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Cuckoo

A Play

Emlyn Williams

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CUCKOO

Cuckoo was first presented, by Michael Redington, at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, on 31st May 1986, with the following cast:

Madam, Cuckoo's aunt	Lila Kaye
Benjy	Karl Howman
Cuckoo	Rosemary Leach
Jerome	Anthony Smee
Powell, Cuckoo's uncle	John Stratton
Lydia, Cuckoo's sister	Tessa Peake-Jones
Mrs Dix	Doreen Andrew

The play directed by the Author

Setting by Eileen Diss
Costumes by Liz Gilbert
Personal Assistant to the Director Brian Tipping

The action takes place in a bungalow on a small island in the Thames, near Hampton Court

ACT I
SCENE 1 A morning in May
SCENE 2 Five weeks later; an afternoon in July

ACT II
SCENE 1 Some hours later, near midnight
SCENE 2 The next morning

Time—1935

To
Rosemary Leach and
Michael Redington

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this, the published play, I have included specially detailed stage directions—as to acting, setting and movement—based on the original production, with the idea that they may be useful to directors up against the problem of "the time element".

Emlyn Williams

ACT I*

SCENE 1

A bungalow on a small island in the Thames, near Hampton Court. The time is 1935, a fine morning in May

The living-room R *occupies roughly three-quarters of the set. The remaining quarter is composed of the veranda, with a glimpse of greenery and a couple of garden bushes. In the* R *wall, downstage, the kitchen door; higher upstage, in the same wall, a door leading to Mam's bedroom (called "the bedroom door"). In the back wall of the room,* R, *an archway leads to a corridor going left and right. Opposite the archway, is the door to Madam's room; Powell's bedroom is off the corridor to* R, *and out of sight. In the back wall, to* L, *the fireplace, a fan of paper in the grate. In the wall* L, *upstage, the main window of the room; next to it, downstage an open glass door gives access to the veranda, and thence to the bit of garden and the river*

The veranda looks rickety and the building is of the cheapest kind, with walls and slanting roof of distempered beaver-boarding, but the room avoids the sordid; the distemper wants renewing, but it is a pleasant mellow colour. The crowded room is higgledy-piggledy with furniture and ornaments of mixed styles; cheap bungalow bits jostle against old solid pieces; a couple of warm landscapes

Between the fireplace and the veranda, facing, a Welsh dresser with china; near it a plant and an old dinner-gong. Below it, against the veranda wall, a dining-table with four chairs. Near the dresser, a tray, on end. Next to Madam's door, a shabby hatstand; a few hats and coats. Against the R *wall, between kitchen and bedroom, a good-looking desk and desk-chair. On the desk, a telephone of the period, the receiver at the end of a cord, and a wireless set. Over the desk, bookshelves. In the middle of the room,* DS, *a stool (or pouffe) and armchair; between them, a small (low) table. Sitting upright on the stool, a large doll, very old and partially bald, white-faced and shabbily dressed in light colours. Behind, half-facing the fireplace, a sofa. Oil lamps, with cheap unobtrusive shades. On the veranda, a couple of garden chairs and tables, very shabby*

Before the CURTAIN *rises, light music of the period. This continues as the action begins, fainter and proceeding from the waterway* L. *Both bedroom and kitchen doors are open. On the dining-table, the remains of breakfast*

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*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Madam is seated at a table on the veranda, pecking at a small typewriter. She is a somewhat faded beauty, between fifty and sixty, with too much make-up and too-striking hair, dressed in a once-garish kimono which she carries off with brio. A woman who has slid into bad days but will not admit it, she is gallant and infuriating, lovable and bristling with pretence. She has a habit of adopting a shaky but accomplished Italian accent as she comes out with stray foreign expressions. At other moments, there are faint Welsh intonations

Benjy stands at the telephone, hanging on. He is a healthy burly young cockney who has been many things in his time, the calling most easily guessed at being that of the sea. He has natural good manners, but loves life and is unlikely to be nonplussed. He wears the trousers of an old suit, and an old sweater; he is in shirt-sleeves and carries a duster in his belt

A pause. Madam types, the music plays. She puts her hands to her ears

Madam That River Thames! Every other punt carries a portable gramophone, *orribile* . . . (*She types as the music dies away*)

Benjy (*into the telephone*) Fishmonger? . . . Mornin', miss, I'm speakin' on be'alf of the Roberts family, could you send six fillets o' plaice. . . . No, miss, this is the new maid. Checked in a couple of hours back, from the Labour Exchange an' learnin' fast, name o' Benjy. . . . (*Calling, to Madam*) Excuse me, is this Cozy Cot?

