TEACHING DECLAN MCKENNA TO BE A NEW YORKER

SARA FEIGIN / AUG 30, 2017 / MUSIC

Declan McKenna exits an unmarked black car half a block away from Webster Hall. He surveys his surroundings & introduces himself in a very reserved tone.

I can tell he's trying to not call attention to himself, so as we head to our first destination of the day I more observe him than involve myself in conversation. His manager explains we're going to check out the massive Halloween shop down the road as Declan showed interest in it as they drove by. When we cross the road to get there, a cab speeds by, way too close for comfort. *"NYC drivers are insane!"* Declan shouts out, *"are there not any rules here!?"* he asks to nobody in particular with a giggle. As we approach the open all year Halloween shop, a boy who can't be any older than Declan, comes up to us shaking and on the brink of tears. He and his two friends, another boy and a girl, are big Declan fans and clearly can't contain their excitement for catching him out organically. Both of the boys are shaking and telling him how much he means to them. They get photos with him and go in for hugs when Declan tries to shake their hands. They're harmless fans whose love for Declan seems a bit overwhelming, even for them. As they walk away from us, giddy to have met their hero, Declan's walk quickens as we head down the block towards our destination.

When we get into the Halloween shop, Declan finally feels comfortable. He gleefully starts pointing out costumes he finds hilarious and keeps remarking on just how large this store is. When I ask him if he's a fan of New York his response feels as though he doesn't want to offend me, *"it's nice, and it's very much like London, although I do like London better."* He enjoys playing here and has played four shows here over the past few years. *"I never get a day off here so I've never been able to explore that much really,"* he explains *"I'd love to see more of New York but I just haven't had the time. The most exciting thing that's happened was I got into a pub here last night, so that was a big thing."* he tells me with a grin. We start to talk about London and I mention that I studied at University of Westminster, this excites Declan as he recorded 'Brazil' at the Harrow campus when he was just 15 years old. We talk about the creepy hospital behind the Uni grounds & how the halls look like 70s themed council flats. The Westminster connection has made an originally somewhat shy Declan warm up to me very quickly. As we get comfortable together, he starts to goof around with costumes and props and I feel like I'm hanging out with an old friend.

Later on as Declan and I explore the Halloween shop, I notice that one of the guy fans from earlier and the girl he was with are keeping their distance but following us through the shop. I can tell Declan has noticed them as well, but I don't say anything as he hasn't verbally acknowledged the fact they're just a few steps behind us. Declan points out some comic strip themed leggings to me and shows them to his manager to get her verdict on whether he should invest in them or not. He decides they're too similar to a pair of flag themed leggings he owns, and puts them back on the rack. We continue through the shop pointing out masks and costumes to each other, every now and again picking something up for the other to more thoroughly acknowledge. We're over in an aisle of sexy nurse costumes when the fans from earlier approach us again. This time with two more friends, girls this time, who can't seem to handle seeing Declan in such a public space; even though they knew he would be here. The teens ask for photos and can barely contain their nerves, hands shaking as iPhone photos are taken. They try and act cool, but can barely start a conversation with an artist who clearly means the world to them. Declan is courteous to his fans and tries his best to make them happy while they have their moment with him. We wander around a bit more after his fans leave the shop and then Declan decides it would make more sense to return to the Halloween shop after his soundcheck.

We head downtown to Cooper Union Square to take some portraits, as we walk we chat about how he feels being seen on the unreachable pedestal his fans seem to see him on. He still can't wrap his head around the fact that his fans look up to him in the way they do. *"They're like my age,"* he exclaims, *"They paint me to be this crazy amazing guy, but I'm not that, I'm just normal. I'm only 18 so it's hard to handle sometimes, I'm scared I'll let them down."* McKenna has a lot going for him, his first full length album just dropped to insane reviews and he's currently on his first headlining tour in the states. Tonight's NYC show is sold out at the studio at the iconic Webster Hall, one night before it shuts its doors for a very necessary refurbishment.

