

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 24, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER answers a listener's question about whether or not racial and religious intolerance is abating in the United States. In the interview segment, ER interviews Lesley Storm, the author, John Wildberg, the producer, and Anthony Ireland, an actor, about their play *Black Chiffon*.

Participants: ER, Elliot Roosevelt, Lesley Storm, John Wildberg, Anthony Ireland

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now Mother, I have here a very difficult question for you to talk about today. You have long been known as a champion of the interest of minority groups in American community life. Do you feel that racial and religious intolerance are abating in the United States and how much longer do you think it will take to win the battle against discrimination?

[ER:] Oh, I think it will take a long, long time because that really means a change in human beings, and when you're really trying to change things that have been in the hearts of people for many years it doesn't happen quickly, it means that people have to not only watch themselves once but daily over long periods until it becomes an unconscious reaction and that takes a long while. I-I think that perhaps on the whole um religious intolerance is gradually growing less. Though I am conscious of the fact that every now and then that when certain things happen it wakens a whole wave of antagonism in different directions and you see it flare up again um in a way that eh you-you regret because uh as far as religious tolerance goes, it ought to by this time, be perfectly possible to let anybody worship um in any way they choose without any interference. Um the difficulty, I think, comes uh when you get out of the mere question of worship and um the question comes up of the other things that religions may ask for, or then eh you move in to political questions and questions of all kinds of daily – that come in to the daily lives of people and then you're out to get real friction. But um on the question of the right of people to worship as they see fit I hope in this country eh we have reached the point where that would be free um to everyone [Elliott Roosevelt: Well the right—] dictated only by um the laws which deal with the um decency and safety and that type of thing. (2:52)

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well the laws with regard to uh the right freedom of worship and-and the general acceptance on the part of the of the public in the United States seems to be pretty clear uh I don't think we have much difficulty in that line, but you did mention the waves of hatred that every once in a while break out ah by one group of ah people against another group who happen to have a different religion uh don't [ER: Well, well it's not always justified.] you think that that this still is um very much um in part of underlying any way in the subconscious part--feeling of Americans.

[ER:] Yes, it and-and in other countries too. It's not um I don't – I think it's not so much the-the way they worship but the things that go with their type of worship. Now, for instance, just yesterday or just a few days ago, um a man who belongs to Jehovah's Witnesses who have certain um tenets in their religion that require of them certain ways of observance um came to me saying that they were having great trouble not in our country but in another country where a thousand of their members had been jailed because they insisted on practicing certain customs which the community, the rest of the community, uh couldn't accept, or didn't accept.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I seem to remember that in the newspaper a few days ago, wasn't that the ah case of the members of Jehovah witnesses in the eastern part of Germany [ER: Yes] which is under the domination of the Russians?

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah yes. Well, there's-there's a case where the so called uh ah freedom that intolerance of the Soviet communistic system seems to have broken down. But uh ah there are cases uh ah in other countries where for instance there is only one recognized religion. Isn't that true ah of some countries where they have a state religion and uh [ER: Oh yes, oh yes.] and they're rather hard on? (5:21)

[ER:] Yes, that's very true but um but um very largely now there is acceptance of the freedom of people who have different religions to practice their religion. Um it's not always, um it's not always uh fully granted but it is more or less accepted eh ah you're quite right it isn't uniform anywhere.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm, but I-I would like to go on to something that actually is much more serious in this country and that's the question of racial intolerance.

[ER:] Well, that of course is something that I think will take a long while because it grows out of things that were done in this country in the past and um and that were wrong in themselves. It grew, for instance, our feeling towards the colored people grows out of the old slavery days and um it will take a long while to wipe out those things because they were wrong and out of them have grown uh bad things. But I believe we are improving, we're improving in the decisions that are legally made today, we're improving in the opportunities I think there is a change coming. (6:54)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright but there is a change, but is that change rapid enough in view of-of world conditions and the position in which the United States finds itself today? Is a--can we afford to take a long time, for instance, I'm thinking now of our position as a leading nation in shaping the history and the course of the world toward peace. A-an acceptance of principles which the United States is advocating, aren't we running a great deal of risk ah that we won't be followed by many countries such as the Asiatic nations where they have another hue of the skin because ah the communist nations will point to us and say we don't have democracy, we discriminate against ah people of a different color of skin, for instance, the American Indian, and the American Negro, and ah we have other cases where there's definite discrimination against people of other races.

