

## THE CUCKOO CLOCK

adapted from the novel by Mrs Molesworth BY MICHAEL THEODOROU

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

*Dedication: For my wife, who first gave me the idea.*

'The Cuckoo Clock' is a delightful children's story by the well-known Victorian writer Mrs Molesworth. This stage adaptation attempts to capture the magical nature of the original with its Victorian charm and sentiment while at the same time injecting it with humour and the language more appropriate for a modern audience. All the main characters from the book are included with some additions in the form of choruses, which will give the opportunity for a much larger cast production. It is a very flexible script which can be played by as few as thirty or as many as pupil numbers allow. Each director must adapt the size of the choruses to suit their own needs.

Music: I conceived this piece with piano music in mind and would suggest either the Nocturnes of Chopin or of John Field. There is an excellent CD of the piano music of the Russian composer Anatol Liadov [Hyperion CDA66986] which would also be eminently suitable. There is one song to the moon for Griselda which can be specially composed or left out. There is also an opportunity for choral singing in the butterfly sequences and a piece of music for dance/ movement for the 'moon creatures' and the Chinese mandarins. Again, each school can include as much or as little music as they wish whilst remembering that this is essentially a play with music rather than a musical.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

GRISELDA

AUNT GRIZZEL

AUNT TABITHA

SERVANT 1

SERVANT 2

SERVANT 3 [DORCAS]

MR KNEEBREECHES

THE CUCKOO [F]

THE CLOCK

THE CLOCKMAKER

SYBILLA

PHIL

LADY LAVENDER

NURSE

MR CROUCH

PHIL'S MOTHER

2 LABOURERS

NARRATOR[S] The narration can be split up between more than one person if desired

CHORUS OF CUCKOOS in the script, 8 are used

CHORUS OF CHINESE MANDARINS in the script, 8 are used

BUTTERFLIES in the script, 8 are used

MOON CREATURES

Butterflies and Cuckoo chorus could be doubled up and Mandarins and Moon creatures, but not Mandarins and Cuckoos. If I were doing the play I would have separate full-time Choruses of Cuckoos and Mandarins, with Butterflies doubling with Moon creatures and some of the smaller roles.

Very small parts, that could be doubled are: Mr Kneebreeches, The Clockmaker, Sybilla, Lady Lavender, Nurse, Mr Crouch, Mother and the 2 Labourers.

The play is ideal for a junior school play, though the author did it with senior school taking adult parts and juniors the other parts.

EXTRACT 1:

**Piano music. Spotlight up on Narrator who turns and addresses the audience as if telling a story to children. Music fades.**

**NARRATOR** Once upon a time near an old village, deep in the countryside, there stood a very old house. Such a house as you could hardly find nowadays, however you searched, for it belonged to a time gone by - a time now quite passed away.

***Piano music gently up.***

Time indeed seemed to stand still in and all about the old house, as if it and the people who inhabited it had got so old that they could not get any older, and had outlived the possibility of change.

***Piano music fades gently.***

But one day at last there did come a change.

***Sound of carriage.***

Late in the dusk of an autumn afternoon a carriage drove up to the door of the old house, startling the rooks just as they were composing themselves to rest, and setting them all wondering what could be the matter.

***The Narrator looks at where Griselda enters.***

A little girl was the matter!

**The Narrator leaves. Griselda has entered, wearing Victorian children's dress and carrying three pieces of luggage.**

**GRISELDA** *putting down her luggage and looking about.* Oh.....This house seems very old.....Where can everyone be? .....It's as if everybody has died.....Where is everybody?

***From the back of the stage three old servants shuffle on.***

**SERVANT 1** Ah! Be you the young missie that's expected?

**SERVANT 2** If so, you're late.

**SERVANT 3** We weren't expecting you so late.

**SERVANT 1** Where have you been, young miss?

**SERVANT 2** We'd quite given up on you.

**SERVANT 3** We really had. We were about to go to bed.

**GRISELDA** But where are my aunts? You're not my aunts, are you?

***All three servants rock with laughter in a creaky manner.***

**SERVANT 1** Goodness, child, how could we be your aunts?

**SERVANT 2** How could you possibly think that?

**SERVANT 3** We're not that old, are we?

**GRISELDA** What do you mean? [***With horror.***] Are my aunts older than you?

***The three servants rock with laughter as before.***

**SERVANT 1** Goodness, the child has so much to learn.

**SERVANT 2** So much to learn!

**SERVANT 3** So much to learn!

**GRISELDA** Where are my aunts? ... Where are Aunt Grizzel and Aunt Tabitha?

**SERVANT 1** In bed, of course, child, where do you think?

**SERVANT 2** Do you expect them to be up at their age?

**SERVANT 3** They can't wait up all night for you!

**GRISELDA *crossly*** Please be so good as to wake my aunts and tell them that Griselda is here. I have travelled such a great distance and am so tired. Why aren't they here to greet me?