When we arrive at the Square, I sit Declan down on a bench in front of some large plants to get a more nature vibe to the photos we're going to make. *"I like shoots like this,"* he tells me, *"not having to do hair and makeup, just all natural Declan. It's so much more enjoyable."* he says with a smile. He interchanges from pulling model level poses to pulling silly faces and being the teenager he truly is. I can tell he feels comfortable with me and in front of the camera, so it makes for a very enjoyable shoot. At one point he takes the Rugrats flatbill cap he's been wearing off and asks, *"are you ready for this!?"* with a sly look in his eyes. I laugh and nod, then he tosses his hat at my camera and laughs with pure joy as it lands almost perfectly on my knee. Hanging out with Declan McKenna reminds me of the friends I made taking summer art courses. It's so refreshing to speak with an artist, one toted to be a musical genius, who's so down to earth and just a regular kid when you really get down to it. After a few more shots sitting he suggests we take some 'real fashion shot' so he stands on the armrests of the bench and does his best top model impression. He then notices the large plants behind the bench and motions at me to follow him into the tall grasses. Declan looks like he's on a safari in a foliage dense jungle rather than in a concrete jungle. He squats down into the grasses and moves them as though he's found a lion in the distance. We play around in the grass for a bit until we both realise it smells like a portaloo and we make a speedy move out of our makeshift jungle.

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"I can make it look like you were frolicking in some wheat," I say with a laugh as we walk back to the venue. Declan looks at me and raises an eyebrow and says in a shrill high pitched voice, *"oh when I was young my friends and I would frolic in the wheat fields.*" He chuckles, *"I love that you knew that!"* We cross a street in the middle when no cars are in sight, *"why do they call it J walking do you think?"* Declan asks the group. Nobody seems to know the answer to the question, so I mention how they call crosswalks zebra crossings. *"Did you just say a zee-bra crossing?"* He asks copying my accent, *"it's a zeb-ra crossing!"* He exclaims, making his accent as strong as possible. *"Oh I'm sorry, should I put on an accent and say zeb-ra when I want to used British terms?"* I ask him in a British accent. He laughs, *"well in my mind a zeb-ra crossing and a zee-bra crossing could be two totally different things!"* We go to J walk again, and this time a bus speeds out of nowhere, Declan shouts at the bus, in his best New York accent, *"HEY! I'M WALKIN' HERE!"* and starts to laugh again. Seeing him so relaxed now, compared to how reserved and timid he seemed when we first met is a really nice change to experience.

We arrive back at the street Webster Hall is on, and stand on the corner chatting while we wait for his tour manager to come to get him. A large line has formed outside, so he has to rush into the venue as he's running late to soundcheck. *"I can't believe I'm the last show this room is ever going to see,"* Declan mentions, slightly in awe, *"it's a New York landmark!"* I inform him it's been open since the late 1800s and he looks at me wide-eyed. His tour manager arrives and she tells the group of us that he only has so much time for soundcheck, so he really has to run. We say our goodbyes and I wish him good luck for the show later that night, which, after hanging with him for awhile, I'm now even more excited to see him perform than I was originally. We say our farewells and I head home for a few hours before I have to return for his gig later on tonight.

The Studio at Webster Hall is jam packed with young girls and boys, at least 80% of the venue are under 21. When Declan takes the stage, he's wearing an immaculately white jumpsuit, and glitter around his eyes. The timid boy I met earlier, has now turned into a full-fledged rockstar. The crowd absolutely lose their minds when they see him and the girls standing next to me at the front of the crowd are now waving around roses waiting for Declan to acknowledge them. His set is insane, he interacts with the crowd and his band, and you can tell this is his calling. He crowd surfs multiple times throughout his set and even at one point he leaps onto the bar at the side of the venue and sings to the crowd from there. Declan McKenna is a music legend in the making, and I cannot wait to see what he has coming for the world.

WEBSTER HALL

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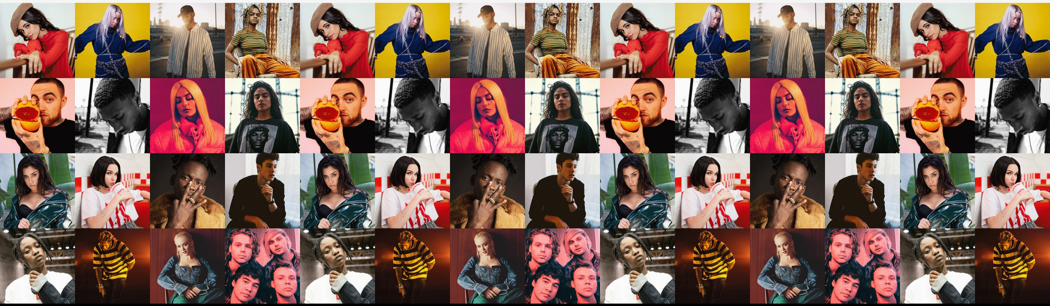

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