

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 20, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about the importance of television for children. In the interview segment, ER interviews opera singer Marjorie Lawrence.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Marjorie Lawrence

[ER:] What came in the mail today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh two very interesting questions in one letter. Just how important do you think TV is to children? And the second question is: How about entertainment problems when your children were very young?

[ER:] Well, let's begin on the first question. Uh, so far I don't think TV is very important to children, but I think it can become valuable to children like everything else, it should be used in moderation. Uh, I'm always uh feeling that one of the American difficulties is that we do things so rarely moderately. We do them--we run them into the ground, um, and we-- if we like them we do them much too much and then we get so tired of them we don't do them at all. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] Ah, and we don't keep moderately um, doing things so that they can be uh, a part of our lives and yet not consume our lives. Now the people who complain most about television with children are the people who tell me "Oh, my child doesn't do any homework, he doesn't uh-uh doesn't have any time to go out. He just looks at the television all the time." Well, there should be some regulation of that. I mean, somebody else I know told me they allowed their child one hour a day, a, for a recreation of uh that type but if they didn't want to look at the television they did whatever they wanted; they read a book or they wrote or they drew or they did whatever they wanted. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] If they wanted to look at the television, they looked at the television and they choose the hour when the programs were programs that they thought suitable for their children. Now I think much can be done to give children better programs, more variety, and both from radio and from television, I think children get today a broader view of the world as a whole and more general information than the children of my generation for instance, or even of yours, had an opportunity to get [Elliott Roosevelt: Well--] and, in that way I think it can be most useful, but it does take some kind of work on the part of the parents.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, do you feel that uh, television uh, broadcasters, the people who operate television and are licensed to do so by the government, do you think that they have a responsibility uh, to very definitely build programing which will be instructive, educational, etcetera for children?

[ER:] Yes I do. Now, for instance, I saw today that an appeal was being made by educators to have two channels, I think it was, um, kept for educators to build programs for children.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No, actually that's been going on for some time, it's a move to get twenty percent of all of the channels that there are, there are prob--uh, I think two thousand channels, something like that, uh, but twenty percent should be devoted to educational institutions. (3:36)

[ER:] Yes, but what I saw today was that it cost so much that they did not feel that um, actual people who were making money on it would be willing to do the kind of programs that many of the educators felt should be done, and therefore they wanted to take over that sort of programing. Uh, it was just something

I read in the paper or somewhere as-as uh being presented to the committee. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] Well now I think there is um, uh, something there and yet, uh, I would not quite agree a, that um, it should be left entirely to educators because I-- what I would be afraid of is that the, the entertainment part of it, uh, would be left out and the children would be less attracted to it. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And I think it should be a balance. Now um, lots of children will primarily look at sports [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes] and I don't think it does them any harm [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] Um, but uh, I think that when you come to giving them other things that um, someone with imagination in the regular television business who-who thinks of it as both entertainment and of value, could do a very swell job [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] on what they offer to children in various fields. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and um, use it to awaken a new interest in children and give them new material to work on in their minds so that I would not, uh, I suppose this is terrible, but I would not want to leave it entirely to the educators any more than I think it should be left entirely to the program people in-in-uh-in-

[Elliott Roosevelt:] The networks.

[ER:] In the networks. (5:31)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course I do feel that uh, that certain standards can be bu-built in programing for television uh, that if they're lived up to will raise the entire level of intelligence uh, not only of children but also grown-ups.

[ER:] Well, I think that's very likely. They, I um, I think a good many uh- uh people uh in a democracy can learn a great deal more about their government if it was properly used. I think television has possibilities for bringing the government actually close to the people which no other uh medium has ever had.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Of course I think that's a wonderful idea. Let's you and I start a campaign of agitation to force the Congress of the United States to televise the uh sessions of Congress. I'll bet it would cut out an awful lot of things that have gone on in the past which the public never knows about.

[ER:] Well, that isn't the only thing I would love to see, um, uh congress televised, but I also think that um it would be very valuable if people actually saw their administrative officials. Who runs the Department of Agriculture? Who runs the Forestry Service? Who runs the Department of the Interior? Who runs the Indian Bureau and when you hear of something wrong in the Indian Bureau, why not see him on the television and find out what he has to say about it. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And there are lot of-- lot more things: who runs Commerce? What's he got under him? Why not have him come and tell us every now and then just what the situation is? I think you could do a swell job of making people really understand their government.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course I have a pet theory about television you know. I think that we're going to come back to the Lincoln-Douglas debates uh, in political life because uh the American people will demand that candidates for office uh come onto television together, state their views and let the people look at them.