**SERVANT 1** We'll take your things, my dear.

**SERVANT 2** And take you up to your room.

**SERVANT 3** Your aunts will see you in the morning.

**GRISELDA** Why are you all so old?

**SERVANT 1** This is an old house. We are all old here, missie.

**SERVANT 2** 'Tis time something young came into the old house again.

**SERVANT 3** Young Griselda.

**ALL 3 SERVANTS** Young Griselda from across the sea.

***The three servants take Griselda's luggage and shuffle off.***

**GRISELDA** What a very peculiar house! And what very peculiar people!

EXTRACT 2:

***Energetic bustling piano music. Griselda walks in a circular motion and is joined by the two aunts, Miss Grizzel and Miss Tabitha, who waddle and bustle in a circular motion, swaying from side to side in their full skirts. Griselda stops and turns. The music suddenly stops.***

**GRISELDA** Oh, Aunt!

**GRIZZEL** Yes?

**TABITHA** Yes?

**GRIZZEL** To whom are you speaking?

**TABITHA** To me or to your Aunt Grizzel?

**GRIZZEL** I am your Aunt Grizzel.

**TABITHA** And I am your Aunt Tabitha.

**GRIZZEL & TABITHA *together*** Well?

**GRISELDA** Have you got a cuckoo in a cage?

**GRIZZEL** A cuckoo in a cage?

**TABITHA** A cuckoo in a cage?

**GRIZZEL** What is the child talking about?

**TABITHA** What is the child talking about?

**GRIZZEL** In a cage?

**TABITHA** A cuckoo in a cage?

**GRISELDA** There is a cuckoo somewhere in the house. I heard it in the night. It couldn't have been outside, could it? It would be too cold.

**GRIZZEL & TABITHA *whispering together and looking at each other*** So like her grandmother. So like her grandmother.

**GRIZZEL** We do have a cuckoo, my dear.

**TABITHA** Indeed we do.

**GRIZZEL** But it isn't in a cage.

**TABITHA** No, indeed.

**GRIZZEL** It isn't exactly the sort of cuckoo you are thinking of.

**TABITHA** No, indeed.

**GRIZZEL** It lives in a clock.

**TABITHA** In a clock.

**GRISELDA *eyes wide open*** In a clock?

**GRIZZEL & TABITHA *together*** That's right. In a clock!

**GRISELDA** So it's not alive then?

**GRIZZEL** Why not?

**TABITHA** What do you mean by - not alive?

**GRISELDA** *puzzled* I don't really know.

**GRIZZEL** *with a half smile, looking at Tabitha. Confidentially* I knew a little girl once...

**TABITHA** Yes....

**GRIZZEL** I knew a little girl once who thought the cuckoo was alive.

**TABITHA** Nothing would have persuaded her it was not.

**GRISELDA** Who was this little girl?

**GRIZZEL & TABITHA** *together* Ah, just like her grandmother. Just like her grandmother.

*The three old servants walk on in their creaky way.*

**THREE SERVANTS** Just like her grandmother. Just like her grandmother.

**ALL TOGETHER** *looking admiringly at Griselda* Just like her grandmother.

**GRISELDA** Wait a moment. Who was my grandmother?

**GRIZZEL** Would you like to see the cuckoo for yourself?

**GRISELDA** Oh, yes, I'd love to, Aunt Grizzel.

**TABITHA** Then you SHALL see the cuckoo for yourself.

**GRISELDA** Thank you, Aunt Tabitha.

**SERVANT 1** And you won't be disappointed, Missie, you mark my old words. **THREE**

**SERVANTS** *together* Hee hee hee! Hee hee hee!

*Blackout. We hear the music of the cuckoo clock. The lights come up to discover a Chorus of cuckoos dancing to the music in a magical blue light. When the music finishes, the Chorus speak. The number given here is 8 Cuckoos, but this can be adapted as desired.*

