

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

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Description: In this interview segment, ER discusses the play *Darkness at Noon* with its author Sidney Kingsley.

Participants: ER and Sidney Kingsley

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(0:01)

[ER:] One of the important contributions to the theater is the current play *Darkness at Noon*, a biting indictment of Stalinism and communism. With me today is Mr. Sidney Kingsley, the author, who will tell us not only about the play but the story behind his writing it. I'm very pleased to present to you Mr. Kingsley.

[Sidney Kingsley:] Thank you.

[ER:] First, Mr. Kingsley, for the benefit of those listeners who have not seen *Darkness at Noon* would you tell us something about it?

[Sidney Kingsley:] Uh this uh this play had its um its uh genesis um in my own feelings long before uh the play itself assumed its present form. Uh many years ago - many years ago during the days when the Nazis were apparently going to sweep the earth, um I began to wonder uh at the meaning of democracy. It seemed to me that to so many of us uh this had become a rather important but um meaningless word. At that time I wrote -- uh I-I began the study of uh the meaning of democracy and that resulted in a play called *The Patriots*.

[ER:] Called what?

[Sidney Kingsley:] *The Patriots*.

[ER:] *The Patriots*, oh yes.

[Sidney Kingsley:] This was a play about Thomas Jefferson.

[ER:] Mhm, I remember.

[Sidney Kingsley:] And um in the course of that study, I discovered uh what to me seemed the most important issue of our time, uh one which it seemed to me could not be treated in too many ways or dwelt upon too much, and that is the issue of human freedom -- uh whether it will survive, whether man's rights will survive in a changing world. And uh since then, I have devoted my time uh to writing a number of plays, all of which treated this subject in uh various forms. *The Patriots*, a study of uh the early American Revolution, uh treated our present problem by uh historical analogy. [ER: Yes.] Uh then I tried to treat it uh by parable in a play called *Detective Story*. Uh both of these were, of course, indirect ways of treating the subject. And uh I wasn't quite satisfied with either one of them. And uh then one day I read uh Arthur Koestler's magnificent book called *Darkness at Noon*. And uh in this book I found the form which treated this problem in the most direct uh manner possible. And so I arranged um to obtain the rights to the book,

and uh with the material of the book and with uh great deal of further research I fashioned a play uh which is called *Darkness at Noon*. (3:38)

[ER:] Well, I saw *Darkness at Noon*, and I was tremendously impressed by it. In fact, so much so that um I'm going to try and take um my grandson and his wife and my secretary and uh see the play again for my own benefit as well as theirs, because I think there is a great deal in it that requires seeing more than once to fully take in. The night that I was there, I was struck uh by the um very good theater; I mean the cast and the presentation seemed to me excellent. I think Mr. [Claude] Rains does a wonderful piece of work. Um but I'm sure I missed -- I got some of the little fine points which brought out the whole story, but I'm sure I missed some too. And um there must be great difficulty in um writing a story of that kind. Is it though?

[Sidney Kingsley:] Well, I-I think there is great difficulty in writing a play of ideas generally. Um there's been some suggestion that even Mr. [Édouard] Schuré's own ideas were uh mostly contained in his preface in his prefaces. Um however, I find that if you um if you make a very theatrical uh play uh out of-uh out of a-a drama of ideas that uh the theater will only help to crystalize and uh-uh-uh make the ideas come alive. But I quite agree with you, I think that um-that any play of ideas uh stands uh-uh studying, and uh one can very well see it many times, which of course is all in our favor.

[ER:] [Laughs] Well, I didn't know whether you'd found that people who've seen it once were apt to come again. Uh but I had the feeling -- I can't say that I look back upon it as a pleasant evening, [Sidney Kingsley and ER laugh] because it was such uh-uh -- it was really like a blow in a way. You had to look at totalitarianism and what it did, and it's not pleasant to look at. (6:09)

[Sidney Kingsley:] No, it isn't pleasant to look at, but perhaps uh if we look at it in the theater and think about it a little and act on it, uh we may not have to look on it in life.

[ER:] Well, uh that of course is-is the whole value I think of having it in the theater. That um -- my one feeling was I wished all the Soviet delegates could come and see it. I wanted desperately to have them obliged to come and see it. [ER laughs]

[Sidney Kingsley:] Well, that of course wouldn't be possible. They'd probably all be shot, wouldn't they, if they [ER: I'm sure they would be,] dared to.

[ER laughs:] But I wish it could be done in true totalitarian fashion, and they could be marched to the theater [ER laughs] and obliged to sit through the play! Um but --

[Sidney Kingsley:] Well, short of that, I suppose, when I published the book, I'll have to send them a copy. [ER laughs: Well --] They may possibly read it in the silence of their rooms.

