

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Boz & Co.

by Stella Kent

EXTRACT

© 2008 Stella Kent



This script is distributed by The Australian Script Centre
77 Salamanca Place Hobart 7004 Tasmania Australia
email admin@ozscript.org
www.ozscript.org
ph +61 3 6223 4675
fax +61 3 6223 4678

CHARACTERS

JAMES BOSWELL

BOSWELL'S FATHER

JOHN REID

DR JOHNSON

ZELIDE

TEACHER

PROSTITUTE

The following parts can be played by single actors:

Dr Johnson and Boswell's Father

John Reid and the Teacher

Zélide and the Prostitute.

SETTING

The action takes place in various venues, indoor and out, in London and Scotland in the 1760s. The various scenes, suggested by the minimum of furniture and properties, should change as seamlessly as possible.

ACT ONE

BOSWELL'S FATHER, a judge, is seated behind a high bench. The scene is exaggerated, in the manner of an eighteenth century cartoon. The VOICES OFF give the impression of a packed courtroom.

FATHER It appearing unto this court that in default...

[He is drowned out by VOICES.]

VOICES Common little eavesdropper. Buffooooon.

FATHER Silence!

VOICES He's guilty! Buffooooon.

FATHER I therefore sentence you to be hanged by the neck till dead.

[As he speaks he fades from view, and there comes into focus the silhouette of a gallows, with a man (REID) standing with a noose loosely tied around his neck.]

VOICE OF PARSON Behold you were bought forth in iniquity, and in sin did your mother conceive you.

VOICE Get on with it!

[Cries of approval.]

VOICES Can't stand here all day. I can't see! Move over. Off with his head!

VOICE OF PARSON And may God have mercy on your soul.

[Silence. A drum roll that almost reaches its climax. Suddenly the light switches, leaving the man about to be hanged in a dim light but

illuminating an excited BOSWELL, dressed in black, watching the proceedings. He has been making notes. He has a Scottish accent.]

BOSWELL

He was pale as death, but when they put the rope round his neck, he suddenly stood upright and ate the sweet orange they gave him. How wonderful to be in London to witness such things. [*A seriously considered opinion*] If it had been me - I should have placed the pips in my handkerchief, not spat them out.

[Drum beat and the man is suddenly hanged.]

Oh terrible - but fine. I will have dreams tonight. [*Looking about him*] Quick - before the crowd! My man! Yes. Sedan chair over here. Conduit Street, if you please.

[In mime he gets into the sedan chair, and is carried through the streets.]

You should not have gone, Boswell. You said you would not. But I cannot resist a hanging. [*He raises his hat.*] Dr Goldsmith. Such a distinguished gentleman. And this very afternoon I'm to meet the great man himself. Ah indeed, a man who is tired of London is, is... [*The image eludes him. To the sedan carrier*] Pray can you go a little faster? ... Yes, I see the street is greatly crowded. [*Very attracted to a woman they are passing*] What a fine fresh wench. [*Calling out of the carriage, to her invitation*] Alas, my dear, I have another appointment. [*To himself*] Besides, I have but recently cleared myself of the French disease. I must set myself up with someone's wife to enjoy a winter's safe copulation. Or take a wife myself. No! Think not on marriage. [*To the carrier*] This is my lodging! I had it from Dr Hahn. 'Women are necessary,' he said, 'because retention will clog the brain.'

[He alights and enters his house, unbuttoning his clothes as he goes.]

I always wear black for a hanging, out of respect. But I could not wear it all day. Dress affects my feelings as irresistably as music. Now, what should the great man like? [*He starts to take off his outer clothes.*] Chocolate brown? My most solemn countenance - looking

like the fifth act of a tragedy. Or scarlet and gold? The overture.
Such possibilities! Who should Boswell be?

[He sees us.]

Ah. You've come to see my play. 'The Life of Mr Boswell' by Mr Boswell. Genius. No, I know what you're thinking. But I should never have been blamed for that play - I wrote little more than the prologue. And you can see already with this one - a hanging! Such innovation to dispense with the prologue altogether and start with the action. Are you comfortable? You on the pit benches, I know they benumb the posterior, but rest assured once we proceed your minds will be quite distracted - especially when we meet the great man.

[Getting on with his dressing.] Do not perturb yourselves - I do not take off everything. *[He finds his nightcap]* There you are! It was quite chill last night without you. A nightcap is a most excellent invention. If your head is not covered from the dampness of the night air, your teeth will rot. And teeth are highly necessary. I know a man, but forty and a teacher, whose teeth are so bad he whistles like an old woman of eighty. Before we go - my journal. Last night's expenses. *[Writing]* Item: one prostitute. *[Excusing himself to us]* I employed armour - a sheath. Yes, yes, she was illbred, but she was well formed for amorous dalliance.

[FATHER comes into focus still on the high bench.]

FATHER James. I desire you to return home at once.

[BOSWELL puts his fingers in his ears.]

FATHER James.

BOSWELL I cannot hear him.

FATHER It is high time you continued your work at the bar. Fortunately my influence can be put to use.

BOSWELL I will not leave London.

FATHER I order you to come home.

BOSWELL Scotland the Gloom.

FATHER Now.

BOSWELL Oh go away - this is my play.

[He claps his hands. To his astonishment the lights go out on his father. He claps his hands again. FATHER appears, grumbling.]

FATHER You cannot just dispense with me when you think -

[BOSWELL claps his hands again and his FATHER disappears. BOSWELL is delighted. He makes the finishing touches to his toilette in front of the mirror.]

BOSWELL With the great man I will be most grave. 'Sir, it is an inestimable honour to meet the gentleman whose essays, poems, whose tragedies are guiding my conduct at every turn.' I am late! 'Ah, Mr Boswell, your own reputation as a writer precedes you.' 'Oh sir, you flatter me too - '

[REID has entered, unseen by BOSWELL.]

REID Mr Boswell!

BOSWELL What. What! Help! Murder!*[He lunges for his sword which he brandishes inexpertly.]*

REID No, no, Mr Boswell - it's me.

BOSWELL John Reid? Egad, man, I nearly had you there.

REID Sh! By your leave, Mr Boswell, sir.

BOSWELL Why? What?

REID I didn't do it, I swear.

BOSWELL How many this time?

REID Only nineteen.

BOSWELL [*Pompously*] Receiving stolen sheep is punishable by transportation.

REID Not the colonies!

BOSWELL [*Relenting*] You know that.

REID I bought them in good faith, Mr Boswell. I heard as how they'd been sold by horse dealers.

BOSWELL Reid, I have an appointment -

REID Mr Boswell, you've got to help me - they found the sheep skins in my house.

BOSWELL Oh, John! There are many fine lawyers will help you.

REID Last time -

BOSWELL We only just got you off -

REID You were brilliant - that story you told the jury about me being without work for upwards of twelve months-

BOSWELL And his poor wife being delivered of a male infant that died for lack of nourishment.

REID It was better than the truth, Mr Boswell. It brung tears to my eyes.

BOSWELL Not proven, they said.

REID And that was a hundred and twenty sheep! You'll do it again, Mr Boswell.

BOSWELL No, Reid.