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Boswell

By

MARIE KOHLER

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Boswell received its world premiere at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe at Riddle’s Court on Aug. 5, 2019.

CAST:

JOAN Abbey Siegworth
JAMES BOSWELL Brian Gill
SAMUEL JOHNSON/FATHER/
DOCTOR/PROFESSOR..... Brian Mani
JOSHUA REYNOLDS/DAVID HUME/
TAXI DRIVER Kyle Aaron Racas
OLIVER GOLDSMITH/DAVID GARRICK/
THE LADY Laura Gordon
LOUISA/MRS. THRALE/SERVING WOMAN/
GARDYLOO WOMAN/MARGARET BOSWELL/
HEBRIDES TAVERN WOMAN..... Christiane Laskowski

PRODUCTION:

Directors..... Marie Kohler, Laura Gordon
Producers..... MHK Productions, Rhymes with Purple
Scenic Design/Lighting & Projection Design/
Props Design Jody Sekas
Costume Design Misti Bradford
Sound Design/Composer Joshua Schmidt
Wig Artisan Becky Scott
Choreographer & Movement Coordinator..... Jessica Lanus
Dialect Coach..... Clare Haden
Stage Manager Sarah Deming-Henes
Assistant Stage Manager..... Bri Humke
Wardrobe/Crew Olivia Jardas
Assistant Sound Designer Theresa Ramos

The play was subsequently premiered in the US at 59E59 Theaters in New York City on Nov. 12, 2022.

CAST:

JOAN Phoebe González
JAMES BOSWELL Josh Krause
SAMUEL JOHNSON/FATHER/DOCTOR Brian Mani
JOSHUA REYNOLDS/LOUISA/SERVING WOMAN/
GARDYLOO WOMAN/MARGARET BOSWELL/
HEBRIDES TAVERN WOMAN Rebecca Hurd
OLIVER GOLDSMITH/PROFESSOR/
DAVID HUME/TAXI DRIVER Triney Sandoval
DAVID GARRICK/MRS. THRALE/
THE LADY Miriam A. Laube
UNDERSTUDIES Emily Fury Daly,
Ty Fanning, Rex Young,
R. Ward Duffy, Liz Days

PRODUCTION:

Director Laura Gordon
Scenic Design/Props Master Jody Sekas
Costume Design Misti Bradford
Lighting Design Katy Atwell
Sound Design/Composer Joshua Schmidt
Wig Artisan Emily Christoffersen
Choreographer & Movement Coordinator Maria Gillespie
Dialect Coach Eva Breneman
Scots and Gaelic Coach Beth Frieden
Stage Manager Jane Heer
Assistant Stage Manager/Wardrobe Robert T. Sharon
Production Manager Brandy Kline
Technical Director Anthony Lyons
Scenic Charge Carri Dahl
Master Electrician SG Lehmann

To Brian Mani,
whose support proves never-ending,
and whose stellar Dr. Johnson lit my way.

SPECIAL THANKS:
Forward Theater;
University of Nevada, Las Vegas and
Nevada Conservatory Theatre;
Renaissance Theaterworks;
University of Wisconsin – Parkside

Boswell

CHARACTERS

JOAN: Graduate student of English literature, in her 20s to 30s, from Chicago. 1950s.

JAMES BOSWELL: Scottish gentleman searching for identity. 1760s–1770s.

FATHER: Scottish barrister, Lord of Auchinleck, father of Boswell. 1760s.

OLIVER GOLDSMITH: Anglo-Irish playwright/novelist. 1760s.

JOSHUA REYNOLDS: Famous English portrait painter. 1760s.

DAVID GARRICK: Famous English Shakespearean actor. 1760s.

SERVING WOMAN: Works at The Cheese in London. 1760s.

MRS. THRALE: Englishwoman of letters and a friend of Johnson. 1760s.

SAMUEL JOHNSON: A world-famous lexicographer/poet/essayist in his 60s to 70s. 1760s–1770s.