[ER:] I-I should think that will be a very good idea. Um now um you um -- I would like to know from you a little bit about the artistic problems of a production of that kind.

[Sidney Kingsley:] Uh the artistic and uh problems of this particular production um are woven into the philosophic problems. And uh this is what I meant uh when I said a second ago that uh-uh if one could crystalize ideas in terms of theater that they mutually helped each other. Um to begin with uh we have two conflicting philosophies in the world today, which had to be represented in the play. They are on the one hand the scientific materialism uh of the Marxists, and on the other hand they are the subjective idealism uh which um is the basis of uh Jeffersonian democracy, let us say. Um I found my symbols for it in a production uh-in-in solid concrete production terms; um scientific materialism is represented by the concrete and iron of the prison. Now, the play itself vibrated as it were between-between thought and uh idea, which are manifestations of the soul, and the concrete uh reality of the present-of the prison. And uh

so I-I try to embody this-these-this fluctuation between the two philosophies which was struggling for possession of the man's soul in the actual physical production. And so the physical production was planned so that it vibrated between what seemed to be utter physical reality and the thoughts and ideas of the-of the protagonist uh which are in space, and uh the only mechanical means by which I could achieve that vibration was to use light, so that um the change from the material present to this thoughts and conscience uh is affected in most instances by simply throwing a switch. (9:26)

[ER:] Yes, yes. Um that's-that's very interesting of course, the way you do it. Um I-I wondered whether in the little part of um of really getting down to uh the man's natural feeling that we would ex--you would've expected would have come out in his love for the girl and his natural protection of her. And the way in which the idea that his work was more important um overruled that and made him protect himself rather than the girl. Um I-I wondered um whether that's-whole story wasn't rather difficult to tell. How you --?

[Sidney Kingsley:] Well uh-uh I suppose every story is difficult to tell until you find out how to do it, and then it's very easy. Uh and in this instance, the um -- it was very important for me to find uh a symbol for the human soul; uh in the book itself there is very little of that. And the man's struggle uh in his own mind is with uh vague um metaphysical impulses. Uh we had to be more concrete on the stage. And so uh I tried to personify and embody in the girl a sense of the human spirit, or the soul. And eh in this respect, I eh -- in the course of my research I came across one item which uh was of enormous value. In uh some of his reminiscences, [Maxim] Gorky tells of a weekend with [Vladimir] Lenin and uh during the course of this weekend they were playing the "Appassionata." And Lenin, in listening to it, said uh, "This music is very dangerous for the nerves. I mustn't listen to this too often. Uh because when one realizes that human beings created such beauty, one wants to pat them on the head. But that's dangerous. They'll take your hand off. You have to strike them." And it was this um this uh-uh anecdote that I've incorporated into the play using uh almost as a theme song the "Appassionata." And uh it represents uh at once Rubashov's feeling that he could very easily fall in love with this girl, and uh his philosophic resistance, his determination to resist it because it's dangerous.

[ER:] Yes. I-I think you brought that out. Well, now we have to stop for a minute and hear f-a word from our announcer. We'll come right back.

[Break: 12:32-12:37]

[ER:] I'm very glad, Mr. Kingsley, to resume our talk, and I am particularly anxious to know what the reactions of people to uh *Darkness at Noon* have been. Um have you had any opportunity to observe or have you heard from people afterwards how they felt about it?

[Sidney Kingsley:] Yes, yes, I have. Uh um I've gotten a very extensive mail on it, which is extraordinarily uh flattering and moving. Uh apparently this play has not only uh excited and interested a great many people, but it seems to have resolved in a great many uh individuals um -- it seems to have resolved their uh-uh some of their confusions uh as to uh-uh-our position in the world today and the position of the Soviet Union. In addition to that, uh I'm particularly pleased at the reaction of young um college students. Young men and women uh who are very critical and um-uh whose uh acceptance of a play is on a very high level. Um they are--have embraced it uh-uh with remarkable enthusiasm. (14:03)

[ER:] That's very interesting. And are you uh do you expect the play to go outside of New York City in time so that it will be [Sidney Kingsley: Oh yes, yes. It will.] available in other places?

