

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 17, 1950

Description: In the interview segment, ER discusses theater with actor Jose Ferrer.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Jose Ferrer

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[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now my mother has as her guest today uh a gentleman who has just completed a picture, which is receiving great acclaim. But in particular, uh the performance given by this gentleman is receiving great acclaim. And so mother would you take over at this point and introduce our guest today?

[ER:] Thank you I would be very glad to. Our guest today will I know be able to tell us most interesting stories and news of the opening of a new motion picture of importance. This guest is Mr. Jose Ferrer.

[Jose Ferrer:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. It is certainly a pleasure to be a guest of yours and to have the opportunity of telling your listeners about uh *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

[ER:] I am very happy to hear about *Cyrano de Bergerac*, it's one of my favorite plays. But before we hear about your picture Mr. Ferrer, I think perhaps our listeners would like to hear something about you yourself. I understand you abandoned a teaching career to go into the theatre. What changed your mind? (1:17)

[Jose Ferrer:] Well I adopted a teaching career in the first place as a result of changing my mind about another career. Uh you see I always wanted to be a painter, and I went to Princeton University. And the closest thing they had to an art department there was an architecture department, and so I enrolled as an architect because this way I got a chance to draw and paint, and uh so on I soon realized that I would be a very, very ninth-rate architect and since this was in uh in 1933 when architects, the great ones, were starving anyway. I uh decided to pick up--

[Jose Ferrer and ER overlap]

[ER:] Painters were to.

[Jose Ferrer:] Well, uh [Elliott Roosevelt and Jose Ferrer laugh] painters always do, you expect them to [Jose Ferrer laughs] starve I guess [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]. But uh I decided because I spoke uh Spanish at home and had learned French as a child that I should teach modern languages. And uh it was while trying to follow this idealistic concept of my future that uh a friend of mine persuaded me to be in a show that he was producing at Princeton, an undergraduate uh show. And once having uh stepped back stage, although I fought valiantly against this career for two more years, I think I was fatally smitten. Smitten? Smitten, yes [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]. (2:25)

[ER:] I think that's very interesting. But I'm interested in that uh you just said that you speak Spanish at home you speak English. Um but I have been reading a little about you and I understand that you speak other languages too. I wonder, this is perhaps mean and you can say [ER laughs] you won't do it if you want to, I wonder if you mind saying one of the very famous Coquelin lines in all the languages that you know.

[Jose Ferrer:] Well now, I know, I know that in in English of course, the line for instance, I have a record of Coquelin reciting the "Ballad of the Duel" which begins in English: "Lightly I toss my hat away,

Languidly over my arm let fall The cloak that covers my bright array-- Then out swords, and to work withal." And in French he says, "Je jette avec grâce mon feutre, Je fais lentement l'abandon Du grand manteau qui me calfeutre, Et je tire mon espadon." Now how that is said in Spanish, German, or Italian I don't know yet. [Jose Ferrer laughs] My Italian is based entirely on Sardi's Restaurant, you know? [ER, Elliott Roosevelt and Jose Ferrer laugh]

[ER:] That's wonderful!

[Elliott Roosevelt:] My mother has a certain experience with Sardi's Restaurant. She goes--

[Elliott Roosevelt and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[Jose Ferrer:] I know she does [Jose Ferrer laughs] she has the John Gold memorial corner over there

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right! [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] What, what interests me about this is that um I went to school in Europe you see and I have just a little knowledge of all those same languages. And I remember seeing theater in all those different countries when I was about 16. And seeing very great actors and I saw Coquelin do Cyrano.

[Jose Ferrer:] Oh that must have been wonderful.

[ER:] And I saw some other things that I will never forget. I saw a wonderful performance by Mounet-Sully of *L'Oedipe Roi*, uh when he was going blind. And almost the most wonderful thing was the reaction of the audience to him, when he finished the whole French audience was on their seats and I was the little American girl who had never seen an audience rise and stand up on their seats and yell at the top of their lungs. [Jose Ferrer: Oh, that must have been thrilling.] And I was way up in the gallery because I had very little money--I just was thrilled. (4:43)

[ER and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[Jose Ferrer:] And of all the roles for him to be playing, isn't that wonderful?

[ER:] Isn't that a wonderful thing?

[Jose Ferrer:] Yes.

[ER:] And to remember, I'm always so glad that I saw those things. But I saw the theater in Italy and the theater in Germany. I never liked it as much in Germany, though I do think it's a beautiful language.

[Jose Ferrer:] Particularly when you understand it. German always sounded uh unattractive to me until I began to understand it. And then I've done some singing of German lieder as you know you- you-you come in contact with men like Heine and Goethe and then and it's fabulous.

[ER and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[ER:] Well then you get the really beautiful poetry, [Jose Ferrer: Yes, the most lyrical.] and I do think that German poetry is very beautiful.