TAXI DRIVER: Scotland. 1950s.

DAVID HUME: Scottish Enlightenment writer and philosopher. 1770s.

MARGARET BOSWELL: Boswell's wife. 1760s.

GARDYLOO WOMAN: Edinburgh. 1770s.

PROFESSOR: Joan's American academic boss. 1950s.

LOUISA: Attractive English actress. 1760s.

HEBRIDES TAVERN WOMAN: Speaks only in Scottish Gaelic. 1770s.

THE LADY: Scottish widow, landowning wife of an aristocrat. 1950s.

DOCTOR: London. 1760s.

DOUBLING SUGGESTIONS

Producers are encouraged to double roles to suit their needs. One example configuration is as follows:

Woman #1: Joan

Woman #2: Reynolds, Louisa, Serving Woman, Gardyloo

Woman, Margaret Boswell and Hebrides Tavern Woman

Woman #3: David Garrick, Mrs. Thrale and The Lady

Man #1: James Boswell

Man #2: Samuel Johnson, Father and Doctor

Man #3: Goldsmith, Taxi Driver, Professor, David Hume and
Voice of Carriage Man

PLACE AND TIME

Scotland and Chicago, 1950s.

London, 1760s.

Scotland, 1770s.

MUSIC AND SOUND DESIGN

Sheet music for the Gaelic song in Scene 21 is available as a free download on the Dramatic Publishing website.

The original sound design by Joshua Schmidt is also available for free upon request. Please contact Dramatic Publishing's customer service department for more information.

CASTING NOTES

Since the plight of an outsider is one of this play's main themes, *Boswell* could be well served by a racially and ethnically diverse cast. It would be meaningful if Joan comes from an American background that is historically marginalized. In the play's Edinburgh Fringe production, the role of Joan was played as Jewish American. In the off-Broadway production, the role of Joan was played by and co-developed with a Latina-American actor, Goldsmith was played by a Latino-American actor and The Lady was played by an East Indian-American actor, who also co-developed her lines. We drew on respective cultural backgrounds for certain lines of Joan's and The Lady's. While the roles of Boswell and Johnson may be cast with actors of any race or ethnicity, they should stay true to the characters' historic regional accents. If you trust the language and themes of the play, you will be getting at its heart.

SPECIFIC LINES: Joan's and The Lady's culturally specific lines but may be substituted with others. An addendum at the back of the book provides other variations. If you are interested in casting an actor from another background, you may tweak the language to suit your production or send a special request to Dramatic Publishing to reach out to the author.

In these three scenes, BOSWELL and JOHNSON begin their 1773 journey to Scotland as JOAN, a 1950s academic from the South Side of Chicago comments from the side. JOAN is on a pilgrimage to uncover literary treasures to make her academic reputation ... but ends up questioning her own sense of authenticity.

(We see JOAN go through motions of travel—picking up her bag and getting on a train.)

JOAN. I board a train from the Glasgow airport.

Scene 8: The Tour Begins

JOHNSON (*summarizes with self-importance*). In the autumn of the year 1773, we commenced our journey.

BOSWELL. Late summer it was, actually.

JOHNSON (*insistent*). Sir, it is set down in my journal. Here!

(JOHNSON holds it out to see.)

BOSWELL. Aye, but—

JOHNSON. In autumn: “The third season of the year, when crops and fruits are gathered.”

BOSWELL *(guiding JOHNSON on the path)*. Oh! Go canny, sir! There’s some—em—

JOHNSON. Ah. Sheep’s shit. Thank you.

(BOSWELL helps JOHNSON across it, then leaps over.)

JOHNSON *(cont’d, to the audience)*. On the fourteenth day of August, we began our travels northwards. Boswell, where the devil is my walking stick!?

(BOSWELL hands him the walking stick.)

BOSWELL. Och, here, sir. But the date really would be the eighteenth.

