

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 1, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt discuss the accomplishments of the United Nations. In the interview segment, ER and author John Steinbeck discuss his new play, "Burning Bright."

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Elliott Roosevelt, John Steinbeck

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You and I, Mother, have often talked about UN activities, other than those widely publicized in the press and on the radio and television, and about the fact that the uh there is very little known on the part of the public uh except uh about the bickering and the squabbling about rules and procedural matters and tie ups through vetoes, etc. Now you've been sitting out at the UN since it began and you can tell us what actually has been accomplished of a concrete nature, and I know that tremendous strides have been made through UN activity that are benefiting the peoples of the entire world. And I think that the American public would like to know more about those activities. Could you enlighten us some on this subject?

[ER:] Well, of course the programs that are carried on under the Economic and Social Council are really the programs that get very little publicity, and yet do um the greatest amount of good for people throughout the world, and also the programs that are carried by the specialized agencies. I think that perhaps the best thing to talk about for a minute is the World Health Organization. For instance, it has been able to stop epidemics of cholera several times because it was able to uh mobilize everything in the vicinity and do it so quickly that um the spread was stopped before uh it really got a good enough start to make it impossible to stop it. Uh then of course the amount of good that has been done uh by the World Health Organization's campaign against malaria. Um malaria will sap people's strength and they can't work, and uh and it-it can reduce a whole area to um uh groups of people that are unable to carry on [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] the ordinary activities. And world health has moved in in many cases, in areas like that and gradually cleaned up the area. And then um you know I imagine that with the cooperation of World Wealth, the Children's Emergency Fund carried out on a very broad scale the inoculation of children against tuberculosis. Um we don't think about that as so important because we have done very well on tuberculosis but in areas in war ravaged countries there were uh among the children, great numbers of children uh that had tuberculosis or were on the verge of having it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] We saw that up in um ah the Scandinavian countries this summer. (3:19)

[ER:] Exactly, well you saw it in Rovaniemi in the upper part of Finish Lapland and it's uh it existed for instance in Holland and in France. In all the countries where the food supplies had been siphoned off during the war and the children had been left with insufficient food. The result was that if they found a child in a family with tuberculosis they inoculated all the other children and that meant that it didn't spread to the other children and uh saved a tremendous number of children. And naturally that is uh being used now in other areas of the world where the same things uh were needed. Now you take Food and Agriculture which is an advisory body but it never the less is carrying on studies and giving advice, which is absolutely vital to the future of the world. We know that with the increasing population and still the same area we have to either produce food on less land or preserve the land better than we've done in the past. And for the first time they are carrying on a worldwide survey of soil erosion of the uh the floods that take the top soil down to the ocean and leave uh nothing of which you can grow anything for people to eat and so forth. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm, yes.] And those things are now being done on a worldwide

scale when before each nation carried them on separately and some nations didn't carry them on at all.
(5:11)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well and many nations uh have too small an income really and are too backward to be able to carry on these programs.

[ER:] Not only carry-carry on the ah uh research and too backward to do anything about it. I mean, too – haven't um enough of the wherewithal that is needed to do anything when they know what they should do. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] Just as I was told yesterday, by one of the Pakistan delegates, that they didn't need advice, they knew any child would know what they ought to do. But they just didn't have the means to do it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, well for instance, ah going back on the World Health Organization for just a minute. Uh when uh India had these recent floods and uh threats of all kinds of outbreaks of-of pestilence and disease and so forth, did the World Health Organization immediate-immediately move in to aid those people with serums and--?

[ER:] They always um send in all the help they can. Now, of course, everything in the United Nations is conditioned naturally on the amount of-of materials that they have to work with--the amount of people that they have to work with. And um there are budgets for each of these organizations. And there are times when uh they can't do as much as they would like to do though they try to do all they can in everything that happens.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but before this organization came into being there really was no uh—

[ER:] There was absolutely nothing, if you remember we used to hear of horrible famines in China and India. And uh you probably as a little boy were made by your father and mother [ER laughs] made to give some pennies to the Chinese relief fund or the uh [Elliot: Yes] Indian relief fund, but the uh minute it was over we forgot all about it. There was nothing done on a continuing program to try and prevent these things. Now this under the United Nations is the first time that everything isn't dropped the minute the first relief has been handled.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And all governments do participate. (7:32)

[ER:] And all governments are now alerted. Now all governments don't participate in the specialized agencies, you know, only those who join, participate, and bare the expense. But that doesn't keep those who don't belong from asking for help.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I see, well now is there any agency in the uh United Nations working on the problem of education, of [ER: Oh yes.] educating people in backwards areas of the world.

