

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

February 8th, 1951

Description: In the interview segment, ER's guest is playwright Robert Sherwood.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Robert Sherwood.

(0:05)

[ER:] Good afternoon, this is Eleanor Roosevelt. I'm happy to welcome you for another visit here in my living room at the Park Sheraton Hotel. As usual, I have a guest that you will be anxious to meet, and as usual, Elliott will assist me on the program. And now, here is Elliott.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Thank you, Mother. Sitting with Mother here in her living room in the upper reaches of the Park Sheraton Hotel overlooking New York is an old family friend, Mr. Robert Sherwood. Mr. Sherwood is regarded in the field of dramatics as one of the most gifted writers of this generation. Mr. Sherwood has become a vital factor in the bicentennial, celebrating two hundred years of America's living theatre. He will pres--we will presently hear many interesting things about this form of art from Mr. Sherwood. And, as usual, Mother and I will discuss an interesting question sent in by a listener, but before we go on, a word from the sponsors who make this program possible.

(Pause from 01:07-02:31)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Now, here is Ben Grauer.

[Ben Grauer:] Friends, have you started the Real Lemon early morning habit at your house yet? You know, that's a mighty good habit to get into. Just drink two tablespoons of Real Lemon in a glass of water first thing before breakfast. See if you don't feel better with the daily Real Lemon habit, and you'll be joining millions of other people who take lemon juice and water every morning. And with Real Lemon, you get your lemon juice faster and easier. There's no cutting or squeezing, no fuss or bother. All you have to do is uncap the Real Lemon bottle, and just pour two tablespoons of lemon juice into a glass of water. That's all there is to it; it's quick, convenient, and economical. If you haven't started it, begin the Real Lemon habit at your house tomorrow. Better check your Real Lemon supply right now. If it's low, pick up several bottles when you shop today. Get Real Lemon sweetened or unsweetened at your food store and use it for every use of lemon juice.

Here is part of the law of the land: law that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. It reads, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof are citizens of the United States." Now that is a part of our law, law that binds us together as one advancing people one hundred and fifty million of us all races, all creeds, all colors, all equal. Surely, we steadfastly give our respect and allegiance to the law. Protecting our rights and encouraging our dreams, it has brought us through many a dark uncertainty, and, on occasion, peril, and our freedom still secure. Al Smith, plainspoken and warmhearted, once said of freedom that "the price we pay for it is vigilance; eternal vigilance." We too, you and I, have something to say about freedom, something that is at once challenging and reassuring. Freedom, we say, is everybody's job. This has been the Eleanor Roosevelt Program, which is recorded in Mrs. Roosevelt's living room at the Park Sheraton Hotel on the corner of Fifty-sixth Street and Seventh Avenue in New York City. Today, Mrs. Roosevelt's guest was the distinguished writer and playwright, Robert Sherwood. Tomorrow's guest will be Mrs. [Marguerite Crooks] "Mickey" Falkenburg Wagstaff, tennis champion and mother of tennis cha- and radio and TV

personality [Eugenia Lincoln] "Jinx" Falkenburg McCrary. On, uh, Monday, beginning the new week, we have a very interesting and exciting guest list, headed by Secretary of the Air Force Thomas K. Finletter, who for a long time has tried to awaken public opinion to the importance of adequate defense against air attack. Tuesday's guest with Mrs. Roosevelt is an interesting personality from the world of music, the famous ballad singer, popularizer of American folk melodies Burl Ives--Burl Ives on Tuesday--followed by Mrs. Roosevelt's guest Wednesday, the distinguished lady senator from Maine, Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith. On Thursday, Mrs. Roosevelt will bring before her microphone and to her audience another famous Republican senator from Maine, Senator Owen D. Brewster. Mrs. Roosevelt and Elliott Roosevelt will be with you again tomorrow and every day Monday through Friday from 12:30 to 1:15 pm. This is Ben Grauer speaking. (6:14)

(Pause from 06:15-06:26)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] With Mrs. Roosevelt in her living room today is a very old friend of the family's and a gentleman of many facets and talents. In fact uh he's probably so well known to our audience that I shouldn't uh bother to go into any kind of introduction. So, I think Mother, without further ado, I'll ask you to introduce to our audience Mr. Robert Sherwood.

[ER:] Well, I don't really have to introduce you, Mr. Sherwood, but I just want to tell you that I'm terribly glad to have you here today.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well, as always Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm delighted and honored to be here.

