

Programme Notes: Scenes from a Friendship. (Audience version).

Introduction

Scenes from a Friendship by Jane Upton offers an intimate portrait of the enduring bond between Jess Johnson and Billy Moss, charting the evolution of their relationship from the age of 12 in 1992 through to age 43 in 2023. As you arrive at the theatre, you will find faded paper polaroids strewn across the auditorium floor; you are invited to walk across them as you make your way to your seat. These photographs contain white silhouettes in place of human figures, setting the tone for a play concerned with the presence, absence, and fleeting nature of memory.

Characters

Jess is played by a petite woman with blue eyes and a dark blonde ponytail. Her base costume is a white tee-shirt worn under a sleeveless denim jumpsuit, paired with red and grey trainers and short white socks. She shifts her appearance for different time periods by adding a baggy denim jacket or carrying a prop like a takeaway coffee.

Billy is portrayed by a tall actor with blue eyes, short red hair, and a ginger moustache and thin beard. His base costume consists of a teal tee-shirt, jeans, and a belt, with trainers that feature an orange splash on the front. The passage of time is subtly reflected in the various ways he wears a teal-and-brown check shirt.

Stage and Set

The setting for this production is a single, quirky, and symbolic space that is overwhelmingly white. The floor is a flat, square platform raised a foot above the ground, deliberately rotated at a slight angle so that it sits off-centre from the audience's perspective. This white floor is covered in rows of evenly spaced square polaroid photos, none of which touch one another. Each of these photographs features one or two figures depicted as white silhouettes, echoing the images you walked on earlier. In the very centre of this platform, there is a circular area devoid of photos—an intentional space where a rug would traditionally lie.

The walls at the back and to the left are constructed from white wooden grids, which house row upon row of small dark squares, each the size of a polaroid photo. Due to the scale of these grids, a deliberate optical illusion is created in normal light: at every intersection of the grid, a faint ghost of a grey circle appears, which vanishes the moment you attempt to focus your gaze directly on it. This visual trick leaves the viewer with a profound sense of something that is always present, yet constantly eluding them. While these black squares appear as voids at first glance, they are transformed when light shines from behind them, revealing that they are, in fact, polaroid photos of Jess and Billy, appearing as though etched in orange glass. On the left wall is a white door, and on the back wall, slightly to the right of centre, is a large, window-sized square that serves as a screen for projections.

Within this space are several pieces of furniture that are intentionally "wonky," each featuring a corner that appears to sink into the ground. These ambiguous objects shift their function throughout the play to serve the needs of the narrative:

These include...

- The chair which is slightly tilted.
- A school desk, which also sports a tilt and is also used as a kitchen surface or an office desk.
- A loose white cardboard box, also wonky, sits on the floor to stow various props.
- The bed, situated at the front and left, is so deeply set into the floor that only a smooth, hard wedge with a pillow remains visible. The slope of this wedge is shallow enough to allow a character to lie on it, and it functions as a teenager's bed, a bed in later life, a hospital bed or even a piece of higher ground when the characters are outdoors.
- A chest of drawers is used variously as seating, a set of steps, or a filing cabinet.

Lighting and structure.

The play's structure is punctuated by transitions between flashbacks, each marked by the sound of a camera shutter and stuttering orange flashes of light that glare through the polaroid photos embedded in the rear walls. To assist the audience in navigating the timeline, projections on the rear screen display the characters' age and the year of each scene—for example, "12 – 1992," "15 – 1995," or "43 – 2023". Periodically, these projections will feature silhouetted imagery from the characters' lives. In these brief moments we see an adult Jess reflecting on their friendship. The projections culminate in a final selfie polaroid of the adult Jess and Billy beaming together where we finally see their faces.

Key Scenes and Transitions

The characters' interactions are physical and varied. They are often seen face-to-face in a room, park, or playground, or they may be positioned apart—both facing the audience, holding handsets or modern mobiles—to simulate being in different locations.

The play opens with an older Jess phoning an unseen Billy; she leaves him a voice note while looking increasingly worried. The stage is lit in cold white light, which increasingly focuses on Jess. As she ends the message, warm flashes of light, reminiscent of camera flashes, appear from behind the rear wall.

Age 12, 1992: Billy enters, and they adopt their 12-year-old personas. Billy performs a heroic stance as a sheriff, while Jess exits and returns hobbling, wearing a spectacular long silver wig to rehearse the 'Mortiana' scene.

Age 15, 1995: The two sit atop the chest of drawers, which represents a wall at school. As they transition to the next scene, they jump off the platform to circle the stage before re-entering through the left door; Jess pauses momentarily to look back at the polaroid on the rear wall.

Age 16, 1997: In a house party scene, Jess sits on the bed as Billy stands, later joining her to make a revelation. During a transition, the stage is lit in deep blue; the phone rings, and they stand in separate spotlights—Jess on the far left leaning on the drawers, and Billy on the right sitting on the desk. Later, they rehearse the balcony scene from *Romeo & Juliet* while Jess sits on the drawers as if on Juliet's balcony. During a house party, the stage is lit in red and blue disco lights, and Jess dances in a central spotlight while Billy remains on the periphery.

Age 17, 1998: At the school drama block, they talk while eating packets of crisps. In Jess's room, Billy leans against the drawers and eventually joins Jess on the bed. During a sequence where they pretend to be in NYC, Jess dances until an embarrassed Billy joins in, spinning with arms wide open in a centre-stage spotlight.

Age 18, 1999: They stand against the rear wall in a centre spotlight, Billy holding a bottle of Malibu and Jess holding a trophy. Multi-coloured disco lights shine through the left door. Billy uses a disposable Kodak camera, announcing he has "one photo left," and they take a selfie. As Billy leaves, Jess watches him with a yearning gaze, then looks through photos from the desk.

Age 22–25 (2003–2005): At age 22, they exchange news over a mobile call. When Jess says "Amazing," her facial expression contradicts her words. At 25, Jess leaves an answerphone message while sitting on the bed. Billy, in a cool white spotlight, sits on the floor slumped against the chair, unable to pick up, though he scrambles to answer when she mentions writing a poem.

Age 30–35 (2010–2015): At 30, the stage is lit in blue, we hear rain and Billy carries an umbrella. At 35, during Billy's stag do, he wears a rainbow sash as they face one another to chat.

Age 38–42 (2018–2022): At 38, Billy sits on the chair while Jess stands nearby, fidgeting nervously. In a hospital scene, Jess sits on the bed while Billy sits on the chair at the bedside; Jess fumbles with a blanket when she mentions the name "Elliot". At 42, during a FaceTime call, Jess folds socks on the chest of drawers while Billy sits on the desk. In a later scene at a park, they look past the audience toward their unseen children, Elliot and Richard.

Age 43, 2023: They run to catch a tube, facing the audience. In a hospital scene, Jess tentatively leans on a chair before sitting at the bedside. She eventually wraps her arms around an emotional Billy in a hug and joins him on the bed to tell him, "it's going to be ok". As she reminisces about her childhood garden, the music lifts and the stage is bathed in a warm orange glow.

Age 44, 2024: Billy stands centre stage leaving a voice mail, while Jess sits on the bed, looking yearningly in his direction. The final image is of the pair together in a warm glow, looking towards the rear projection screen displaying their polaroid selfie, before the play concludes in a blackout.