[ER:] Oh yes, UNESCO. UNESCO is working on-on that problem all the time. Its main idea of course is to increase though education and various projects in science and in any of the intellectual fields the understanding of peoples throughout the world as a basis for world peace. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And so it is always working.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, in other words there is uh really quite a big program going on in that field.

[ER:] Oh there's a big program, UNESCO carries a very big program.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh I believe there's eh an agency eh that also is trying to work for cooperation between the different nations to stamp out such evils as narcotics, is there not?

[ER:] Oh yes, there is uh a—there uh narcotics agreements have been extended under the United Nations, under the Economic and Social Council, and nations have signed up uh agreements between them to do certain things. Then you know there is a great many regulatory agencies that regulate, for instance, where nations shall fish and all kinds of things that deal with economic questions [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.]. And that try to uh make for better conditions throughout the world. (9:27)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, in other words, uh you would say, would you not, that the-the UN already is doing a great deal more than was ever accomplished under the old League of Nations, or any proceeding body uh that tried to knit together or bring together the nations of this world.

[ER:] Yes, we are using all the accumulated knowledge of the League of Nations and we've developed it and gone far beyond it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And would you say that today that the UN actually in-in practice though these agencies is working toward the goal of real understanding in spite of the fact that we have all of the-the squabbling going on in the General Assembly and the--and in the uh committees.

[ER:] Oh it's working towards that goal but it will be a long while before you can have 60 nations and their representatives um meet with full understanding. I had a letter the other day from someone who saw it going on in a committee for the first time and were so impressed the he wrote me a letter about it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] Well, I'm afraid we have to go on to another part of our program now. Do you think so?

[ER:] I think so.

(Break from 10:47-11:01)

[ER:] This day and age seems to be one of constant change. Changing ideas, change in the tempo of our lives, and here with me this afternoon is a man who has effected another change, a different style of writing. He is Mr. John Steinbeck, well known author and playwright. I'm very glad to have you here, Mr. Steinbeck.

[John Steinbeck:] Thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt. (11:33)

[ER:] Now, I have to own that unfortunately, having spent most of my time out at Lake Success of late, I've not been able to see your play, which was so recently on Broadway, *Burning Bright*. So I wonder if you'd tell me about the plot and the characters.

[John Steinbeck:] Uh, the plot is very simple. It concerns probably one of two basic human involvements in the world. One being birth and the other death. This play is involved with birth. It's important; it's uh the preoccupation of humans concerning it. And it uses two approaches toward birth, one birth is a continuation of the uh lets say the individual line, and the other birth is the conception of a uh, of a group or rather as a continuation of the species, rather than a continuation of the individual man. The plot I suppose is simplified to carry this story. Uh I don't know how I can go into more detail than that, but—

[ER:] Well now, how-how many characters have you? (13:00)

[John Steinbeck:] There are four peop--four characters.

[ER:] There are four characters only.

[John Steinbeck:] Four characters only, and I--they have been called symbolic, I suppose they are symbolic. When a subject is so simplified it must be considered symbolic.

[ER:] Well now, um symbolic of-of what? Um—

[John Steinbeck:] Of a generality, each individual character representing not only a man or a woman but a state of mind. And uh the change in the story uh being the change that would come not only to that state of mind but also to that that individual.

[ER:] But now why have you taken to this new kind of uh of expression, the play novelette.

[John Steinbeck:] I suppose because when I was very young I didn't see many plays and so was not able to uh jump the footlights. In other words, plays were very difficult for me to read. And so a number of years ago I tried to invent a form of play that I could read myself, I don't think I'm alone in that. I think many people find difficulty in reading plays as such, and this was an attempt to write the play form in a fiction uh in a fiction frame so that people could read plays. As a matter of fact, in publishing circles it's well known that plays aren't very widely read [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]. (14:30)

[ER:] Then you mean that you put your dialogue in and that could be taken out, umm just lifted right out of the story.

[John Steinbeck:] That was exactly the intention. That the description is to be used for stage directions and the movement of characters and that everything inherent in the story occurs in the dialogue. That is the intention, it doesn't always work.