[ER:] Oh I think it would be wonderful! Perfectly wonderful and help democracy no end! [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] I think it would be a real thing for, for the people.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap here]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I-I really do think that television is going to play a very important part not only in, in raising the standard of, of the intelligence of children, but I also think it's going to do a great deal to make democracy work. (8:04)

[ER:] Well, now I haven't got to that second question. Well what--

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap here]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well the second one, uh [ER chuckles] remind you a little bit: How about entertainment problems when your children were very young?

[ER:] I never had any. There were so many children they always entertained each other, [Elliott chuckles] I never had a child, uh, that couldn't find something to do. I always thought that meant that there was a very stupid home when children came asking you, "what shall I do?" I don't, I can't ever remember any of you ever asking me that. [ER laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No I'm, I must say I think that most of the time it was uh, you had to spend your time trying to find us [ER: Yes!] because we were off doing something we shouldn't be doing, but uh, I do think uh there was one feature of our entertainment which proved very, very valuable for all of us children, and that was the way you awakened our interest in literature by those after luncheon reading sessions when we would--

[Elliott Roosevelt and ER overlap here and the next line]

[ER:] After lunch and after tea.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All lie around and after tea. And we'd lie around on the floor and on the chairs and you'd sit up there and read stories to us that were just wonderful.

[ER:] [ER laughs] I think I read you some poetry too if I remember rightly.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, as a matter of fact uh, uh, I think that most of my interest in literature came from those sessions and I, if I'm not mistaken, when I was about uh, eight or nine years old I was reading all kinds of books and waking up at a terribly early hour-

[Elliott Roosevelt and ER overlap here]

[ER:] Well you would because you, you were younger and had to listen to the books I really chose for Anna and James you see. So you came younger than they did to reading some of the older things and you were able to do it um, lots of youngsters would have been bored, but you never did get bored. You listened to all the things I read to Anna and James you see, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and um that made quite a difference. Do you remember one summer, I, perhaps you were too young for this, when uh we read quite a lot of Shakespeare plays and each of you read a part?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I certainly do.

[Elliott Roosevelt and ER overlap here]

[ER:] And we read them aloud at lunch every day. [ER laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I certainly do remember that. [ER sighs]

(Break 10:15-10:25)

[ER:] My guest this afternoon is a charming young lady who is a great and splendid example of what the will to conquer the tragedy of serious affliction means. She is the Metropolitan Opera star Miss Marjorie Lawrence.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Thank you Mrs. Roosevelt, it's a pleasure and a privilege to be here on your program.

[ER:] Well, I'm happy to have you Miss Lawrence. Now most people stricken with polio at the height of their career would resign themselves to living within four walls. You instead took your art to the four corners of the world. But before we go on to that part of your story, tell us something of your early life. You were born in Australia, I now know though I didn't in the past [ER and Marjorie Lawrence chuckle]. Did you start singing there?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, yes I did Mrs. Roosevelt, uh, at the early age of five years old. Uh, I sang my first concert, it was a Sunday school concert you know one of those Sunday school concert affairs. And uh, I think the first song I ever sung was "Push the Pram for Baby" or something like that. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Well, now yours was a musical family?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, everyone in the family loved to sing. We were a very large family: seven uh, six children in all. And uh, my mother died at a very early age when I was two years old, so Father would take all of the children and gather 'round the piano and every evening we would sing for hours. Everyone loved to sing.

[ER:] Well, that-that is a good way of developing into a singer isn't it? Now, when did you make your first appearance in opera?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, that was in 1932. Uh, the Opera House of Monte Carlo. I- I made my first uh debut in the role of Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*.

[ER:] Was that uh, before you appeared at the Metropolitan?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Oh yes. Then I came to the Paris Grand Opera and I sang there for two or three years. And uh, then I came to the Metropolitan Opera here in New York in uh 1935.

[ER:] Well, Miss Lawrence, I've been reading your book recently published, uh which was recently published called *Interrupted Melody*. And I would like very much to have you tell your audience the story about "Grane" I think it's pronounced isn't it?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, that's right!

