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Temper-Mental, a Truly Dublin Rapper

Sophie Jane Andrews-McCarroll meets Temper-Mental MissElayneous, the new rapper making a splash on the Dublin scene.

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Sophie Jane Andrews-McCarroll | *Contributing Writer*

The moment I arrive in the café on South William Street where I had arranged to meet Elayne Harrington (or Temper-Mental MissElayneous) I spot her. Even sitting at the far end of the thankfully cosy café her trademark hair, the fringe in oversized rollers, makes her instantly recognizable, as does her ready smile and the easy manner which has made her such a beloved Dublin figure. As we huddle over coffee (no milk for Elayne, who is vegan) she talks to me about Irish society, modern media and cultural movements of the 21st Century. All standard interview questions are forgotten as she invites me to experience her ideas of revolutionary challenge and change.

Elayne is a Dublin rapper, poet and artist from Finglas. Recently she has come into the public eye through her appearance in the RTE reality TV show 'Connected', where her vibrancy and refreshing honesty quickly made her a public favourite. She has been a figure on the Irish rap scene for some time and has released various tracks over the past few years, most recently 'Heart Loose Tempo' on vinyl. She uses her art in her social activism and 'Temper-Mental MissElayneous' has worked with organisations such as YMCA and The Y Factor. Having experienced periods of homelessness herself, she is a keen activist on behalf of those living on the streets and in sheltered accommodation in Dublin.

Talking to me about the social stereotypes surrounding the term 'homeless' she says, "To look at me, you'd never think I was homeless... I mean you wouldn't guess things that have happened to me in my life by looking at me at all..." She tells me about the photographic exhibition she will be performing at later on that day. Daisyhouse, an organisation which provides supported accommodation, are running "Faces of Homelessness" in Powerscourt town house, which challenges the common perceptions of homelessness. "It's all about smashing stigmas, and the general overview of homeless people as scruffy, or working class...the way people think a homeless person sounds, looks, behaves, and performs in society". Elayne herself is currently undergoing a second period of homelessness, living in accommodation provided by Daisyhouse.

Elayne talks about how misperceptions of homelessness can be symptomatic of broader class divisions, referencing her own experiences as a public figure. "Talent doesn't take away your class. Talent doesn't blend class into the background. I still have to prove my intellect to people." I wonder out loud if this kind of attitude is exacerbated in Ireland and Elayne pauses for a moment. "...ah I would say maybe that because of the size of Ireland...maybe it's more condensed you know." She pauses again and continues thoughtfully "because we're a small island and that you know...it's maybe more expansive in other places."

In discussing these social stereotypes, Elayne laments the enduring influence of modern media on our perception and the role it plays in perpetuating these stereotypes. Her ideas on television, in particular, are bordering on revolutionary. "It's not grabbing people by the lapels and shaking them and showing them the truth. I tend to want to do that by nature." TV to Elayne is something akin to the opium of the masses. "The media I think is a cog in the machine, a machine that is based around social convention and keeping people comfortable. Mainstream media perpetuates class division and these things, through the TV, for example 'Damo and Iver' [the popular RTE TV show], which is a real tragedy...I would say boycott television."

She does concede, however, that TV and the power it wields can be a force for good. "Boycott television – unless you're going to use it as a subversive medium to challenge the status quo." Her appearance on 'Connected', she argues, has had a beneficial effect. "I think a lot of good has come from it, because street harassment has been picked up on. Misogyny has been picked up on in the show. Heterosexism has been picked up on, I got to air that. Again discomfort the comforted and comfort the discomforted. So I've done both, by just existing and being a victim of street harassment. I've done both in terms of people who were discomforted by male conduct, again a patriarchal society, people that are discomforted by that and rightly, so they should be, were comforted by my response in anger and fear. My honest and vulnerable response to it, and yet my strong integral response."

However she reinforces her earlier argument about the inevitably detrimental nature of TV. "It's about cultural oppression, it's about feeding the mass poison through the medium of television". When asked to elaborate, she obliges with characteristic eloquence: "I think that the TV is ultimately fear inducing, the same as glossy magazines...it's the white noise, it's the static that influences me physiologically on a physiological plateau; I just resist it. I have a resistance to the abstraction of it". Food for thought.

She discusses the oppressive nature of the media and the advertising industry, and talks about how she personally finds a sense of freedom through her own mental resistance to advertisement. “They [the media] want to keep people docile” she claims. “It’s about self-knowledge, about knowing who you are, regardless of what the media does. How they control food, or water, or living, or thinking, or quality of life, or class division. I think that if you have the knowledge of self, you can talk about knowledge, you are empowered and can be free, within this gilded cage of life.”

Elayne’s outlook and sense of internal freedom is deeply rooted in the hip hop movement. “Hip hop educated me, in a social way, in a moral way...” She talks about the four elements that are important in her work: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional and how they run parallel to the four elements of hip hop: graffiti, break dancing, turn tabling or DJing and rapping. However, despite regular quotations of the works of various artists within the hip hop movement, much of her own ideologies come from a deeply personal moral impulse. “A lot of my moral influences were innate Sophie, you know?”

Hip hop isn’t the only influence on her outlook. “I’m a Bakunanist” she tells me, referring to an obscure, somewhat anarchic ideology that believes in the complete and unrestricted freedom of the individual. “If every person, man, woman and child is given the choice of complete unrestricted freedom they will ultimately go for what’s morally right” she says. Society as a whole, if working in perfect harmony, will have the capacity to reject miscreants: “they need to be ejected from society and told ‘ok you sexually assaulted, or you raped, or you murdered. You are no longer welcome in our society.’ Society needs to work together and be aware of that.”

But of course this ideal world contrasts with the reality of the society we live in today. “There’s sprawl, there’s so many people and so much confusion and mental debris that we can’t focus our powers on integrating it in a communal way. We need the overseeing eye, the big daddy, the finger wagging, telling us how to be and how to feel. Because it’s easy.” She introduces me to her belief in small, separate societies: “I don’t believe that everybody should be one and wanting to be one, just as I wouldn’t oppose anyone wanting to live solitarily as a monk for example.” She does concede the impracticalities of such a system, citing the exploratory nature of humans: “it’s a symptom of society to want to expand and explore and to want to integrate. I think people want to see outside of what’s due them really or what’s expected of them.” Looking for material for a thesis anyone?

It is impossible to do justice to the full extent and depth of thought and discussion that is Elayne Harrington and her ideas. Some of the concepts that she broached require more discussion than one article can do justice to, but the diversity of her theories and the complexity of emotion can be readily experienced through her rap. As we approach the counter to pay, we chat idly about college. She says she is going to NCAD next year. “At least”, she laughs, “I assume I am. I haven’t done the portfolio yet, but I assume they want me”. I don’t think anyone could but agree with her, a talented musician and poet who is challenging us to change the way we see the world, no matter how uncomfortable the outcome. “Shake ‘em up make ‘em grow. Growing pains hurt man. Revolution hurts.”

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