[ER:] I see well that's that very interesting, I wonder—

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother? [ER: Yes.] You know I have an idea uh that you uh would have liked to have seen this play if you had the opportunity and uh-uh John Steinbeck, knowing that you get around a great deal – uh around the world, uh maybe he could tell you where the play will next be playing and you could probably hop over and see it. (15:34)

[ER:] [ER laughs] Where is it going to play next?

[John Steinbeck:] Well, I understand that it's going to play in Stockholm at the Royal Theater uh next, and I believe in England soon after that.

[ER:] Woo, well I wonder if it gets to England by uh April, I might be on my way to the human rights eh commission in Geneva and just stop by and see it in London [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[John Steinbeck:] Oughta be in Geneva now that April's in England [John Steinbeck and Elliott Roosevelt laugh].(15:52)

[ER:] Well, perhaps you'll play from Geneva.

[John Steinbeck:] I don't know about the Swiss.

[ER:] You don't know about the Swiss? [ER, Elliott Roosevelt and John Steinbeck laugh]

[John Steinbeck:] So far.

[ER:] Are the Swiss--I wonder are the Swiss good playgoers?

[John Steinbeck:] I don't think they stay up that late [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh].

[ER:] You don't think they stay up that late? Well, I- I just wondered whether they're the kind-- now of um, the French are really good playgoers. I mean, I think the French audience would be a wonderful audience to write a play for.

[John Steinbeck:] I think that is probably true if you write a play for the French. Uh I have had some success with plays in France. But there was just a little gallicization, if that is a word, of the plays before they reached Paris [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] Well, I have to go back to my early days, but I saw uh one or two of the great French actors and actresses when I was at school uh abroad. And I've never seen such enthusiastic audiences, as I—in fact, I being a little American girl had no idea that you ever dared behave the way those audiences behaved. They stood on their chairs and cheered and I just thought it was very badly behaved [ER laughs]. But I saw, I must say, some rather um extraordinary plays. I saw *Oedipe Roi* with [Jean] Mounet-Sully and one or two other plays um that really were quite outstanding, I imagine, at that time. But um I-I hadn't ever thought about the fact, which you put very well, that you really have to write for the French.

[John Steinbeck:] Well, I think that would be true of any people. It just occurred to me that you were very lucky that you saw plays that the French liked. Because I understand they can be just as vehement in the other direction when they do not like--(17:53)

[ER and John Steinbeck overlap]

[ER:] [ER laughs] I imagine they can. I imagine they can.

[John Steinbeck:] I remember some historical—

[ER:] Well, that's-that's the exciting part I suppose. Writing for a-an audience that is as--as um that responds in that way.

[John Steinbeck:] I guess I prefer that to a great group of people who follow a single leader [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] Now do you have to write in a special way for different parts of the United States?

[John Steinbeck:] Uh perhaps I do, I-I should, but I don't. Uh I know in some parts of the country my work seems to be better liked than in others, and uh I should say, all in all, it is it's liked outside the large cities more than in the large cities.

[ER:] Outside the United States?

[John Steinbeck and Elliott Roosevelt simultaneously:] No outside the large cities.

[ER:] Outside of the large cities, oh yes.

[John Steinbeck:] I should think that that might be just a matter of leisure because uh the reader having a little more time to give to what I've been working on. I don't know that this is [cough]—

[ER and John Steinbeck overlap]

[ER:] Perhaps a little more time to think. Because ordinarily um you give people something to think about don't you?

[John Steinbeck:] Uh I like to think of it as thought. It has been called other things [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh].

[ER:] Well, you still haven't told me enough about what um uh what happens in your play.

[John Steinbeck:] Very simply, the story of the play is that of a sterile man, who coming from one of three professions with a long continuing tradition in history, feels it necessary to transmit his own bloodline, his own experiences, his own profession, to ah a son. Being uh incapable of producing a son, and um yet ah being incapable of living without a son, his wife provides him with a son by another man. Uh on his discovery of this, he cracks up completely and only on, well what would you call it, only on uh [unclear term] he is able to arrive at the conclusion that uh his bloodline is not very important. And that the uh child is the important thing, and the relationship between children and man is more important than the relationship between individual father and son. And uh this is what has been called a happy ending; I don't find it a happy ending at all but only a realistic ending.

