

BOSWELL

by Marie Kohler

Scene Sample

In these three short scenes, BOSWELL and JOHNSON begin their 1773 journey to Scotland as JOAN, a 1950s academic comments from the side, while on her own Scottish pilgrimage to uncover literary treasures.

** indicates shift in time

Scene 8: "The Tour Begins"

(JOHNSON summarizes with self-importance.)

JOHNSON

In the Autumn of the year 1773, we commenced our journey.

BOSWELL

(to JOHNSON) Late summer it was, actually.

JOHNSON

(to BOSWELL) 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) Oh! Go canny, sir! There's some – em -- ...

JOHNSON

Sheep's dung. Thank you, Sir.

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

JOHNSON

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

(BOSWELL hands him 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, towards the storied northern city --

BOSWELL

Towards 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 audience) Their plan? Start in Edinburgh, skirt the eastern coast – hit St. Andrews, Aberdeen and Inverness...

JOHNSON

(to 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

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.)

-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.)

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 audience) As for my pilgrimage...

(Sound of car horns.)

JOAN

A taxi takes me on the final leg.

TAXI DRIVER

Got tae drive slowly, miss. There's hunners a' sheep 'roon here, and now the murk's cum in. Dreich.

JOAN

(to 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 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 and 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 64th 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

(calling) Boswell!

BOSWELL

Huzzah!

Scene 9: "In Storage"

THE LADY

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

JOAN

That's 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

Great. My professor will be pleased to hear it.

THE LADY

Bushels of them. Hunners of them.

JOAN

"Hunners"? Sorry? (finally understanding the meaning.) Ah, "hunners."

THE LADY

And absolutely carts of Boswell.

JOAN

Oh, 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 – language of the Empire.

(Silence)

Och, dinna fash. [“don’t worry about it”] Shall we continue with the Family Hoard?

JOAN

Certainly is a large collection.

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. The Scribbler. Boswell!
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 need. Don’t bother.

(JOAN starts looking around on her own.)

THE LADY

You dinnae want ma help?

JOAN

Thanks, but no, I'll be Ok. (to herself, distracted by the amount) This is just incredible...

THE LADY

Suit yersel'. Tea's at four. Supper, seven.

(no response)

THE LADY

We'll be having salmon, quail, and Brussel sprouts.

(JOAN still distracted. No answer.)

(THE LADY exits.)

JOAN

Sorry, what?

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

Good grief, where to start...

(looking more closely) These are clearly letters...this... what is...? Leather-bound. That's positive.

JOHNSON

(offstage calling) Boswell....

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

JOAN

The hand is legible – the ink is bright –

JOHNSON

Where are you, Boswell -- ?

JOAN

Rag and linen paper – that’s positive...
(amazed) All as clear as if it was written yesterday...

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

BOSWELL

(closer) Hallooo –

JOAN

(referring to what she’s examining)...(stunned) My God, is this a journal? Could it be...? *Ay dios. [lines can be substituted for actor of different cultural identity]* 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

“23 August, 1773. James Boswell.”

JOAN

Carajo! [Lines can be substituted for actor of different cultural identity]

(She tosses book. Beat. Then picks it up again.)
(Lights increase on outside narrated scene as it begins to become more “real”.)

Ugh.

(She slowly starts reading aloud, then picks up.)

“Upon this tour, he wears a long brown great-coat, with pockets which might almost hold the two volumes of his folio dictionary.”

Wait... is this...?

(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

(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

(offstage) 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 to JOHNSON) Just here, sir!

JOHNSON

(offstage) Define your term. What does “here” mean? What a God-forsaken 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 reentered.)

THE LADY

It's awfully dark here. 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

Ah. I'm OK, thanks.

THE LADY

Fascinating term. "OK".

JOAN

Oh?

THE LADY

Derives from "Och Aye".

(Perhaps an awkward pause.)

JOAN

Alright.

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. ["Torch" means "flashlight" in Britain.]

JOAN

Uh, no, thank you.

(THE LADY exits.)

JOAN

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

(JOAN returns to her reading. Can't see well, so searches through her bag for her flashlight. 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. (pause) I see a mound, a small swelling. A medium to large-sized hill.

BOSWELL

(pointing) Well that is it, sir!

JOHNSON

The landmark, sir, appears somewhat overrated.

(Phone rings.)