[ER:] Well, there's discrimination against Mexicans, for instance, in certain parts of this country. Um there is no question that is one of the very bad things internationally today. That ah we have allowed many races throughout the world who just happened to have a different colored skin to think that we look down upon them and we have exploited them because in some ways, commercially for instance, they were not as advanced as we were, and the result is that today we suffer from our past history. They don't trust us. And they don't trust us uh because we have had this attitude of superiority towards them, and it will take us a long while to gain the confidence that we really mean what we say that we believe all human beings are equal. They may not all be developed to the same point in the same way but they as human beings have a value and are equal and should have opportunity to develop that we should now be working toward. (9:24)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but have we got a time schedule worked out that we can show to the world that we are making progress and that we have a goal within sight.

[ER:] It's hard to make a time schedule for the change in people's hearts.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah, that is very true but it is a matter of education is it not?

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt and ER overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ignorance is what causes most of this trouble. [ER: Yes that's--] And ah are we bringing through education this progress, this intolerance and-and discrimination to an end.

[ER:] I think we're doing a great deal more than we've ever done before. Whether we're doing enough and whether we're moving fast enough, I don't know.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I think that ah we could afford to talk about that on other programs and bring on some of the advocates, don't you?

[ER:] I do.

(Break 10:17 to 10:32)

[ER:] This afternoon we are privileged to have with us the author, the producer, and one of the stars of a hit play on Broadway: *Black Chiffon*. And as there is quite a lot to talk about, without further delay I would like to introduce the author Miss Leslie Storm, the producer Mr. John Wildberg, and one of the stars, Mr. Anthony Ireland. First I think we will ask the author of *Black Chiffon*, Miss Storm, to tell us about the play but before that I would also like to say that Miss Storm is a friend of mine, when I was in England during the war she spent a great deal of time and was very careful in escorting me around. Welcome to America, Miss Storm

[Leslie Storm:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. I am honored to be welcomed by someone who is so well loved in our country.

[ER:] Now, will you tell us uh about your play, and what inspired it, and how does it feel to have a hit play on Broadway, particularly after it was a smash hit in London too? (11:49)

[Leslie Storm:] Well it does feel very good. [Leslie Storm laughs] Ah to tell you the story of the play, Mrs. Roosevelt, it's the story of a woman who is devoted to her only son and to his lapse coming purely from the collapse of subconscious mind on the eve of his wedding. She takes her black chiffon nightgown from the store, is caught and arrested. What follows is the uncovering of her whole family life over the long years of marriage, and the fact that her husband's jealousy of the son has driven the two into a very close relationship which is agony for her to break. She discovers too that in her defense in court the whole story will have to be used. Rather than have that used and have the secrets of her heart explored in public, she decides at the last moment not to go through with the defense. She pleads guilty. Offers no excuses and is committed to prison for 3 months. It is her own choice, which she makes convinced that it is less harmful to her family than more or less betraying their intimate life in public. That I think is the practically [ER: Well, that—] the whole story.

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[ER:] Well, that is a very interesting story but what really inspired that? Was it something that you ah had really known was it a real story?

[Leslie Storm:] It was founded on fact. (13:22)

[ER:] It was founded on a real?

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[Leslie Storm:] Oh yes.

[ER:] And ah was--

[Leslie Storm:] It was based on fact. It was changed about and dramatized but--

[ER:] Well um, I think it's interesting that uh it was such a success in England and now here. When really um it deals with the psych--almost a psychiatric question, a question of--that psychologists would understand.

[Leslie Storm:] Yes.

[Leslie Storm:] Yes, well we have a psychiatrist. Mr. Ireland is our psychiatrist in the play [ER and Leslie Storm laugh].

[ER:] Oh well I, of course, didn't realize that. (14:03)

[Leslie Storm:] But it isn't a psychiatric play.

[ER:] It isn't?