JOHNSON. Nonsense. On the fourteenth day of August, we set our course and bade farewell to any luxury of travel, toward the storied northern city—

BOSWELL. Toward my great city! Edinburgh.

JOHNSON. You cut me off, sir—I was getting to it.

(The two rumble together quietly, correcting each other.)

JOAN *(to the audience)*. Their plan? Start in Edinburgh, skirt the eastern coast—hit St. Andrews, Aberdeen and Inverness.

JOHNSON *(to the audience)*. We would then be entering a land upon which perhaps no wheel had ever rolled.

BOSWELL. Perhaps not quite true, sir.

JOAN. March across the Highlands to the west and then island-hop through the Hebrides.

JOHNSON. Skye, Mull, Iona ...

TRAIN ANNOUNCER (*V.O.*). Next stops: Kilmaurs, Kilmarnock, Mauchline ... and ... Auchinleck.

JOHNSON. The land lies open on the west and north to a vast expanse of ocean—

(BOSWELL scribbles in his journal.)

JOHNSON (*cont'd*). And is cooled in the summer by perpetual ventilation ...

BOSWELL. We call it “wind,” sir.

JOHNSON. And by the same blasts in winter is kept warm. Half the year is deluged with rain.

(A clap of thunder and rain. JOAN opens her umbrella. She tries to hail a cab.)

JOHNSON (*cont'd*). All in all, the weather was ... how shall I put it? The weather was ...

JOAN (*searching for the right word*). Dreadful?

BOSWELL (*also searching*). Unsatisfactory?

JOHNSON. Scottish.

JOHNSON, BOSWELL & JOAN. Less than ideal.

JOAN (*to the audience*). As for my pilgrimage ...

(Sound of car horns.)

JOAN (*cont'd*). A taxi takes me on the final leg.

TAXI DRIVER. Got tae drive slowly, miss. There's hunners a' sheep 'roon here, and see how the murk's come in. *Dreich!*

JOAN (*to the audience*). I cannot understand a word the driver says. (*Loud, to TAXI DRIVER.*) Sorry, what's that?

TAXI DRIVER (*louder*). *Dreich*, ah said! We have to go canny—there's always hunners and hunners of sheep along 'roon heer.

JOAN. "Hunners?"

TAXI DRIVER. It's aw durt roads since we come doon fae the main one, there's hunners we could hit aroond heer.

JOAN (*pretending she understands.*) Ah, "hunners."

JOHNSON (*from his journal*). "Indeed, from the autumnal to the vernal equinox, a dry day is hardly known—except when the showers are suspended by a tempest. Samuel Johnson, 1773."

(*JOAN smiles.*)

JOAN. Three unpaved roads, wandering sheep, a long winding drive later ... a great old estate rises up before me.

BOSWELL (*from his journal*). "Now in his sixty-fourth year, he is a little dull of hearing ... (*Considering.*) correct, but not stern in taste, hard to please and easily offended—at times impetuous and irritable—"

JOHNSON (*irritable*). Boswell!

BOSWELL. Huzzah!

Scene 9: In Storage

THE LADY. I've got grand material for you. Scads of it.

JOAN. Good to hear. We'll want to see anything you have of Johnson's, as my professor wrote. Papers, letters—fragments, even.

THE LADY. Aye, loads of tidbits—scads of notes, papers, letters—tons of annotations.

JOAN. That sounds positive. How about journals?

THE LADY. Aye, trunks of journals.

JOAN. My professor will be very pleased to hear it.

THE LADY. Bushels of them. Hunners of them.

JOAN. “Hunners?” (*Finally understanding.*) Ah. “Hunners.”

THE LADY. Aye, and absolutely carts of Boswell.

JOAN. Oh, sorry, unfortunately, we’re not interested in Boswell.

Except perhaps one or two things relating to the friendship.

THE LADY. So why the sidekick?

JOAN. “Sidekick?”