[Sidney Kingsley:] It will. In fact, we're going to do something which isn't ordinarily done, but I feel that the play and what it has to say is of moment. Uh we're going to release it to um to uh universities uh and little theaters well in advance of the normal release date. [ER: That's interesting.] Uh in-eh in relationship

to the audiences, there's one very interesting thing I've noticed which would seem to upset all the uh early theories uh-uh with which I was indoctrinated about: crowd psychology. Um in my days at university, we were taught that the mind of a crowd is on a lower level than that of the individual. But I've found uh in uh -- particularly in the theater in relationship to this play that the mind of the crowd seems to rise to a higher level than that of the individual. This for example -- a great many very uh highly intelligent individuals accepts certain things in the book um without question, which uh would not be accepted by the crowd--the level of the crowd in the theater. [ER: Hmm.] And uh-uh I recommend this uh [ER: What?] to the psychologists. [ER: Mhm.] But the uh the audiences have been extraordinarily uh receptive and not uh -- I've never-never witnessed this in the theater, not a single performance goes by, but that uh at the end of the um evening, the um-the audiences stay in their seats and shout "Bravo!" and really carry on as if every night were a first night.

[ER:] That is really very encouraging because I think it shows that they are appreciative of um a really good performance, because I-I think it's a wonderful -- well done, and um at the same that they have uh a realization uh that um there is a purpose back of this play which is very beautifully served, and yet not too ostentatiously.

[Sidney Kingsley:] No, that would be disastrous if it were too uh ostentatious, I think.

[ER:] Yes, I think that would be. Eh it always is. [Sidney Kingsley: Yes.] I mean it's almost always that --

[Sidney Kingsley:] Yes, but we are -- we've been very surprised and delighted uh by the audience reaction because they accept this on its own terms as high theater, and uh-uh whatever thinking they do, they then do later.

[ER:] Well, um I-I would like to know too whether you have had criticism from um -- well, for instance, uh psychiatrists and psychologists? Uh what do they think about the play?

[Sidney Kingsley:] The-the um the psychiatrists and psychologists um that I've worked with um uh -- and uh in my research I didn't neglect them -- uh have uh found it quite true and authentic, and um uh whatever was not true was eliminated before we got to the stage [laughs] because I did consult with several of them, including our good friend Dr. [Lawrence] Kubie.

[ER:] [laughs] Yes well, I'm um I'm -- I was very much interested at uh watching him that night. He was--he was really um deeply interested and deeply moved. And I think most of the people -- I-I watched the people around me, and um they were really moved by the play. It was not just uh a performance; it was something that had a meaning for, um, their present day problems. (18:06)

[Sidney Kingsley:] I think so. I think perhaps uh if that is true, it's because uh what I looked for in the play was an essence. Uh I wanted to see if I couldn't extract uh from the whole world today the most important, the most vital uh essence of project drama. And um if naturally with--that's a high purpose; if you just succeed in extracting a little bit of the essence it must affect people.

[ER:] Well, I-I think you have succeeded, and I think Mr. [Claude] Rains has succeeded in creating um a very um compelling uh character. I mean the whole um way in which uh the-the man veers from um the idealism of what he originally meant to accomplish, and then the acceptance of the methods um in order to accomplish it, and the self-fooling that goes on in his mind uh-eh. Curiously enough, it had a very uh interesting effect on me, because I've been having an argument as to whether um the end justified the means and we could face uh-uh certain problems today on the basis of um uh hoping to achieve certain things, and therefore -- which is much like communist theory -- um if uh you had to uh accept perhaps allies that you didn't really believe in very much, well uh that you shoved behind you until you had

accomplished your main objective. And um I had-have always argued that um you couldn't do that. That if you um did things along the way, you had--that you didn't believe in, you had compromised your ultimate objective-I've, and it seemed to me that that was brought out very -- [track cuts; repeats] that was brought out very [track cuts; repeats] -I've and [track cuts; repeats] you had-that you didn't believe in, you had compromised to your ultimate objective-I've, and it seemed to be that was brought out very clearly in the way the man's mind becomes twisted. (20:53)

[Sidney Kingsley:] Well, of course, uh I think that Mr. [Claude] Rains uh has done uh certainly one of the most brilliant uh jobs I've seen in the theater -- [ER: You what?] Mr. [Claude] Rains has done one of the most brilliant jobs uh that I have ever seen in the theater, and um deserves an enormous quotient of the credit here.

[ER:] Well, I-I uh I found -- well I'll tell you I'm coming again? [ER laughs] Just -- [laughs] [Sidney Kingsley: Wonderful. Wonderful.] Very soon.

[Sidney Kingsley:] I would be delighted to have you.

[ER:] And I want to thank you very much, because I hope that um uh many people will go see this play, I think it's very uh necessary for us as citizens in a democracy to see uh this picture of what totalitarianism means, and I'm very grateful to you for having written the play, and I'm grateful to you for coming to be with me today!

[Sidney Kingsley:] Thank you very much; it's been a great privilege indeed, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(22:00)

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