Madam I'm afraid so, with two Ks. (*She types*)

Benjy (*into the telephone*) It is. . . . No, miss the lady of the 'ouse went into 'orspital yesterday, the report is satisfactory——

Madam My sister will be home Monday week.

Benjy (*into the telephone*) Back Monday week, thank yew. (*He is about to replace the receiver*)

Madam How do you spell "absinthe"? You know, the drink, absinthe, it's for my Life Story. (*Designating the typewriter*)

Benjy (*after hesitating, into the telephone*) Do me a favour, miss, 'ow d'you spell "absinthe"? . . . (*Calling, to Madam*) A,b,s,e,n,t . . .

As Madam types the letters . . .

(*Into the telephone*) Thank you, miss, six plaice, righty-ho . . . (*He puts back the receiver and dusts the telephone*)

Madam (*reading*) "From the moment I had sung at the Paris Opéra-Comique, my favourite drink and ever-present friend-in-need was absent", it doesn't look right. (*Taking up a batch of script*) Ah well, press on, turn me on a bath, *caro*, will you?

Benjy (*going up to clear breakfast*) Can't at the moment, Madarm.

Madam Why not?

Benjy There's a clothes-'orse in it.

Madam Oh. Take the horse right out of the bath and ride it straight back to the stables.

Benjy looks back at her, and decides he has not heard aright

From the bedroom, suddenly, Cuckoo's voice, singing absentmindedly, cheerfully, on the shrill side

Cuckoo (*off*) "Funny ole London, Jolly ole town . . ."
Benjy (*peering through the open door, amused*) 'Ello 'ello 'ello . . .

A pause, then Cuckoo wanders in. She is a robust, wholesome, pretty woman, between thirty-five and forty, dressed in a nondescript, colourless shift, too long and too loose, under a bedraggled cardigan; sandals, worn and heavy. Since she is shiningly clean, there is nothing sordid in her appearance; it is merely old-fashioned, dowdy. She wears a faded old sun-bonnet and a small handbag is attached to her wrist. Her gait is curious—slow and uncertain, yet not ungraceful; the uncertainty—between sudden movements of impetuous gesture—betrays the fact that she is mentally retarded. But there is nothing pitiable about her; her face, innocent of make-up, framed by straight bobbed hair, like a schoolgirl, is the face of a child. Her mind, too, is the mind of a child: a bright child. She is a happy creature, with—habitually—an air of wide-eyed thoughtful serenity. The sun-bonnet is curiously becoming, in the style of the silent cinema

Cuckoo (*advancing, singing the same jingle, nonchalantly*) "Funny ole London, Jolly ole town . . . In for a penny, in for a poun' . . ." (*The cockney is artfully exaggerated*)
Madam Mind the chair, dear . . .

She is a second too late to stop Cuckoo banging slightly into the desk-chair. Cuckoo sits on the edge of the chair, and looks at the telephone. Her expression is suddenly dejected, puzzled. Benjy watches her, fascinated. Slowly she reaches forward and puts out a hand

Benjy No . . .
Madam (*who has been typing intermittently*) Darling, leave the telly-phony aloney . . . Misses her mother, poor child . . . (*She continues typing*)
Benjy (*looking at the doll, then addressing Cuckoo*) Where's Daisy?

