken word poet and writer who has shaken up the scene since 2013

**Kae Tempest has the kind of voice that stops you completely in your tracks. In fact, I think Kae could just read out the ingredients in a packet of Oreos and I'd feel as though I was experiencing an existential revelation. After only a few minutes of our Zoom call, I am completely, utterly, earth-shatteringly spellbound.**

Having found recognition and acclaim after the release of their spoken word piece *Brand New Ancients* in 2013, Kae has seemingly never stopped writing. The spoken word performer, poet, recording artist, novelist and playwright boasts a portfolio most could only dream of. From their Mercury Prize-nominated albums *Everybody Down* and *Let Them Eat Chaos* to their Sunday Times best-selling debut novel *The Bricks That Built The Houses*, Kae's work is never-ending.

"I have a fundamental fear of what would happen in life without creativity," Kae tells me when I ask whether they ever get writer's block. "That would be the end of my life. But that fear is a fabrication. That's not real. It's an anxiety which is a symptom of this mythology about what creativity is."

From performing at the back of crowded bars to sold-out shows, Kae's poetry is not just for the page. Earlier this year, the BBC followed Kae as they embarked on their arena tour in the documentary *Being Kae Tempest*. Directed by Emily McDonald, who Kae shared a "kind of awkward dykey bro kinship" with, the film documented the intimate, vulnerable backstage experience behind Kae's work.

While their work is always created from moments of intense personal reflection, by the time the words meet the stage they take on new meaning. Standing in front of a

crowd, Kae isn't just reciting words. They're going on a journey of discovery with the audience, bringing new life to the poems themselves.

"In the moment of performance, the words are like panels on this bridge where on the other side is connection," Kae describes. "The map is drawn but I don't know how I'm going to get there, who's coming with me, or where the audience is going to take me. The discovery is mutual."

**"I have discovered a profound connection to the community"**

Emily's documentary centres around an important pivot in Kae's personal and poetic life – their coming out. In August 2020, Kae came out as non-binary on social media. Within the documentary, Kae looks back at their childhood, explaining that before puberty they had "lived as a boy". However, once they joined the spoken poetry scene, they were confronted by gendered expectations. Even gendered award categories. It became increasingly hard to cope with their rising internal struggles. Coming out, in a way, set them free.

"I have discovered a profound connection to the community over the last couple of years. I stopped

hiding from myself, and hiding from the parts of myself that I saw in the community which scared me because I was repressing and hiding in secret," they explain.

"The galvanising, reassuring, loving, celebratory, complicated warmth of the community has been unbelievably joyous, momentous and important. Because I've been going through that experience, that is coming out in my work because it's something that is happening to me. I feel closer to the community, and closer to myself."

In 2014, Kae was named a Next Generation Poet by the Poetry Book Society, an honour which comes about only once in a decade. Earlier this year, their new collection *Divisible By Itself And One* was even longlisted for the highly prestigious Swansea University Dylan Thomas Prize. Often marked as the "voice of a generation", Kae's work has taken on something of a legendary status. But do they see themselves as this all-knowing, all-seeing voice?

"What does the voice of a generation mean?" they laugh. "We are all the multi-voice of lots of moments. All of the time the generation is regenerating. It's happening all the time. It's a redundant idea in this day and age to think that any voice cannot be complicit at any one moment with 10 billion other voices."

For most, poetry can feel like an entirely different world. But Kae makes it seem a little more traversable. What are their tips for new writers? "Expectation is the enemy of discovery. Allow yourself to relish in the opportunity to be shit and make mistakes. Get from the first word to the last word of something. Get comfortable behind the wheel of words." **D**

*Divisible By Itself And One* is out now. You can also watch the documentary *Being Kae Tempest* on BBC iPlayer