[ER:] Well, I think it's um it's a very interesting ending though, in the uh condition that many, many people in the world have found themselves in of late because there must have been a great many men who wanted sons of their own, in uh well different parts of the world where the war has passed, who uh who must have had to make that just that same adjustment. (21:05)

[John Steinbeck:] And make it if they do not, and one thing about our species is that it has survived. And it has survived all such things, we've been in trouble ever since I supposed we came out of trees. I don't know why this is unique, I think of the breakup of the eastern empire, and well and the ice age for that matter. We've survived everything I see no reason to be pessimistic about this little time of trouble.

(Break 21:26-21:33)

[ER:] I think, Mr. Steinbeck, that I have probably have read nearly all the books that you have written, though you may have written some before I began to read you. But I'd like to know when this play novelette which is readable as a book is coming uh coming out.

[John Steinbeck:] Oh it is. I think it has been out for about a week.

[ER:] Burning bright is out already?

[John Steinbeck:] Yes, oh yes. As a matter of fact, I think it was published almost simultaneously with the production of the play. Uh—

[ER:] I still of course always think, almost instinctually when I hear your name, of *Grapes of Wrath* because that made such a deep impression on me. And I think next to that, *Mice and Men* is my um—the one I think of most. But so I shall look forward to reading *Burning Bright* [ER laughs].

[John Steinbeck:] As a matter of fact, *Mice and Men* was the first of the experiments in this form.

[ER:] In this form?

[John Steinbeck:] In this form, it was the first of them. There have been three. *Mice and Men*, *The Moon is Down*, and this is the third time I have tried to use this form of play and novelette.

[ER:] You like it?

[John Steinbeck:] Uh, it's very difficult.

[ER:] It's difficult?

[John Steinbeck:] It's very difficult.

[ER:] You'd rather write just a book then?

[John Steinbeck:] No, I'd rather write this, but it is very difficult. The reasons being that the constrictions of the theater uh are perhaps a little difficult for a novelist to indulge in— necessity for keeping the action within the proscenium arch, and necessity for making the whole story appear though dialog and nothing else, is quite difficult, for me at least.

[ER:] I wonder if you mind if I ask you a personal question? How—when did you start writing?

[John Steinbeck:] I really don't remember, but since it's become something like a nervous tick, it must have been very early [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]. I think probably uh with chalk on the sidewalk [ER laughs] and I think it hasn't stopped very much since

[ER:] And that leads me to another question. Tell me a little bit about your boyhood and your background. Where—where did you grow up? (23:55)

[John Steinbeck:] Oh I grew up in a little town called Salinas in California in Monterey County. And I uh guess we were what you might call ranch people, half town and half ranch. I think we had cattle some years, and some years we didn't have cattle. And uh I went to the public schools there and uh I imagine had the perfectly normal, typical childhood.

[ER:] Do you have any brothers or sisters?

[John Steinbeck:] I had three sisters--I have three sisters. No brothers.

[ER:] And um did you fight with your sisters as most good little boys would [ER laughs]?

[John Steinbeck:] Well, two of my sisters were older and I hadn't a chance [Elliott Roosevelt coughs]. One of my sisters was younger and she had a throwing arm like a Yankee pitcher [Elliott Roosevelt laughs], and she inspired great respect not only in me but all the kids in the block, she was really very dangerous.

[ER:] [ER laughs] You sound as though the girls kept you in order. (24:55)

[John Steinbeck:] Yes, some with authority and some with the pitching arm. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] They did.

[ER:] I think that sounds perfectly normal, and as though this really had been a normal family [ER and John Steinbeck laugh].

[John Steinbeck:] Painful, but normal.

[ER:] Um, well now, I always think that one of the most difficult things must be the-the gaining of insight into the human nature. How did you get your understanding of-of people and your ability to write of what goes on inside of people?

[John Steinbeck:] There is some critical section which uh says I that don't have any. I haven't any idea. Uh I think I have a fairly observant eye and a fairly good ear. And I think these two things are necessary in a writer, outside of that I don't know. And of course I'm never sure, whether what you're kind enough to call insight, is insight or not, how can one tell until an audience finds a likeness of experience. (25:58)

[ER:] Well, you must uh know in that people have responded to what you've written, which means it must ring a bell.

[John Steinbeck:] In the past that's so, but uh I cannot remember a single piece of work that I've ever done which has uh found immediate favor.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah but that's from the critics John, that's not uh necessarily from the public.