[ER:] Um, and I thought it was very amusing. (13:04)

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, uh that caused quite a commotion at the Metropolitan Opera. You see, according to the Wagnerian stage instructions, Brünnhilde must mount her steed Grane, off, in the uh, about the middle of this wonderful immolation scene and ride him into the flames. Well of course, I was practically reared on a horse and had uh, been riding horses all my life and uh, so when I came to the Metropolitan, I said to the stage director, "Now, I must ride the horse as it states here. Uh, Wagner has

written these instructions." He said, "Oh that's impossible! You can't ride a horse here. Why it would get scared and it would run into the orchestra and all this kind of thing." But I said uh, I really must ride the horse. So we went to Mr. Edward Johnson and we asked him; no it was impossible, you cannot ride the horse. And the conductor of the orchestra Mr. [Artur] Bodzansky said it was impossible also. However, I found the horse and took him behind the scenes and became quite acquainted with him. And um, of course you have to mount the horse bareback, that is without saddle, you have to leap on his back in one split second, and if you miss the whole thing is ruined of course. So anyway, I went backstage and became acquainted with Grane and to make a long story short, that evening I leaped upon Grane's back and it was most successful, but the strange thing was the next day in the newspapers, they uh, wrote a whole column uh, about how, it, it was such a wonderful thing to see someone carry out Wagner's stage instructions and the management of the Metropolitan Opera took all the credit! [Marjorie Lawrence and ER laugh]

[ER:] Now that's, that's very amusing. Well you had another humorous experience in Paris with another horse didn't you?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, I returned to Paris. In those days I used to commute. I had my home of course in France, in Paris, and when I returned, I uh, it was an understood thing then that I would always uh, leap on Grane's back and there they only had army horses you see, and of course the tails were clipped. So Grane must have a long flowing tail and uh, they said well the only thing to do is to put on a false tail, an artificial tail. So they tied one on and it looked very wonderful. So just at the moment uh, where I'm supposed to leap on Grane's back, which is nearly at the end of the opera, this wonderful opera *Götterdämmerung*, and uh everything had gone beautifully. So I leaped on the horse and with my arm extended to the sky I was riding out to go into the flames and it was quite dramatic. And all of a sudden from the audience the shriek of laughter. Well, to my horror, the tail had fallen off! [ER and Marjorie Lawrence laugh]

[ER:] [ER laughs] That really was a dreadful thing to have happen!

[Marjorie Lawrence:] [Marjorie Lawrence laughing] It was! (16:12)

[ER:] Oh dear. I've heard of other things falling off, [Marjorie Lawrence laughs] but I've never heard of a horse's tail falling off at the opera. [ER laughs] I once saw someone's wig fall off. [Marjorie Lawrence and ER laugh] That's very funny. Well uh had you been in New York ever before you came here for your Metropolitan debut?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] No, I'd gone directly to France uh, from Australia to study and uh, I was a student there and came to New York from Paris. I'd never been here before.

[ER:] Well now you say in your book that you had a let down on arriving here. Why was that? Did you imagine something different or what?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well uh Mrs. Roosevelt, you know the Paris Opera and how ornate and wonderful it looks from the outside and of course I'd heard and dreamed and read about the g-great Metropolitan Opera and uh, everyone, that is the great ambition of their l-life to come here and sing. So of course I naturally expected it to be a fantastic building, you know, something like the Paris Opera or the great uh, Eu-uh European opera houses. Well, it's wonderful on the inside, but outside it isn't so very beautiful now is it?

[ER:] No! [Marjorie Lawrence laughs] It certainly isn't! You're quite right, anyone who had the idea of of, they were going to see something like uh, Paris, or some other places abroad, they would have been let down. Now, how long did you sing at the Metropolitan?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] I made my debut there 1935 in the role of uh Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* and uh, I sang then every season uh, until 1941 when I was stricken with polio. And of course I've sung there since, [ER: Yes.] not as much because now I'm greatly restricted, but I've appeared there since of course.

[ER:] Well, I think that's quite remarkable and when- when were you taken ill? In forty-one? (18:24)

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, it was after the close of the Metropolitan Opera season. And I, it was very strange thing because the Opera always closes with this *Götterdämmerung* and that night uh, Grane, he, whinnied the whole time, of course the legends have it that he knew I was going to become ill. Of course I don't believe that, but right after that I went to Mexico City and uh, for the operatic season that was sponsored by the Mexican government. And um, I'd uh, just been married for two months and I was on my honeymoon, two months previously I had been married, and I was to sing uh, *Carmen and Salome* and *Walküre* in Mexico City and it was during a general rehearsal of uh, *Walküre* that I felt these terrible pains and *Brünnhilde*, as you know, sings the war cry at the opening of the second act. And then she throws herself at Wotan's feet. Well, during the war cry I was, I felt these pains and I threw myself at Wotan's feet and of course I didn't get up again and then [ER: Oh my.] I was told I had polio.