No answer; he steps nearer, then hands on knees:

Where's Daisy, ducks?
Cuckoo Having a nice s-sitdown. (*She speaks with little difficulty, though slowly and with an intermittent stammer. Her accent is indeterminate, with a basis of Welsh. From the desk, she takes up a simple piece of knitting, and knits*)
Benjy (*looking at the doll*) Oh yes. White as a sheet, she must be poorly.
Cuckoo Waiting for the telly-phony.
Benjy O' course she is. They tole me all about you in the Labour Exchange. 'Ow many thruppeny bits you got?

Cuckoo shakes her handbag: the rattle of a money-box inside it

'Ow many hats you got?
Cuckoo S-seven.
Benjy Clever girl. (*He goes back to the dining-table*)
Cuckoo Madam s-sing. (*A pause*) Sing?
Madam Not now dear, I'm writing my Life Story.
Cuckoo Sing?

Madam (*singing, mechanically, while studying her script*) *Caro nome che'l mio cor, festilente palpitar . . .* (*Rising showing off to Cuckoo, according to custom*) Tellyphony please to me, We'll have hot-cross buns for tea!

Cuckoo claps her hands

(*Peering out over the garden*) Those people in the punt, look at them staring, they think I'm mad . . . (*Booming defiantly, arm extended as a Valkyrie*) Yo-ho-ho-*ho*! Yo-ho-ho-*ho*! (*She sits again and types*)

Benjy Where are you now Madarm, got to the Scala Milan yet?

Madam Monte Car-rlo, I can smell the cigars. This is me on the Dolly Sisters, big stars they were, the talk of the Casino. (*Reading, from her script*) "They glanced up from the baccarat table to make a note of my daring dress, as with a flick of a wrist they lost a cool million."

Benjy I bet *you* was a star, too!

Madam I sang some very nice roles.

Benjy When was Monte Carlo, Madarm?

Madam Let me see—when was the war?

Benjy Finished in nineteen-eighteen, so I'm told. Eighteen from nineteen-thirty-five—seventeen years back.

Madam Oh dear . . . The Victory Ball, Dame Clara Butt singing "Land of Hope and . . ." *Sapristi*, seems like yesterday . . .

Cuckoo turns on the wireless

Cuckoo What's a w-war?

Madam It's when people kill each other, dear (*She types a word*)

Cuckoo Why?

Madam Because it was the war to end all wars. (*She types*)

Nondescript music creeps in, on the wireless

No dear, on Thursdays it doesn't come on till the afternoon . . .

Benjy What's that?

Madam An absurd programme called "Funny Ole London", she was singing the theme song just now . . .

Benjy That's right, I know it . . .

Madam Lots of silly voices, *molto comico*. Mind you, she'll listen to anything on the wireless for hours, picks up phrases, you'd be surprised. (*Typing*) Switch it off Benjy, there's a dear . . .

The music fades out. As Benjy crosses to the wireless:

Man's voice (*on the wireless*) "The weather. It will be mostly sunny all day, with temperatures ranging between . . ."

Benjy switches off the wireless, and returns to the dining-table

Cuckoo (*mechanically, a passable imitation of the silken tones*) Later there will be a deep depression over Iceland and most of the Fairy Islands. (*Shrill cockney*) Won't 'arf be cold, oo-er . . .

Madam That's "Funny Ole London" . . . (*Typing a last word, then rising, decisively*) There . . . (*Taking up her bag*)

Cuckoo, who has put down her knitting, looks at the telephone with a sigh

Benjy Won't ring by jus' lookin' at it, y'know. You jus' got to be patient.
Madam (*coming into the room*) *Assez de travail!* (*Sinking into the armchair*) I'd give anything for a champagne cocktail . . . (*Closing her eyes*)

Cuckoo rises, comes down to the stool, takes Daisy up as if she were a baby, and goes into the bedroom, leaving the door again open

Madam is powdering her face. A knock on the (open) kitchen door

Avanti . . .

