

People thought I was mad, *mad*, when I suggested it, but now that it's done, I say **Brilliant!** X and I had already planned our trip to London when I first heard of [Kate Tempest](#), an amazing young poet and playwright from South London. Tempest is the winner of the Ted Hughes prize for innovation in British poetry, and well deservedly, for her epic poem *The Brand New Ancients*. It was on [Charlie Rose on 16 January](#) that I first saw her. I highly recommend that you watch that clip, and you'll understand a lot about this young writer. Tempest, at the time, was in the midst of a 9 day stint at St. Anne's Warehouse in New York (BAM). No way I could make it to see that.



Upon searching YouTube for that clip, so I could share it with others, I came across [this clip](#), from Battersea Arts Center. That lead me to the BAC home page, where I learnt that [her tour of the UK](#) would be ongoing during our visit. After telling X of this, she checked the venues and we found that they either were sold-out, or close to it. Our first choice of Oxford — just an hour by bus — was already out of reach, but Manchester — 3 hours by train — was still available. This meant an overnight hotel stay, in addition to the not-cheap train fare, but I had a feeling that this would be something special. Plans were made, tickets and hotel booked, train timetables consulted. We were set.

Was it worth it?

In every trip, one hopes to find an event — a show, exhibit, event — which all by itself would make the entire trip worthwhile. In London, 2012, it might have been [Pitchfork Disney](#), or shows by [Paper Cinema](#) or [Silent Opera](#), or even a [Punch & Judy](#) show. In New York, 2013, it was [Event Of A Thread](#), by Ann Hamilton at Park Avenue Armory. This trip? Well, it's not over yet, but so far — as good as everything has been — I'd have to say this is it, *The Brand New Ancients* has set a new bar which will be hard for anything to surpass.

X was nearly speechless (and if you know X, that's saying a lot). The 2,000 people who came to Manchester to see Prince performing in the arena next door to Contact Theatre may have thought they were seeing the best show in town that night, but they'd have been wrong.

Tempest is a powerhouse performer and *Brand New...* is just that good of a piece.

Tempest starts out by asking us to accept a fairly simple premise:

In the old days

the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.

But how can we explain the way we hate ourselves,

the things we've made ourselves into,

the way we break ourselves in two,

the way we overcomplicate ourselves?

But we are still mythical.

We are still permanently trapped somewhere between the

heroic and the pitiful.  
We are still godly;  
that's what makes us so monstrous.

...  
We have jealousy  
and tenderness and curses and gifts.  
But the plight of a people who have forgotten their myths  
and imagine that now is somehow all that there is  
is a sorry plight,  
all isolation and worry —  
but the life in your veins  
is godly, heroic.  
You were born for greatness;  
believe it. Know it  
Take it from the tears of the poets.

...  
The Gods are all here.  
Because the gods are in us.  
Tempest takes to the stage with her 4 piece ensemble behind her: Kwake Bass on  
percussion, Jo Gibson on Tuba, Natasha Zielzinski on cello and Emma Smith on violin. This  
band will provide the pulse beneath her words, and a pace through those portions where  
Tempest falls silent and recovers a bit. For hers is a titanic performance of mostly rapid fire  
delivery over an hour and twenty minutes. These silences from Tempest are rare, but  
necessary for her and for us.



The poem itself is a story of two families and several side players, and takes place across some 25 years or so. The lives of these people are at once banal and heroic, simple and convoluted, noble and shameful. Theirs are real lives in real places with real consequences and are described in a performance style which struck me as operatic, but plain spoken. You've heard of "Rock Operas" like Tommy (by The Who) but this is something different; this is a hip-hop flavoured, jazz laced, epic non-stop aria, a spoken-word tour-de-force. Tempest's voice, one moment plaintive and thin, is then vengeful and sharp. Using her voice with all the temper of a well trained singer, she moves us with her, the ups and down, the epic peaks and disastrous crevasses.

When complete she is spent. The blackout seems almost gratuitous, for we know the journey is over. We've met the gods, and have celebrated and mourned them in equal measure. We

have seen ourselves and our loved ones, and she has shocked, entranced and taught us. The audience stood almost as one, a rare sight indeed in England, where ovations are more parsimoniously given than in the states. Also worth noting is this; Tempest rarely deploys flowers of language or clever turns in her work, it is much more spare and plain than that, but when she does hit us with a beautiful phrase, one hears the snapping of fingers in the audience, redolent of the coffee house reception of the beats. I don't know if or when Kate Tempest will come back to the USA, but if she does I will go see her, and encourage you to do likewise. *The Brand New Ancients* [is available on Picador](#).