[ER:] Well ah, there's so much to talk about, um beginning with ah the past and coming down to the present. But just the other night, I went to see a play which was written by Philip Barry and revised by you, the *Second Threshold*. I had a very delightful evening, and I wish you'd talk to us a little about that play first of all.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well, Phil Barry was one of the greatest playwrights of our time in my opinion; he wrote *The Philadelphia Story*, *The Animal Kingdom*, *Paris Bound*, a great many notable and successful plays. A year ago, he finished this play, *Second Threshold*, which I think is, in many ways, the finest play he ever wrote, but he suddenly and tragically died. And he had contemplated a great many revisions in the play, and his widow, Ellen Barry, asked me if I would undertake to make these revisions. I read the play and had so much admiration for it that I felt it was really my duty to do this, to bring this play to the theatre and have it get the hearing that I know it deserves. Well, fortunately, the New York critics have proved that my estimate of the play was correct, and it has had marvelously good notices, and I'm happy to say is very successful. (8:48)

[ER:] Well, I'm glad to hear that; I was eh, interested because someone told me that in certain ways they thought eh it might be um slightly biographical. Do you-do you know that eh whether it was some of his own experience he was writing in?

[Robert Sherwood:] I think so; that I can't be sure of [ER: Well sure.] because there is a resemblance to a lot of people that you and Elliott and I know [ER: Mhm] the men who were great public figures during the war, well Jim Forrestal for one, and eh dear Gil Winant for another [ER:Mhm, Mhm] men who occupied tremendous positions of responsibility who just couldn't adjust themselves to life afterwards

[Robert Sherwood and ER overlap, unclear term: might be "It's worth saying"].

[ER:] Something eh made life not worth living. [Robert Sherwood: Yes] In truth um eh in some ways um I um I felt as though there were parts of it which weren't quite real to me and yet it was um a very

fascinating and interesting evening. [ER laughs] Now you have another play you're very much interested in at the present time, haven't you?

[Robert Sherwood:] Well that is only in the capacity of-of-of producer it's *Darkness at Noon*.

[ER:] Oh yes that I haven't seen yet but I'm going, I'm--

[Robert Sherwood:] I hope you will go [ER: Very soon.] and I'd be very interested to hear what you think of it.

[ER:] Well I-I have eh been invited to go, so I know that I'm going to have that pleasure before long.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well if you haven't been invited already, you're invited right now. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh.]

[ER:] No, I have been invited, I have [laughter] [Robert Sherwood: I'm sure you have.] and um I'm going with a um gentleman who was kind enough to ask me um early in February, so I look forward to it because I read the book, and eh I think it must eh make an interesting play.

[Robert Sherwood:] Oh, I'm sure it does; it's a brilliant job by Sidney Kingsley, who made the dramatization and directed the play; Claude Rains [coughing] is the star, gives a superb [ER: Does it?] performance.

[ER:] Has it had um eh good houses right along?

[Robert Sherwood:] Very good, yes [ER: Very good houses.] yes.

[ER:] I eh remember the book as having a good deal of um rather violent impact on one, and I wondered if the play would have the same.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well I think you'll find the same impact or [ER: The same impact.] very much the same.

[ER:] Well now I notice that you have just eh taken on the rather heavy responsibility, I should think, of being the national chairman of the Council of the Living Theatre, and I wondered if you'd tell me a little about the organization, because it sounds as though it would be a rather exciting eh council to be on.(11:54)

[Robert Sherwood:] Well it is, Mrs. Roosevelt it um it's the first time that the people of the theatre, and I mean the managers, the producers, have really got together in an attempt to advance the interests of the Living Theatre itself. Now, as you well know, we have in this country National Apple Week to promote the sale of apples and National Graham Cracker Week to promote graham crackers [Elliott Roosevelt laughs.] this is the first time that we of the theatre have eh ever really acted in concert to promote the Living Theatre as such. In the past, we've been much more notable for sticking knives into each other's backs than for cooperation, but now we have the feeling that the Living Theatre is this, is and always has been, the great source of talent and ideas for the movies, the radio, and laterally for television, and if that source dries up, the whole entertainment world is going to suffer. So, it is our objective to bring the theatre back to the people and vice versa.

[ER:] Now that would mean really starting um good deal more of-of um shows on the road, so to speak

[Robert Sherwood: Oh, of course yes.] Going from place to place.

[Robert Sherwood:] Yes, and that is where we have been failing signally is in--

[ER:] Everybody wants to be on Broadway; nobody wants to go out into the sticks

[Robert Sherwood: That's all too true, but uh.] Well the trouble with that is, though, that unless you cultivate your audience um out in the remote areas, um you eh you won't have that love for the theatre, which is the only thing that-that will keep it going. (14:08)

[Robert Sherwood:] That is completely right and the theatre cannot survive merely as a Broadway institution eh.