**CUCKOO 1** Did you see that little girl who arrived last night?

**CUCKOO 2** Yes, she's frightfully rude and rather plain.

**CUCKOO 3** I didn't see her.

**CUCKOO 4** That's because you're blind as a bat.

**CUCKOO 3** Don't call me a bat, I'm a cuckoo.

**CUCKOO 8** We're all cuckoos. Well, at least I know I am.

**CUCKOO 6** I am too.

**CUCKOO 5** No, you're not. You're a cross breed.

**CUCKOO 6** Don't insult me or I'll tell my mother.

EXTRACT 3:

**KNEEBREECHES** Now, Griselda, pay attention. Twenty-five times twenty-three is the same as saying seventy-nine plus one hundred and eighty-five plus three hundred and eleven, which all together adds up to what?

**GRISELDA** Oh, Mr Kneebreeches, please don't give me any more sums to do. My head is bursting with numbers and I fear I have a dreadful headache. Could we not finish this tomorrow?

**KNEEBREECHES** Come, come, Griselda, let us not go the way of the snake that crept on his belly all the way up the tree, only to discover that because of his sloth all the fruits of the tree had been picked.

**GRISELDA** But Mr Kneebreeches, I'm exhausted. Could I not please have a drink of water?

**KNEEBREECHES** Water is to be earned, Griselda, like everything else in life - with the sweat of one's brow.

**GRISELDA** But my brow is sweating, Mr Kneebreeches, and I have a fever in my head.

**KNEEBREECHES** A fever, my dear?

**GRISELDA** Yes, sir. My head is about to explode.



**KNEEBREECHES** Ah, yes, by their fruits ye shall know them. But let us be charitable, Griselda. let us stop for five minutes.... [*Griselda smiles.*] ... And then we'll start long division.

*Griselda's smile disappears. Tormented piano music. Blackout. When the lights come up, Griselda is with the two aunts.*

**GRISELDA** I can't explain it, Aunt Grizzel, but it is all far beyond my powers and I'm always so tired when I get to the 'proving' part of the long division sums and so all that's proved is that something's wrong, and I'm sure that isn't any good. It just makes me cross.

**GRIZZEL** Hush!

**TABITHA** Hush!

**GRIZZEL** That is not the way for a little girl to speak.

**TABITHA** ... to speak.

**GRIZZEL** Improve these golden hours of youth, they never will return.

**TABITHA** ... never return.

**GRISELDA** I hope not, if it means doing sums.

*The Cuckoo suddenly starts to strike eleven.*

**GRIZZEL** Good little cuckoo. What an example he sets you.

**TABITHA** His life is spent in the faithful discharge of duty.

**GRIZZEL** Learn from him, Griselda.

**TABITHA** The faithful discharge of your duty.

*The aunts sweep off.*

**GRISELDA** *angrily picking up a book.* You horrid little creature. What business have you to mock me?

**She throws the book at the cuckoo clock.**

**CUCKOO AND CHORUS OF CUCKOOS** Oww!

*The Cuckoo disappears inside the clock without finishing eleven o'clock.*

EXTRACT 4:

***A very soft distant 'cuckoo' from the Chorus of Cuckoos.***

There, I'm sure I heard it. Oh, Cuckoo, please be alive.

***Blackout. Light up on the Narrator.***

**NARRATOR** There was moonlight in the great hall; for though the windows had the shutters closed, there was a part at the top, high up, to which the shutters did not reach, and in crept, through these clear uncovered panes, a myriad of moonbeams, as many moonbeams, you may be sure, as could find their way into the grand room. The goldy silvery cabinet looked magical and the mandarins, I do declare, were nodding. All the Chinese mandarins were nodding.