[John Steinbeck:] Well the uh public uh waits around, that's one good thing about it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Not only do they wait around, but uh a good part of the time their buying habits aren't too much guided by the public--uh by the critics.

[John Steinbeck:] I'm very fortunate that this is so [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh].

[ER:] Well, now you've traveled a good deal, that's give—that must give you um sort of insight into uh different people in different parts of the world. Where-where have you traveled lately?

[John Steinbeck:] I don't know that I have traveled extensively. I've traveled a good deal in Europe and uh spend a large part of my life has been spent in Mexico. Uh but my traveling has been fairly sporadic and not uh very, not very profound I'm afraid.

[ER:] You say Mexico, and Mexico um to me would be a very interesting ground to study because you have there um such different kinds of types of people. You go from the Indians to the rather sophisticated uh Spanish, and um it must be quite a wide range.

[John Steinbeck:] Well, I think the reason I have spent a good deal of time in Mexico is that my county, uh when I was growing up at least, had a very strong Mexican-Spanish background. So the people who worked with us and even the little kids in school uh spoke Spanish before they spoke English. And uh the whole, if you can call it culture, from below the border, was always with us when we were growing up as- as children so that Mexico has not seemed strange to me, where it has had its Spanish influence of course. The Indian languages nobody's ever been able to learn that I know.

[ER:] Well I've always-- I-I wish a hundred times a day that I knew Spanish. I listen over my earphones in the United Nations to the Spanish speaking people so that I have now got—so I can now understand quite a good deal, but there's such an interesting um difference in the way they look at things.

[John Steinbeck:] Yes there is, and don't they make beautiful speeches?

[ER:] Oh they make the most wonderful speeches. Occasionally I'm not quite sure what their speeches mean, but sound perfectly wonderful [ER laughs]. (28:55)

[John Steinbeck:] I don't think this is a very good idea, sometimes it is not well to look into what they mean. But they always sound wonderful.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I uh –

[ER:] We had a gentleman speak yesterday eh who made a speech on a constitutional point of law, and when he'd finished I really didn't know whether if he or I were-was completely lacking in understanding [ER laughs].

[John Steinbeck:] Ah did he specify the constitution because there have been several in Mexico?

[ER:] No, but it sent us flying to find the constitution of Mexico, to find out what the constitution of Mexico said. And today we are now experts on the Mexican constitution.

[John Steinbeck:] Of 1918 I hope.

[ER:] I hope [ER Elliott Roosevelt and John Steinbeck laugh].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I don't know about that, I think that the uh one of the most interesting gentleman I've ever met is the Mexican gentlemen who was elected last year to head UNESCO and uh he had uh a great—

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[ER:] [Jaime Torres] Bodet.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes Mr. Bodet. He had a terrifically hard time in getting uh unanimity amongst all the other delegates to UNESCO, and so finally he just got up and he gave an impassioned address and eh over in Italy and threatened to quit over there one the spot if they didn't okay his-his viewpoint. And by golly, before they got through they did okay his view point.

[John Steinbeck:] He'd had great training in getting unanimity at home. I should think there'd-would be no other man that could have done that.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's very true [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] Now I-I find the wonderful thing about South Americans, and people who live in the Caribbean, and so forth, they have unending faith that though what you are doing at the moment may seem to be entirely impossible if you just talk a little longer it will be--it will become possible.

[John Steinbeck:] I don't know that this is a bad idea. (31:03)

[ER:] But now tell me do you have any plans for the future.

[John Steinbeck:] Oh yes, I'll go back to work immediately.

[ER:] You're going back to work?

[John Steinbeck:] Always, I told you it's become a nervous tick by now.

[ER:] On another novелlette?

[John Steinbeck:] On a very long novel.

[ER:] On a long novel?

[John Steinbeck:] An extremely, an extremely long novel.

[ER:] Would it be too much to ask um where it's laid?

[John Steinbeck:] Oh it's laid in my own valley, the valley I came from. And uh actually it's more or less an attempt to tell myself what's or to find out for myself what has happened to the country in the last fifty years. And so in terms of doing it myself, I hope to find myself what has happened to this country in fifty years.

[ER:] Good luck to you, I should be terribly interested to read it then. Good night [John Steinbeck: Good night.] And thank you for coming.

[John Steinbeck:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(31:57)

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Transcription: Becky Mann
First Edit: Andreas Meyris
Final Edit: Seth LaShier
Final Check: Natalie Hall