[ER:] Oh, that, that must have been uh, a terrible shock I think, a dreadful thing to go through. Well, uh, I suppose uh, like all the other people I've ever known who go through something like that, it's such a tremendous thing to have happen that somehow it calls out of you greater qualities than you even thought you, you had. Is that what happened to you? You found yourself--

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes.

[ER:] Able to face things you never expected to face?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, I was really in the depths of despair as you understand above all people, but of course I'd just been married to a wonderful American husband and he was the one that really aided me and helped me uh get back again. And through faith and through his faith in me because when such a thing happens, you don't know where you are for quite some time and of course I was given up as hopeless and uh, I was supposed to die at least three or four times so I believe, [laughs] but eh I was paralyzed from the shoulders down and of course they told me that I would never sing again, above all that I would never sing again. So that was rather terrible. However, uh my husband had me flown back to the United States and then um, he started to help me. When everything else had failed and I was told that I would never sing, we knew the only way was really to turn to God and to have faith and courage and with my husband's great love uh, all of those things that if one will work and strive to do one's utmost, as you say, it is amazing what can be accomplished.

[ER:] That's a wonderful philosophy.

(Break: 21:48-22:04)

[ER:] Before the broadcast, uh, Ms. Lawrence, we were talking about your concept of pity. Did you have much of that to contend with?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, a great deal, but that is absolutely one's worst enemy is self-pity or pity in any form.

[ER:] Uh, but you were able to um, to get over being sorry for yourself?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, I must confess, I had to stop seeing a great many of my very dear friends uh- because every time they saw me they would say, "oh, what a terrible thing this should happen to you" and so on, so I just uh, had to stop seeing them, you know? And uh-uh because that was getting me nowhere at all.

[Marjorie Lawrence and ER overlap here]

[ER:] Nowhere at all. Well I remember when you came to the White House just before the president went to Yalta. Do you remember anything about that?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, that was one of the great moments of my whole life. You were so kind and gracious to me there and invited me to have a private interview with President Roosevelt. I shall never forget that. And then again of course, as you know he was my great inspiration and the letter he once wrote me and the final phrase uh, phrases which said "From an old veteran to a young recruit, I say 'Carry on'" and that has helped me so much through all of these years and I've passed it on to the veterans and others in similar conditions and it's always been such a wonderful stimulation. But there's one thing really that was very amusing that happened to me, uh, during the fourth inaugural dinner. I was there as, to uh open the proceedings with the "Star-Spangled Banner." Well it was the Mayflower ha- uh, Hotel and um, it was about a quarter to eight and in those days I gave all my concerts seated from a seated position and my evening frocks had long zippers up the back. Well, about ten minutes to eight as I was putting on my frock, this zipper got stuck and would not go up or down. So my husband started pulling on it and it wouldn't move. We called a maid, she couldn't do anything about it. So it just, it was about five minutes to eight and I knew that I must be there by eight o'clock. So just about then a very attractive young waif came by as the door was a little ajar, she said "the only thing you can do with that is to sew it, uh sew you into it-- sew up the zipper with a needle and thread." So here she, she began with a great long darning needle and a white thread and she absolutely sewed me, uh, me into that frock. But uh, and I arrived just on time, but all through the "Star-Spangled Banner" I was very much afraid every high note that the whole zipper and frock would come apart. [ER and Marjorie Lawrence laugh] (25:07)

[ER:] Well, that would have been a very serious thing to have happen. Well, now I understand, of course, um, why you've been so wonderful with the soldiers because during the war uh, you sang for so many of them. Where did your singing for them take you?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] All across this country, of course the United States and Canada. And then um, I went out on a freighter to Blackout across the Pacific to uh, back to the southwest Pacific and as far as Darwin and Townsville and uh all up in that area.

[Marjorie Lawrence and ER overlap here]

[ER:] Oh, I remember Townsville well [Marjorie Lawrence laughs] when I went to Australia.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Did you go to Darwin too? Did you get that far?

[ER:] I don't think Darwin, but Townsville I remember very well.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] And uh, we came back from there and um, then I went across to the European theater and all through Germany and then returned back here. Then I went back to Germany again at the invitation of General Clay.