[Jose Ferrer:] It's extraordinary.

[ER:] Very beautiful.

[Jose Ferrer:] Well you know, I was in Montreal last week and I ran into Françoise Rosay, the wonderful French actress, [Elliott Roosevelt: Hmm] and uh we began to talk about *Cyrano*, and she had seen Coquelin as a girl and she remembered him and she told me about him. Now there had been a project afoot for me to play *Cyrano* in French in Paris possibly next year uh in order to prepare the French people for what they may consider a very, you know, sacrilegious thing which is to do *Cyrano* in English. And I was excited about this until she began to describe Coquelin's performance, [Jose Ferrer and Elliott Roosevelt chuckle] and this terrified me so that I that I don't think I'll ever have the nerve. But her description of his voice, you know, eh made you feel that uh perhaps you should go back to Kindergarten to study about acting because it was something so advanced, so extraordinary. And the way she recited some of the lines from *Cyrano*, the musicality she put in was absolutely thrilling.

[ER:] I-I- I couldn't do anything like that. But I can remember perfectly the impression it made and I'm an old woman now! [ER laughs] It made the most tremendous impression--I've never forgotten it. I saw Sarah Bernhardt do *L'Aiglon* in the same, the same period. And she was getting –

[ER and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[Jose Ferrer:] Yes, they toured here together in nineteen-three here.

[ER:] And I saw Duse do some of her first plays. But I saw her do it in this country first and then in Italy. And uh I-I think you remember the great actors and actresses that you've seen as a young person [Jose Ferrer: Yes]. They make--the awful part of it is that they make the most terrible standard that everybody [Jose Ferrer: That's right] else is judged by later on. (6:57)

[Jose Ferrer:] For those of us who have to follow in their footsteps a little tough because we're battling a memory, we're not even battling a reality, you know? [ER: No]. But it's important to have that memory, the emotional memory of the kind of truth that they managed create for you on that evening is something to be cherished and uh and its those kind of, I think, life lines from one generation to another that ah keep cultures alive and give us something to-to aim for always .

[ER:] Well I'm just delighted to have you doing uh this particular play because I love the play!

[Jose Ferrer:] Yes, it's a wonderful play.

[ER:] I just love the play.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, and I think that uh the fact that it is coming out as a film--incidentally who are the producers of this?

[Jose Ferrer:] Stanley Kramer. [Elliott Roosevelt: Ah] This is his fourth picture. You know, he's the wonder boy. He's the one who did *The Champion*, and did *Home of the Brave*, and did *The Men*.

[ER:] I loved *Home of the Brave*. I thought it [Jose Ferrer: Yes, wonderful--] was wonderful.

[ER and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[Jose Ferrer:] Have you seen *The Men* yet?

[ER:] Yes I have, I had some criticisms of *The Men*. It worried me a little because uh I was afraid it wouldn't give enough uh feeling that they could get back on their feet. But uh he explained to me that um uh the men themselves didn't-- weren't worried by that, and that they felt that they wanted to help those who really couldn't get back on their feet and had to live another way. And, therefore, they hadn't emphasized the fact that in modern--these modern days, even with paraplegics, almost all of them um can get about.

[Jose Ferrer:] You mean literally get on their feet?

[ER:] Literally, well only with crutches, and braces, and things

[Jose Ferrer:] Yes, yes, yes, yes.

[ER:] But literally now, we are making more and more strides. Because I am enormously interested in this [Jose Ferrer: Surely], watch the advances they make in actually getting them able to move and to get about out. But it-it—from the point of view as it was explained to me that these men wanted to make the men who were still in chairs [Jose Ferrer: Mhm.] feel that they could live and could get about. I think it has a great value. (9:15)

[Jose Ferrer:] Several of those boys came on our set, you know? And watched them shoot *Cyrano*--

[ER and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[ER:] Well I know that. I saw some of them in the hospital um when I was out with this last time [Jose Ferrer: Birmingham] where they've been moved.

[Jose Ferrer:] Mhmm. Oh where they've been moved [ER: Yes, yes] out, out by the ocean.

[ER:] And uh I was very much uh interested in them, but I feel that one must not let people get the idea, even the paraplegics, that um they're bound to be in chairs the rest of their lives [Jose Ferrer: Yes] because, more and more, we are getting to find out that there is practically no one that needs to remain in a chair the rest of his life.

[Jose Ferrer:] Well that's very interesting I didn't know that myself.

[Elliott Roosevelt and Jose Ferrer overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother and Mr. Ferrer, would you mind very much if I interrupted this very interesting conversation for just a minute because I'd like to get in a few things of interest to our audience, and then we'll come back to this very interesting conversation between you two.

(10:41)

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Transcription: Andreas Meyris  
First Edit: Christy Regenhardt  
Final Edit: Seth LaShier  
Final Check: Natalie Hall