Jerome enters. He is a good-looking man in his early thirties, dressed unobtrusively in (summer) city clothes; he wears a hat, which he takes off; he carries a parcel. His self-possession is charming and unconscious

Benjy studies him closely

Jerome Sorry to come in through the kitchen . . .
Madam (*Italian*) It is the only way, unless you tr-ravel by the river.
Jerome This *is* Kozy Kot?
Madam *Si si*, isn't it nauseating? We've got used to it, over the years—we can do even better, next door we have the Robinsons.
Jerome What's theirs called?
Madam Nest O'Robinsons. Are you insurance? My sister's away . . .
Jerome I'm a friend of her daughter's.
Madam Lydia? She's not here.
Jerome Not here? (*Put out*) But when I rang the office in Ludgate Circus they told me she's at home . . .
Madam Well, she is and she is not—Lydia is down the river visiting her mother in Kingston Hospital, home later.
Jerome Good . . .
Madam Would you like me to give her a message.
Jerome No thank you—(*crisply*)—*I'd* like to give her a message.
Madam Oh?

As Benjy crosses to the kitchen, with his tray

Jerome I want to marry her.

Madam stares at him: Benjy too

Madam Sit down.
Jerome Thank you. (*He puts down his hat and parcel, and sits on the stool*)
Madam You must be the one she calls her pick-up!
Jerome (*not amused*) Does she now? . . . We met in the Tube.
Benjy One more for lunch, Madarm?
Madam Of course . . .
Benjy And excuse me Madarm—if you could pop in an' show me where all the stuff goes?
Madam *Subito, caro . . .*
Benjy Ta.

He goes into the kitchen

Madam How long have you been in love with her?
Jerome Since we met, in the Tube. Six weeks ago.
Madam You are *sentimentale*, I find that *simpatico*!
Jerome It's not *sentimentale*, it's what happened.
Madam Ah ... (*Rising, and walking up towards the archway*) I must announce to my brother ... (*Calling, excited*) Powell, a visitor! (*Back*) And Lydia has said yes!
Jerome No.
Madam No? (*Incredulous*) She has said *no*?
Jerome No. She hasn't said anything.

As Madam sits

I wrote her last week, twice, no answer. No contact—nothing—that's why I'm here. (*He is, for him, het up*)
Madam She has quite a shy side, *nostra* Lydia ...

Powell enters from his room: that is, from R *of the archway; he is seated in his old wheelchair, which he propels with skill. He is a studious man in his late forties, shabby but fine-looking, with a cheerful easy eloquence. From the waist down, his body is hidden by a rug. All about him is neat and clean, but worn: clothes, rug, chair. The chair has a home-made tray attached to it, with books and notebooks*

Powell A visitor, did you say?
Madam Powell dear, this is Mr——
Jerome Price, Jerome Price ...
Madam He wants to marry Lydia.
Powell Oh? (*Putting on spectacles, suspended round his neck by a cord*) I'm her mother's brother. (*Studying Jerome*) And very nice too.
Madam He's here to propose to her.
Powell And have a look at all of us, can't blame him. Kozy Kot, Mr Price, is the seat of the house of Roberts-Ellis, a stronghold of Welsh émigrés in Bungalowland. You may wonder where Madam comes in. Madam Gwendolen Ellis is an international operatic orchid from Methodist soil. Our sister has talked broken French in Rome, broken Italian in Paris, and in London she's broken both.
Madam (*giggling*) Powell ...
Powell What else? ... You may have gathered that we're ... not well off. They say wealth corrupts—if it does, the house of Roberts-Ellis looks pretty safe to me.
Madam (*to Jerome*) Have *you* any money?
Jerome I ... I work in an office too.
Madam Oh.
Jerome I have ... prospects.
Powell That sounds promising, we might settle for it ...
Madam (*remembering*) Ah ... (*Rising*) The kitchen ...
Powell Is there something about a wheelchair that makes it run people's lives?

Jerome (*as Madam crosses*) You've had an accident?

Madam stops at the kitchen door

Powell (*amiably*) I'm still looking for a way to answer that without embarrassing.
Jerome Oh . . . (*Confused*) I'm sorry——
Madam My brother, Mr Price, was wounded in the Great War.

She goes into the kitchen, leaving the door open

Powell Do sit down . . .