***The music of the Mandarins. Lights up to reveal the Chorus of Mandarins, dancing and nodding in the moonlight. At the end of the music, they all stand in a Chinese-mandarin-style pose. They talk in Chinese accents.***

**1ST MANDARIN** Ah so. That was nice.

**2ND MANDARIN** Very nice.

**3RD MANDARIN** I enjoy the dancing.

**4TH MANDARIN** I do not. I enjoy the singing.

**5TH & 6TH MANDARIN** But we do not sing.

**4TH MANDARIN** I sing on my own.

**5TH MANDARIN** When do you sing on your own? I do not hear you.

**4TH MANDARIN** You are deaf.

**5TH MANDARIN** I am not deaf.

**3RD MANDARIN** I hear you when you sing. I close my ears.

**6TH MANDARIN** Do not argue. The way to peace and harmony is not to argue.

**ALL MANDARINS** Ah, so.

**7TH MANDARIN** In this house there is much trouble.

**ALL MANDARINS** Trouble?

**8TH MANDARIN** What kind of trouble?

**2ND MANDARIN** Cuckoo trouble.

**ALL MANDARINS** Ah, so.

EXTRACT 5:

**GRISELDA** Who are you?

**CLOCK** I'm the Clock, of course.

**GRISELDA** I didn't know you could speak.

**CLOCK** Of course I can. Have you never heard of the speaking clock?

**CUCKOO** Don't listen to him, Griselda. He thinks he knows everything.

**CLOCK** Well, I know more than you! You can't even tell the time properly.

**CUCKOO** Yes, I can.

**CLOCK** No, you can't. The number of times you count eleven instead of twelve or ten instead of eleven is perfectly disgraceful.

**CUCKOO** Well, it's a much harder job than just ticking all the time. That's all you have to do: Tick, Tick, Tick. There's nothing to it.

**CLOCK** Look, do you want me to raise your rent?

**GRISELDA** Oh, stop bickering, you two! I thought you were going to show me some pictures, Cuckoo.

**CUCKOO** I was, until my demented landlord came out. Why don't you go back inside your box?

**CLOCK** Actually, I figure quite strongly in this story. I just want to make sure you tell it right.

**CUCKOO** Oh, all right then. But don't interrupt.

**CLOCK** Will if I want to.

**GRISELDA** Be quiet, both of you and show me the pictures. [*Pause.*] Well?

**CUCKOO & CLOCK *together*** You said we were to be quiet.

**GRISELDA** Oh, all right then, but one at a time.

**CLOCK** I'll go first.

**CUCKOO** No, you won't.

**GRISELDA *exasperated*** Oh, for goodness' sake. Clock - you go first.

EXTRACT 6:

**PHIL** I never 'ave anybody to play with. I'd like to play with you if you're not too big. And you could 'elp me find the cuckoo.

**GRISELDA** What do you know about the cuckoo?

**PHIL** She called me. She called me lots of times. And today Nurse was so busy, so I thought I'd come. I do believe the cuckoo's a fairy and when I find her I'm going to ask her to show me the way to fairyland.

**GRISELDA** She says we must all find the way ourselves.

**PHIL** Does she? Do you know her then? And have you asked her? Oh, do tell me!

**GRISELDA** You couldn't understand. Some day perhaps I'll tell you - I mean if I ever see you again.

**PHIL** But I may see you again. You'll let me come, won't you?

**GRISELDA** I'm not certain.

**PHIL** And if the cuckoo knows you, perhaps that's why she called me to come to play with you.

**GRISELDA** How did she call you?

**PHIL** First, it was in the night. I was asleep and I had been wishing I had somebody to play with, and then I dreamed of the cuckoo - such a nice dream. And when I woke up, I 'eard her calling me, and I wasn't dreaming then. And then when I was in the field, she called me but I couldn't find her and Nurse said 'Nonsense'. And today she called me

again, so I came up through the bushes. Perhaps if we both tried together we could find the way to fairyland. Do you think we could?

**GRISELDA** There's a great deal to learn first, Cuckoo says.

**PHIL** Have you learnt a great deal? I don't scarcely know nothing. Mother was ill such a long time before she went away, but I know she wanted me to learn to read books.

**GRISELDA** Shall I teach you? I can bring some of my old books and teach you here, after I have done my own lessons.

**PHIL** Oh, yes please. And when I've learnt to read a great deal, do you think the cuckoo would show us the way to fairyland?

**GRISELDA** I've been looking for such a long time, but I haven't found it.

**PHIL** We must ask the cuckoo.

**GRISELDA** But I'm sure it would be a good thing for you to learn to read. You must ask your nurse to let you come here every afternoon and I'll ask my aunts.