[Leslie Storm:] No, it's uh the human side of psychiatry. I don't think there's one psychological term used in the play

[ER:] I see, but it really is the explanation of um something that very few people know much about, namely what happens to the subconscious in people ah which goes on registering all the time, [Leslie Storm: Yes.] um even when they don't recognize the fact [Leslie Storm: Yes.] that it is registering.

[Leslie Storm:] And then when a dangerous set of circumstances crops up the mind is unguarded and a crisis happens.

[ER:] And I should think in a way it would be a play that would um enlighten a great many people to um what might go on inside them.

[Leslie Storm:] Oh, I think it does.

[ER:] Think it does. Did you have any uh motive when you were writing it to-to help people [ER coughs] to understand things, or was it just a story that you were telling?

[Leslie Storm:] Well, I think unconsciously one does. I think the motive to help is probably at the back of one's mind. I don't think you could write a sincere play if you didn't have that somewhere at the back of your mind.

[ER:] Somewhere in the back of your mind. Well, now just for a few minutes I'd like to talk a little about the days in London [Leslie Storm laughs] when I think you were very kind to me. Um do they seem very far away to you now?

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[Leslie Storm:] Oh well they do, eight years ago. I was a newspaper woman at that time. [ER: And it all --] With about 30 others, if you remember.

[ER:] Oh, I remember you all very well [Leslie Storm laughs] but you were very kind because you never complained when they lost you [Leslie Storm laughs], and when your cars didn't catch up, and when you had to stand in the cold. (16:18)

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[Leslie Storm:] You didn't complain either, [ER: No but--] and you worked 24 hours a day then.

[ER:] Well, I know but that was what I'd come over to do and you um ah must have had moments-- I think there were times when you wanted to wring my neck [ER and Leslie Storm laugh] [ER coughs]. (16:34)

[Leslie Storm:] There were moments--

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[ER:] There were moments I couldn't keep on, but I had too [ER and Leslie Storm laugh].

[Leslie Storm:] There were moments when our feet ached rather [Leslie Storm laughs].

[ER:] I'm sure your feet ached, but I was always made more comfortable than you were and I always felt a little guilty about it. And that was a time when there were no signs anywhere as I remember. I remember driving you never could ask anyone where you were going because [Leslie Storm: No] nobody knew anything. They had been so well drilled in keeping the secrets that were necessary that you'd ask where you were going and ah a perfectly blank expression would come over the person's face you were asking [Leslie Storm laughs] and I know--I remember distinctly one or two occasions when you all arrived rather late and ah it was just because you hadn't --

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[Leslie Storm:] We were lost.

[ER:] You were lost?

[Leslie Storm:] We were lost in a bomber going over to Ireland. We weren't told where we were going because it was so secret and the-- it was a bomber as you know it was very noisy and very difficult with a trap door below for parachuting, and we took two hours longer getting there than we should. Missed you [Leslie Storm laughs]. Missed our stories that night. (17:54)

[ER:] And ah then as I--my recollection of that is that I only spent about-- uh no I spent the night, yes that's true. So--

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[Leslie Storm:] In North Ireland.

[ER:] Yes, you probably did have a chance to-to sleep there anyway.

[Leslie Storm:] Yes [Leslie Storm laughs].

[ER:] And uh then I-I went-- and it was Armistice Day as I remember and they came and Lady Montgomery laid a wreath.

[Leslie Storm:] Ah yes I remember that.

[ER:] I remember that very well.

[Leslie Storm:] In Belfast.

[ER:] What?

[Leslie Storm:] In Belfast.

[ER:] Yes, in Belfast.

[Leslie Storm:] Yes. (18:26)

[ER:] And um then I also remember very well, but you probably don't. We went to the naval hospital and it was all in [unclear term] and huts and it was really my first view of a hospital [Unknown speaker coughs] that um was entirely laid out--it was laid out so that if you destroyed one end of it, while the other end would function and everything was well arranged. And I couldn't understand why as far away from the front as Ireland here was a naval hospital and no nurses. And I kept asking the doctor and he kept saying to me very firmly, "don't you go home and tell them to send me nurses. I don't want any nurses. What would I do with them here?" [ER and Leslie Storm laugh] I kept saying, "but I really think it would be a very good idea to have nurses here." And he, "certainly not, they disrupt all my arrangements." And so, that was-- that's very fresh in my mind; the feeling that uh it was beautifully run and beautifully equipped hospital. [Leslie Storm: Yes.] And also, I hadn't been able to get any um uh Kleenex anywhere and I had a terrible cold and I acquired it right there in the hospital. [ER and Leslie Storm laugh] That trip I can remember, but I think the most tiring evening for all of you was the night that we went to the factory in Scotland, do you remember?