[ER:] How did you ever get the authorities to let you go? [Marjorie Lawrence laughs]

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, I had one experience when uh-uh-- of course they always told me that I must not expect any consideration, I said "that's alright, of course I don't." But when I was on board this little freighter, and uh, they came and saw me in a wheel chair they said, "Well it's too risky, you must get off." I said, you'll have to put me off and there I stayed so, uh, they were marvelous though. We flew a great deal, you know in bucket seats; I know you know all about those.

[ER:] Perfectly extraordinary that you were able to stand it.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, I always say Mrs. Roosevelt, if you want to do anything badly enough, you can cope with all the difficulties.

[ER:] Well, that's really very remarkable though it shows what will power will do. Now, very recently you've been back to Australia haven't you?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, uh, I have made uh-uh several trips to my native land. I was there in um, 1949 May, yes a little over a year ago.

[ER:] Well, now I know you have an amusing story on me because I once did not know that you came from Australia. [Marjorie Lawrence laughs] Now you go ahead and tell that story, I know you want to. (27:39)

[Marjorie Lawrence:] That was really very funny. Uh, one time we were going to Detroit and you were kind and gracious enough to come to our drawing room to have a chat with us. I think you were going there to-to speak. And you just returned from Australia and uh, you were quite enthusiastic about your trip. And naturally I was most anxious to hear all about what you thought of Australia and everything. So you started to tell me how strange it was that the seasons were so different. Why you said, "You know, down there when they have Christmas, it's in the middle of summer," and so on-- how very different the seasons were. Well, of course I was trying to be most polite and I was saying, "Yes, Mrs. Roosevelt, yes," well, when you departed, my husband and I sat down and we really had quite a chuckle because evidently you had not remembered quite then that I'd been born and raised in Australia. And I--

[Marjorie Lawrence and ER overlap here]

[ER:] Of course I hadn't remembered. [Marjorie Lawrence laughs] I hadn't remembered it at all. And now I notice that you have what looks like an Australian opal on your finger is that right?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, that's a fire opal.

[ER:] Oh, that's so lovely I think. I think they're beautiful.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] I love them too. Some people say they bring bad luck, but I don't believe that do you?

[ER:] Well I-I happen always to have considered they brought good luck because they happen to be my birthstone. [Marjorie Lawrence: Oh is that so?] But uh, I was born in October and that is the month when [Marjorie Lawrence: Oh?] an opal is your birthstone, but um I've heard that same thing uh, opals for any other month, if you're born in any other month they're bad luck, but I don't believe it's true. [chuckles] I'm

glad you don't. Well, now how do you feel about your present career as compared to the past? Do you still get the same enjoyment out of it? That you--

[Marjorie Lawrence:] I get a great deal more enjoyment out of it because it's only when a thing has been almost taken from you that one realizes its full value and I've been busier than ever and I've traveled a great deal more uh, than I ever did before my illness. And of course my singing means so much more to me now than it ever did.

[ER:] Oh, well it's marvelous when you've thought you perhaps would lose that wonderful uh, uh, gift and- and now to have that again, of course it's wonderful. But I must say I think it's remarkable that you can travel so much because that is hard.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, but you see my wheelchair, we call it a jeep, so they just fold it up and uh, away we go. One time there we were almost commuting uh, between here and Europe and uh, uh--I fly most everywhere and um.

[ER:] You fly uh, pretty easily.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, yes, I like it.

[ER:] Well, that's wonderful. Now you told me that Hollywood is now considering your book for a movie. Will you play yourself in it?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] No, I will not play myself, but I will do all the singing. They're making a string, a screen treatment off it now and of course someone else will play my part and uh I will, as they say, dub in the singing.

[ER:] Well, in a way, won't that be rather disillusioning? Because so many people know you and, uh, if somebody plays you, won't that be very difficult?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] I don't think so because you see, look at the *Al Jolson Story*, that was remarkably well down and uh, [ER murmurs]uh I guess perhaps they can get someone that looks rather like me perhaps.

[ER:] Well how do you feel about television?

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, I've been approached by many people, a few people, to have a show of my own. I think it's a wonderful thing, television.

[Marjorie Lawrence and ER overlap here and the following line]

[ER:] I think it's a wonderful medium.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes, I really do. And-uh, a-after my concert season is over and my busy schedule and I'm hoping to go into it more seriously.

[ER:] Well, that's what you might call a future plan.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Yes it is.

[ER:] That is wonderful. Now, I want to thank you so much for coming today and tell you what a pleasure it was to see you.

[Marjorie Lawrence:] Well, thank you. It's been a great joy and privilege.

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