**PHIL** I needn't ask Nurse. She doesn't care what I do, except for tearing my clothes.

**GRISELDA *gravely*** That isn't good, Master Phil. You'll never be as good as good if you speak like that.

**PHIL *submissively*** What should I say then? Tell me.

**GRISELDA** You should ask Nurse to let you come and play with me, and tell her I'm much bigger than you and that I won't let you tear your clothes.

**PHIL** Very well, I'll say that.

**GRISELDA** Now, can you find your way home without scrambling through any more bushes?

**PHIL** Yes, thank you, and I'll come again tomorrow afternoon, after I've had my dinner and raced three times around the big field.

**GRISELDA** I think it would do if you *walked* three times around the big field. It isn't a good thing to race when you've just had your dinner.

**PHIL** Very well, I'll try to remember. I'm so glad you'll play with me again. And if you see the cuckoo, please thank her.

***Phil races off, falls over, picks himself up and then runs off. Griselda shakes her head.***

## PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES, ETC.

### INTRODUCTION

The play is quite a faithful rendering of the Victorian childrens' story by Mrs Molesworth, very famous in its day. Its sentimentality has been tempered with more modern humour and language that will be familiar with present-day youngsters.

The story involves Griselda who has been orphaned and sent from abroad to live with two ancient aunts in their equally ancient house. Griselda's days are divided between lessons with the strict Mr Kneebreeches and with exploring the house and its environs under the tutelage of a magical cuckoo from a cuckoo clock made for her grandmother. She travels to many magical places and learns important lessons in obedience and respect. Finally she meets up with a younger boy, Phil, who is staying nearby under the care of a Nurse. Though his parents are not dead, he has not seen them for a long time so they are both in effect orphans. Both desperately desire to visit Fairyland, but this magical place, as Griselda understands, is somewhere one can only find by oneself and - the inference is - inside oneself. Eventually, a kind of magic does happen and Phil's parents return; they will live close by and Phil's Mum will be a mother figure for Griselda.

### CHARACTERS

GRISELDA is the main character. She is perhaps about ten years old and has lived abroad. Orphaned, she has been sent to live with her two aunts. She is a feisty girl, not easily down-hearted, who grows up enough in the play to begin to think and care about others.

AUNT GRIZZEL is the boss of the two aunts. She is strict, perhaps too much so, insisting on good manners, lessons properly learned. She punishes Griselda when her lessons have not been learned, or when she is rude. She is snobbish, having enormous reverence for Lady Lavender.

AUNT TABITHA is a kind of echo to her stronger sister. She always agrees with everything that Grizzel says, except once when she insists on a severer punishment on Griselda, for rudeness.

Both aunts are basically kind, though stern. They do care for Griselda and should not be played like Roald Dahl -style horrid grown-ups. The lessons they state are old-fashioned ones of obedience, punctuality and duty, which are exemplified by the cuckoo, who fulfils her duties day in and day out.

SERVANT 3 is the main one of the three servants. All are ancient, creaky and in many ways similar to the aunts. They have all lived together in the ancient house for so long that they have become mirror-images of its age.

MR KNEEBREECHES is a caricature of the incompetent schoolmaster. he talks above Griselda's head, makes no attempt to explain things and makes unreasonable requests. No wonder he gives Griselda a headache.

The Cuckoo is female - 'mother' to all the cuckoo chorus. She is reliable and dutiful. She is also a kind of fairy godmother figure, taking griselda on magical journeys.

LADY LAVENDER is a caricature grand lady, imperious and demanding.

PHIL is five years old [obviously played by someone a little older, I imagine!] He should be played as a proper boy in that he gets into mischief and only worries about upsetting Nurse after the event. But he believes in magic, as does Griselda, and it is that and the magical Cuckoo who brings the two lonely children together.

Other characters are very small roles, or members of Choruses without clearly defined differences. I have apportioned the Chorus speeches myself, to try to give some differences where possible. For instance, Cuckoos 1 & 8 are sensible and clearly the leaders, whereas Cuckoos 4 & 5 are rascals, who love to wind up others, especially Cuckoos 3 & 6. 7 is full of him/ herself. 6 is rather babyish. 2 is full of grumbles and looks on the black side.

Of the Mandarins: 1 tries to keep them in order and takes the idea of order seriously. 4 is proud of his voice, which is clearly awful. 5 does not like 4 and is always going for him. 6 is full of wise words...