[Leslie Storm:] Oh, yes I do, too well. Near Glasgow--

[ER and Leslie Storm overlap]

[ER:] Lord Weir's uh factory. And it was- I was-- I talked to the night shift [Leslie Storm: Yes] and I thought I was going to be the only to make a speech and everyone on the platform made a speech, [Leslie Storm laughs] and I kept looking at all the newspaper people who practically propped up their eye lids up and looked at me. Do you remember all those things?

[Leslie Storm:] Yes, I do remember.

[ER:] Well, I think now we have to stop just a minute and then we'll come back on the air.

[Leslie Storm:] Okay.

(Break 20:28-20:36)

[ER:] Well, Miss Storm has told us about the-the writing of her play, and now we have Mr. Wildberg the producer and Mr. Ireland one of the stars who brought the play to life to tell us their part in this success. First of all, Mr. Ireland, what part do you play?

[Anthony Ireland:] Well, I play the part of the psychiatrist that Miss Storm was talking about. He's called Dr. Bennett Hawkins. Now I'm brought in to try and find some sort of explanation for Miss Storm's heroine's strange behavior. Um now Miss Robson and I have one of the longest scenes I think that have ever been written as a dialogue in a modern play. And I think that because it is so beautifully written by Miss Storm, this has been one of the high spots that the critics have picked out in the play.

[ER:] Well, um it sounds as though it would be a difficult thing to bring to life. Did you have much difficulty in making the role convincing in the way you do?

[Anthony Ireland:] I don't think I did. I must once again complement Miss Storm on the way it is written I think it was one of the parts that I've enjoyed playing more than any other. It really is so well written that the part practically plays itself.

[ER:] [ER laughs] That's wonderful. Uh Mr. Wildberg I understand that not only have you had four tremendous successes in a row, but you perform the rather unusual feat of taking a strictly American play, Anna Lucasta, to London where it had a long run, and then turning around and importing a British play to New York with the same result. Was there any difference in your production problems in London and in New York?

[John Wildberg:] I don't really think so, Mrs. Roosevelt. I-I think that they were about the same. Uh I had a very hard time getting a good theater in London for Anna Lucasta. I finally got His Majesty's. I had a very hard time getting a good theater in New York for Black Chiffon. I finally got the 48th Street Theater, where my friend the late Brock Pemberton had Harvey playing for four years, so I got wonderful theaters in both cities. I had a very difficult time getting a good cast together to take to England. I finally got a beautiful cast headed by Hilda Simms and Fred O'Neal, and I had an awfully difficult time getting this beautiful team of acting that I brought over from London headed by Miss Flora Robson, Mr. Anthony Ireland, and Mr. Raymond Huntley. So it has not been easy ah at any time. It was hard getting the right kind of lodgings for my actors in London, it was hard getting the right kind of lodging for my actors in New York here, but uh I would say that uh the producing problems are pretty much the same. I think it's uh less expensive to produce in England uh than it is in America. It's more expensive here by a great deal, but the financial success of *Black Chiffon* has offset the fact that it has cost more to do here. So I'd say that the producer's problems are about the same in London as they are in New York. (24:08)

[ER:] I would say, from hearing you uh tell about them, that what you needed was perseverance and uh the ability to overcome difficulties [ER, Anthony Ireland, and John Wildberg laugh]. And now getting away from your producing life for a moment, one of your friends has told me that you and Police Commissioner [Thomas Francis] Murphy were law partners at one time, don't you think his job is a little more difficult now than yours?

[John Wildberg:] Well, [John Wildberg laughs] that's a very, very funny question. I'd say, I'd say all - I'd say his job is much more tough than mine is. I'd say I just had to recast this play to bring it over here, Black Chiffon--he's recasting the whole New York police department [John Wildberg and Anthony Ireland laugh].

[ER:] Well that's just what I was thinking it must be [ER and John Wildberg laugh] quite a job. Do you think that your legal experience is an asset in dealing with people in the theater?