[ER:] Now I remember um when I was in Hawaii in the summer of '43 during the war, um eh something which has always stuck in my mind. Judith Anderson was there um playing eh Shakespeare with Maurice Evans for the boys, and having a great success eh as Lady Macbeth, and eh she eh told me an amusing story of how one of the boys, how they would wait outside, the soldiers, for her and say, "This is the first time we ever saw real people on the stage!" [Robert Sherwood laughs.] The very first time dozens of young Americans had ever seen a real play. Now that seems incredible, but the movies had taken over so completely that they-they eh they just had never seen a play.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well I've heard the expression that um some young people throughout the country, youths, they describe eh the Living Theatre as--they say, "Well it's like television with round actors." [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh.]

[ER:] That is--that is a terrible move!

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Is there any similarity at all between this organization and an organization about which Helen Hayes has been on our program to talk about, the American National Theatre and Academy?

[Robert Sherwood:] Well, eh, the two organizations are really interlocking; now if you look at our letterhead, you'll find Helen Hayes, one of our directors, Benton Freadly [unsure of spelling]. The council is organized, really, on a temporary basis. This is the two hundredth anniversary of the first [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] first theatrical season here in New York, the first recorded [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] theatre in America [ER: That's interesting.] and this council is just to celebrate this bicentennial in 1951, but ANTA is the permanent national theatre organization.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm.

[ER:] And um you-you would have one thing of course to contend with which has always bothered me very much. Um I was interested, as I know you were interested, in the days of the Depression eh in the um theatre that was worked out or um eh that Hallie Flanagan had charge of. [Robert Sherwood: Oh, yes, the Federal Theatre Project.] The Federal Theatre Project and um I've heard people say eh all sorts of things about that project, but eh-eh I was not aware of at the time and I'm sure you were not aware of and I doubt whether they are true. Someone said to me the other day, "Oh, but that was a terrible project, it was completely communist." Well, now I don't question there may have been a few communists who were-were actors just as there might be some who were anything else. But I'm sure that project had um a great value because it gave at a price that people could eh really attend plays eh who never attended them before, and that's one of the things worries me about the theatre; everything has become so expensive today. To produce a play costs somebody a fortune, and therefore how are we ever going to make it possible for the um person of-of even moderate income to pay eh the only prices that are possible if you're going to-to pay for the production?

[Robert Sherwood:] I know. Well, the melancholy fact is that, take our company, the Playwrights' Company, which is just an organization of playwrights to produce our own plays: in the last five years, we've had, I think, six plays we've produced and except for one, they've all been very successful. I'll mention some: *Green Girl*, eh, *Lost in the Stars*, *Anne of the Thousand Days*, *Joan of Lorraine* with Ingrid Bergman. Had some very big hits, and yet, with those six plays, the investors have not broken even [ER: Good gracious.] over a period of years. (18:55)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I think that's something we want to come back and ask some more questions about, but we have to interrupt for just a moment, then we'll come back to the interview.

[Break: 19:03-19:09]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now Mother, let's get back to your interview with Mr. Robert Sherwood and that very amazing statement which he made of eh the number of successes which his company had had, and the fact that the, eh Playwrights' Company had not broken even.

[ER:] Well um that is something which worries me a great deal because um it means one of two things: either eh the government is going to subsidize the theatre, um or in some way the cost of production has to come down, and I don't know how that's to be done, and with the present union rules and eh some of the other difficulties that face eh the production of a-of a play.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well that's one of the main jobs for this Council of the Living Theatre is to try to work up the economy and to arrive at certain basic reforms that will enable the theatre to keep on living.

[ER:] Well now do you think that um eh it would be possible eh to get both state and federal subsidies for the theatre?

[Robert Sherwood:] I-I do not think it would be possible. You remember, Mrs. Roosevelt, the Federal Theatre Project that you mentioned earlier, part of the whole [ER: Oh I remember.] WPA relief program. Well when the Congress started cutting down on WPA eh after the Depression had passed, the very first project to go was the Federal Theatre Project [ER: I remember when that happened.] and then the whole Federal Arts Project was loped off before any other WPA was cut.

[ER:] I remember curiously enough I was talking to um-um Helen Holmes [silent film actress] and Lytle Hull not long ago about the eh question that arises, and in the question of all the arts, because um a we're about the only country that in its parliament or its congress um does not have any realization that the arts are of value to the development of a nation, and um-um no-no subsidies um are forthcoming either on a state or national basis, um so then it resolves itself down to how do you eh bring the cost down um so that a group of people eh can do it profitably because in this country nobody's going to produce theatre at a loss all the time.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well one thing that has been accomplished due to exchange of information in this council um Kermit Bloomgarden, the producer of Arthur Miller's prize-winning play *Death of a Salesman*, has worked out a scheme whereby [recording cuts out] by truck and bus, and the eh scenery is greatly reduced. Now they can carry that play all over this country. They can play in high school auditoriums and gymnasiums, and barns; anywhere where the space, whether there's space for an audience, whether there's a stage or not, and I think that that will spread, and that we will be able to get a great many more plays to the people.