THE LADY. The lunky Englishman.

JOAN. Johnson? (*Pauses, taken aback.*) Johnson was the greatest thinker of his century—critic, essayist, poet ... he also wrote the first dictionary.

THE LADY (*dry*). In English, aye. (*Upbeat.*) What do you think? Large isn’t it? (*Referring to collection.*)

JOAN. It certainly is. And hopefully full of what / we’re—

THE LADY. Aye, we’re simply bursting. *Tatties o’wer the side, Miss Martin.*

JOAN. Sorry?

THE LADY. Mind your feet. You must go *canny*—my poor husband broke his toe on the old croquet box.

JOAN. On the ...

THE LADY. Croquet box—there, in the corner. Chock full of family intrigue—lots of sexy bits. The black sheep, you know.

JOAN. Your husband?

THE LADY. No, not my dear departed—I’m speaking of his ancestor. Boswell. “The Scribbler”! What would you like to look at first, Miss Martin? I know the ins and outs of all this and *ken* what’s what, so I can tell you precisely where to—

JOAN. Oh, no. No need to bother.

(JOAN starts looking around on her own.)

THE LADY. You *dinnae* want ma help?

JOAN. Thanks, but I'll be fine. *(To herself, distracted by the collection's possibilities.)* This is just incredible ...

THE LADY. Suit *yersel'*. Tea's at four. Supper, seven.

(No response.)

THE LADY *(cont'd)*. We'll be having salmon, quail and Brussels sprouts.

(JOAN is still distracted. No answer. THE LADY exits.)

JOAN. Sorry, what?

(JOAN starts examining. She is eager. She talks to herself.)

JOAN *(cont'd)*. Good grief, where to start ... *(Looking more closely.)* These are clearly letters ... this ... what is ... ?
Leather-bound. That's hopeful ...

JOHNSON *(offstage, calling)*. Boswell ...

(JOAN opens one. Excitement may grow as JOAN opens something leather-bound.)

JOAN. Rag and linen paper—that's positive ...

JOHNSON. Where are you, Boswell—?

JOAN. The hand is legible—the ink is bright— *(Amazed.)*
And all as clear as if it was written yesterday ...

(She reads more. Light starts to rise on outside scene.)

BOSWELL (*closer*). Hallooo—

JOAN (*stunned*). My God, is this a journal? Could it be ...
ay dios. Please, please, please, please, please, let it be
Johnson's? The cover, Joan, check inside the cover ...

JOHNSON. Boswell!!

JOAN. Boswell?!

(BOSWELL is writing in his journal.)

BOSWELL. "Twenty-three August, 1773. James Boswell."

JOAN. *Carajo!*

(She tosses the book. Beat. Then picks it up again. Lights increase on the outside narrated scene as it becomes more "real." JOAN starts reading aloud slowly, then more quickly.)

JOAN (*cont'd*). "Upon this tour, he wears a long brown greatcoat, with pockets which might almost hold the two volumes of his folio dictionary." Wait ... could this be ... ?

(Happy, BOSWELL talks to JOAN, as if directly.)

BOSWELL. "His countenance, naturally the cast of an ancient statue. And he carries in his hand a walking stick of English oak."

JOAN. It's got to be Johnson he's talking about.

JOHNSON (*offstage*). Boswell!

(BOSWELL looks over his shoulder and hurries writing.)

JOAN (*continues reading*). "This imperfect sketch will have to serve of that wonderful man, whom I venerate and love— that sincere and zealous Christian—"

JOHNSON. Where the blazes are you!?

BOSWELL (*continuing*). “Of a melancholy temper, and a most humane and benevolent heart ... with a mind stored with such a vast collection of learning and knowledge that I have ever known.”

JOHNSON. I insist that you reveal yourself!

BOSWELL (*calling*). Just here, sir!

JOHNSON. Define your term! What does “here” mean? What a godforsaken journey.