[John Wildberg:] I would think so. In fact, I'd say that I'd hate to be a producer and not be a lawyer. I wouldn't know just how to go about producing not that I go around suing people all day long, but uh I've given up the law business now and I'm about my own best client and uh I'm very glad that I- I went to law school. Of course I have to tell you something funny about Tony Ireland, sitting in the opposite here me now, he plays the part of the psychiatrist in our play and he's getting so well-known from *Black Chiffon* that I've seen him walk up 5th Avenue and I've seen ladies come up to him and start to put psychiatric problems to him now [John Wildberg, ER, Leslie Storm, and Anthony Ireland laughs]. Tony let me ask you, uh I think you're quite capable of defending the acting [Unknown speaker coughs] profession, did you ever notice any of my lawyer tactics or practices uh creeping in to my producing of *Black Chiffon*? (25:58)

[Anthony Ireland:] [Anthony Ireland laughs] No, John I didn't.

[John Wildberg:] [John Wildberg laughs] I'm glad of that.

[ER:] Mr. Ireland, [ER clears throat] you've acted both here and in England where the theater receives government subsidy. Do you think that actors have a better chance of earning a regular living under the system in England?

[Anthony Ireland:] Frankly no, Mrs. Roosevelt. I really think the most important thing is to try and popularize the theater amongst the masses and in that way helping the actors. I don't think that a government subsidy necessarily will give more employment. But I think if it reduces the expenses of producing plays, the price of admittance, and all those things it will popularize the play and get the masses to go and see it, rather than going to the cheap music halls and movies we naturally want to entice people in to the theater. In that way I think the actors will benefit, but I don't think it will cause more employment.

[ER:] You don't think it will cause more employment. Well, we of course have never had a subsidy and we're just now uh hoping uh to get something in the way of a national theater subsidy, which will perhaps mean that there will be state theaters beginning in different states. [Anthony Ireland: Yes, yes, yes.] And um I don't know how it was in England because England is smaller and I imagine you can travel round with your companies um and perhaps go cover the country more easily. But in our country there are a great many places where eh no one has ever seen a real live actor on a stage. [Anthony Ireland: I think -] They go to the movies and I noticed in the war how many of the eh actors would come back and tell you uh how exciting it was to play to an audience of soldiers because uh they, they just thought this was a new thing that they'd never seen before and never experienced the having the actors on the stage actually [Anthony Ireland: Yes] there. And they were every much excited about it and I think for the actors it made a most marvelous audience they-- I-I know how many people-- I remember well um some of the people I know best who were doing Shakespeare who said they'd never played Shakespeare as well because their audiences were so remarkable.

[Anthony Ireland:] I had very much the same experience in the services in England the numbers of men, educated men, in my mess that used to turn around to me and say, "are you an actor?", I'd say yes, "do you know we'd never been to a theater?" and they never had. And then when plays started coming round to entertain the troops they were fascinated, and I think we collected an enormous public for the theater because of those shows have been given to the troops. (29:11)

[ER:] Well we felt over here, we started in the Depression having um eh shows that were given-- uh course they had the element of employing people who needed employment, but they were good shows given at a very low um price, and we felt that that stimulated the interest in the theater to a very great extent and um got people in the habit of going. I don't know whether that would be the result if we have a national subsidy or a state subsidy, but some of those plays that started in the years of the depression, some of the sort of groups that came together have kept going. For instance, we have in Virginia ah a thing a called the Barter Theater um which uh started by actors and actress who played just um for what people brought in in kind and they were able to live. Some very funny stories I've heard of how it was run. I don't know whether-- what one could do to popularize but I just love to see everything done it makes it real thing that belongs to the people.

[Anthony Ireland:] I quite agree. That I think is a wonderful thing.

[ER:] Well, Miss Storm ah don't you feel that it's a really wonderful thing to have written a play that means—that gives so many people an interesting evening?

[Leslie Storm:] Oh yes indeed I do, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] You really—I've always thought it must be great fun to have a great success like this and think how many people you reached. Now I want to thank you for coming and both you gentlemen. I think all of you together must have a great sense of satisfaction. Thank you so much.

(31:29)

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