As Jerome sits again, on the stool

In case you visualize the Charge of the Light Brigade . . . the truth is that one fine evening on a beach off the River Somme, I disregarded the signs and went for a walk. It was my last, my legs couldn't be found anywhere. Might have been worse, I was never an athlete and used to trudge down country lanes longing for a lift. You could say that I have—that I have come to terms with my body.
Jerome Are you a writer, sir?
Powell (*holding up a thick notebook*) The philosophical jottings of a hermit.
Jerome They look pretty substantial.
Powell Going to be a book, one day. An important one, you never know!
Jerome You're a reader, too . . .
Powell Have to be! As a schoolmaster before the war, I was too busy to sit down with a book. My martial exploit brought home to me that I was to do nothing but read, and write, for the rest of my life.

As Benjy enters from the kitchen, carrying a tray of crockery etc. for lunch, followed by Madam with a tablecloth

You've stopped feeling sorry for me. (*Turning to go to the veranda, and seeing Benjy*) Who's this?
Benjy Emergency relief, sir, at your service. I was a male nurse, for a spell.
Powell Oh. I suppose that's where I come in.
Benjy Yes, sir. Last thing at night I'm to get your legs off and put you to bed.
Madam (*at the dining-table, setting the tablecloth*) Benjy!
Powell No no, he's down to brass tacks, rather refreshing. (*Turning to go*) I did have a most uncomfortable night . . .
Madam You see, Mr Price, our sister's always done it . . .
Powell (*to Jerome*) Make yourself at home, you don't mind if I do a little work?
Jerome Of course not, I'll wander round . . .

Powell wheels himself on to the veranda, to study notes. Madam examines tumblers, and hands them, one by one, to Benjy, to polish. (NB: No objects should be taken from the tray on to the table, to facilitate the quick change which follows the scene.) Jerome sits on the sofa and takes up a magazine

Cuckoo comes in from the bedroom, nursing Daisy, who is now wrapped in a

small quilt. Cuckoo herself is now in a child's straw hat, and has draped gaily coloured paper streamers round her shoulders: she carries a small home-made abacus with white beads

Jerome gets up on her entrance; as she stares at him, and he stares back, he sits again

Cuckoo W-would you like a cup of t-tea?
Jerome (*bewildered*) No thank you.
Madam She can *make* a cup of tea—can't you darling?

Cuckoo sits at the desk, glances at the telephone, plays with the abacus, slides the beads along as she counts, silently and laboriously

(*Busy*) Has she decided who she is today?
Benjy Jus' now, she was Winnie.
Jerome Winnie?
Benjy Winnie Whitechapel, on the wireless, "Funny Ole London" ... (*Going up to her, hands on knees again, as if humouring a child*) 'Ow's Winnie today, ducks?
Cuckoo (*a mechanical but exact dead-pan imitation*) Evah-so-bloomin well Ay-thank-yew ...
Benjy Ain't she a caution?

Madam leaves the dining-table and comes down to the armchair

(*To Cuckoo*) An' Miss Meddle?

Cuckoo does not answer

(*To Jerome*) She's the other one, same programme—(*to Cuckoo*)—Miss Meddle?

No answer

I'm strange, that's what it is ...

Benjy exits to the kitchen

Jerome watches Cuckoo, embarrassed but fascinated. Madam has delved into her bag and starts buffing her nails

Madam She's Lydia's sister.
Jerome Lydia did mention—something ...
Madam You can speak up, she doesn't mind.
Cuckoo (*as Miss Meddle, a ridiculously refined character*) Dew speak up, Ay didn't quate ketch the gist ... (*She closes her eyes*)
Madam Miss *Meddle*! Oh, she has us in stitches sometimes. Quite a bit older than Lydia, of course——
Cuckoo (*Miss Meddle*) A evah so old, old enough to know bettah may deah. (*Opening her eyes, her Welsh accent echoing her mother*) With the child one day old, the nurse dropped her on the floor, dead drunk the nurse was, and the child has been *special* ever since.
Madam She once overheard her mother explaining the facts——
Cuckoo (*still her mother*) A damaged person, that's what the child is.

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