JOAN. I’ve read Boswell’s *Tour of the Hebrides*. This seems different. Maybe a private version?

BOSWELL (*pause*). Lord in heaven, thank ye’ for my kind friend’s voyage. Och—he’s coming now ... lurching like a ship. I’ll not tell him I’m writing about him. More, later.

(*BOSWELL closes his journal. THE LADY has re-entered.*)

THE LADY. It’s awfully dark, I know. We have no funds for the “leccy.”

JOAN. Um ...

THE LADY (*gestures to ceiling*). The “electricity.” You’ll not want to ruin your eyes.

JOAN. Oh, I’m OK, thanks.

THE LADY. Fascinating term. “OK.”

JOAN. Oh?

THE LADY. Derives from “*Och aye.*”

(*Perhaps an awkward pause.*)

JOAN. All right.

THE LADY. Indeed. My husband, the old Laird, had a dream to install electricity up here. It’s up to me now, isn’t it?

JOAN. I'd like to make a call to the States after supper. May

I use your telephone? Of course, I'd reverse the charges.

THE LADY. OK. I'll bring you a torch next time.

JOAN. Oh, no thank you.

(THE LADY exits.)

JOAN *(to herself)*. Why in the world would I need a "torch?"

(JOAN returns to her reading. She can't see well, so she searches through her bag for her flashlight. She pulls it out and turns it on.)

BOSWELL. "Picture a hillside full of light ... "

(Perhaps lights rise to full outdoors level. We hear gulls.)

Scene 10: Sightings

BOSWELL. Look, sir, in the distance—do you see it?

JOHNSON. What, sir?

BOSWELL. Edinburgh! And our famous Arthur's Seat!

JOHNSON. Where, sir?

BOSWELL. Just over there! Arthur's Seat—our venerable mountain!

JOHNSON. I see no mountain. I see a mound, a small swelling. A medium- to large-sized hill.

BOSWELL *(pointing)*. Well that is it, sir!

JOHNSON *(dry)*. The landmark, sir, appears somewhat overrated.

(Phone rings.)

Scene 11: Transatlantic Phone Call #1

(Lights up on JOAN on the telephone to her PROFESSOR. The static and gaps of an old transoceanic phone call are heard. Throughout this call, they frequently misunderstand each other.)

PROFESSOR. Joan—Joanie—I can't quite hear you—terrible connection—

JOAN. I said there's lots of raw material—

PROFESSOR. Rare, huh? Well, that's positive—

JOAN. No, not "rare," raw. Piles and piles of secondary things ... various notes, letters. Family stuff. By the way, this Lady? She's my first aristocrat. Kind of pushy—and very free with her advice.

PROFESSOR. Her price? Oh, yes, she'll jack that up and drag things out. Don't appear too eager—just explore and find the gold. And check out the library, while you're at it.

JOAN. The attic? Yes, it's jam-packed. She says there's lots of Johnson ... I've found some references—I hope there's more in this mess of a collection.

PROFESSOR. Yes a terrible connection—

JOAN. Oh, no. I meant that—

(Phone connection ends.)

JOAN *(cont'd)*. *Hijo de puta.* *(To THE LADY, who has overheard.)* Sorry. The call was pretty spotty, unfortunately.

THE LADY. Aye, quite common here. Not so in your country? Lucky you. Tea?

JOAN. Oh ... no thank you.

(THE LADY hands her a blanket and exits.)

Scene 12: Edinburgh

BOSWELL. We walked arm-in-arm on High Street—
(*Explaining to the audience.*) on our way to pay respects
to David Hume— (*To JOHNSON.*) a brilliant philosopher,
once my professor ...

(*DAVID HUME bows.*)

BOSWELL (*cont'd, whispers to the audience*). Mr. Hume
spoke of his favorite subject ...

HUME. Death.

JOHNSON (*a bit panicked*). Death?!

HUME. The fact should hold no fear. For where, I ask, is the
awfulness in death?

JOHNSON (*dry*). One or two thoughts come to mind.

HUME. But we must accept with courage what we fear.
Then fear can give way to reason, and reason is the great
accomplishment of humankind ...

(*JOHNSON is heating up.*)

JOHNSON. Reason is my field, sir!

HUME. Grand, sir. You'll agree, ergo, that hell has no
reality—heaven, a religious concept only. We humans
conjure up our deities from the vapors of our brains.

JOHNSON. I do not agree on that, sir!

HUME. *Och aye*—we distract ourselves! In fact, we exist
briefly between two passages—one before we are born, and
the other after our extinction. And that is all.

JOHNSON. Scoundrel! I will not abide this conversation!

OPTIONAL ALTERNATE LINES

The following lines were developed for Edinburgh Fringe, and Joan's surname was Weinstein.

Scene 5: Lexicographer

JOAN. Exactly. You may be wondering why I'm interested.

On first glance, I appear a modern young woman. Perhaps more professional in dress than most. Maybe a secretary? School principal? Wife? No. Graduate student. I set my exacting sights on Literature, with a capital "L." Surprising to some, perhaps, since I hail from Chicago's West Side. For those of you who know American lit, why not cast my gaze on Asimov—Bellow—Salinger. I could have drowned myself in existential Jewish angst. Or why not tackle feminism—Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir— or, God help me, Anaïs Nin? Not me. I turned away from the expectations—the constraints of my tribe and my "claustrophobic" era. I turned to the Enlightenment—to 18th-century England. To reason, wit ... to light. I clung to its language—elegant and clean—and, yes, its put-downs, which could slice like brilliant knives. No one better at that than Samuel Johnson. Yes. Samuel Johnson was my man.

Scene 6: The Club

JOAN. A mystery to me. Books had been my only friends.

When I was five, *A Guide to Midwest Rocks and Minerals* was my favorite. Such clarity. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, second best. *Black Beauty*, *Anne of Green Gables*—the usuals—left me cold. Way too "schmaltzy"—too emotive. Instead I preferred Gibbon's *Fall of Rome*—now there's a narrative! But when I got to my university, I discovered—

Scene 14: Cocktails

THE LADY. Wee bit priggish, are we? Strains of your old Puritan blood?

JOAN. I'm hardly a Puritan.

THE LADY. You're American, aren't you? I've heard that legacy is woven into your country's very fabric.

JOAN. I'm also Jewish.

THE LADY. *Och!* Grand! We Scots have always loved the Jews!

The following lines were developed for 59E59 Theatres with an East Indian-American actor, and The Lady's surname was Lakshmi MacDougal.

Scene 18: Research

THE LADY. My *ammamma* was born in Madras. My grandad was born in Scotland. (*Indicating the surrounding estate.*) This estate? From my husband's family. I married "up," yes. I'm a commoner, me. Hard word for an American, I realize.

JOAN (*uncomfortable*). But why would ... ? Sorry. Not my business.

THE LADY. You apologize too much. Especially when you don't mean it. (*Beat.*) Are you trying to ask me why I'm hanging on to this? I do it for my husband. (*Beat.*) We had a lovely marriage—lovely. We met at university. (*Amused.*) He studied land management. Dull to us, I know, but he loved it. Me? It's poetry. I'm omnivorous. 16th-century, seventeenth—John Donne is braw. The Romantics, too—The Brontës—all that terrific treacle. And today, Neruda,

Tagore—they speak to head and heart. Ach—Sor Juana
Inés de la Cruz—pure dead brilliant.

JOAN (*pause*). Fiona—

THE LADY. Call me “Fi,” why don’t you.

JOAN. Fi. I’m ...

*(Big revelation for JOAN. She’s been “passing” in
academia.)*

JOAN. Joan ... Joan Morales.

THE LADY. Not Martin?

JOAN. No. Morales.

THE LADY. Fiona Lakshmi MacDougald.