[ER:] Well that will take plays eh out into small towns and villages and rural areas [Robert Sherwood: Yes.] That will be very valuable, but that still doesn't solve the question in the big cities of the cost of

production [Robert Sherwood: No.] and neither does it solve um because you have to produce a good many plays to keep the flow of um artistic, creative interest in writing plays.

[Robert Sherwood:] That's exactly it and it's the dearth of playwrights that is the-the greatest evil of the theatre today there are just n--

[ER:] Well w-why would you to try to write a play eh if the chances of getting it produced are so slight?

[Robert Sherwood:] Well I think [ER: That's the trouble!] people have just got to write plays. The greatest works of literature in every language have been written to be spoken rather than read. (24:09)

[ER:] I-I know that's true eh but then they must be produced to really [Robert Sherwood: Yes.] achieve their-their results, and-and this difficulty is an economic difficulty because um people who-who go to keep the New York theatres, there are fewer New York theatres open than there were a few years ago, I understand.

[Robert Sherwood:] Oh, much fewer, and I'd-I think that today there are only six plays on the road. Only six plays [ER: Six plays on the road] from coast to coast.

[ER:] Good gracious. So that practically, even in the bigger cities outside of New York, there is very little theatre.

[Robert Sherwood:] Very little. (24:51)

[ER:] For instance Boston and and eh [Robert Sherwood: Chicago.] Chicago [Robert Sherwood: Yes, Washington DC.] and Los Angeles, Washington, well Washington has always been bad I've never known why--

[Robert Sherwood:] But Washington is--

[ER:] Worse, I suppose.

[Robert Sherwood:] No, Washington is the best city in the country for theatre, if we had the outlets there

[ER: Yes]. It's the biggest audience, the most appreciative audience, because there-

[ER:] That's because there's a good many foreigners [Robert Sherwood: Yes.] but um eh it isn't the best city from the point of view of theatres, is it?

[Robert Sherwood:] No, well and recently there hasn't been any theatre, well there is now, but for a long time there was no theatre because we simply would not put up with the um [ER: With segregation.] racial seg--well it was more than segregation, it was [ER: Yes.] total discrimination. A Negro couldn't get into the theatre there.

[ER:] I remember going in Washington one night to a movie on Lincoln, and it was picketed because they wouldn't allow the colored people to see the movie on Lincoln and um it wouldn't appear in the colored theaters, which do exist eh to a certain extent, I mean movie theaters um in the more or less colored areas, for several weeks later, and so they-they picketed the theater and I thought, "They worked it out all right!" (26:20)

[Robert Sherwood:] Well I happen to remember that episode because that part-particular movie was from my own play *Abe Lincoln* [ER: Yes.] in *Illinois* [ER: Yes.]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You know, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions in the lil-little time remaining about another phase of Mr. Sherwood's writing, and that is eh his eh writing of books rather than plays: eh-eh do you find this eh work rewarding, sir?

[Robert Sherwood:] Well, I've really written one book, and that was *Roosevelt and Hopkins* [ER overlaps: Hopkins], and, eh, I can safely state that nothing I have ever done in my life was so rewarding as that was.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What about the-there's another project that you've undertaken as I understand it in England. Is that correct?

[Robert Sherwood:] Yes, well that is not absolutely definite, but that is eh to write a book based on the private papers of David Lloyd George, the great prime minister of the First World War, and--

[ER:] Of course that would be interesting because in many ways some of the reforms he brought about then and touched on New Deal reforms eh they sort of--

[Robert Sherwood:] Oh yes, that's the thing that interests me, that in [ER: Yes.] as long ago as nineteen hundred and five [ER: They antedated it.] he was eh [ER: advocating] working for Social Security for wages and hours, and it's a matter of eh considerable interest and also some amusement to me that his principal lieutenant in putting through these reforms was Mr. Winston Churchill. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh]

[ER:] That's very interesting.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, Mr. Winston Churchill has always claimed to be one of the, eh more liberal minded of the people of England, of the leaders of England. He maintains that he can do it better.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well a lot of conservatives in this country who worship Churchill as the eh supreme Tory of all time would be pretty shocked if they looked at the record. [ER and Elliott laugh.]

[ER:] Exactly.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] They could hear how he talked.

[ER:] And not only how he talked but how he actually [Robert Sherwood: Yes.] helped to get them through. I mean really eh because they did go through a great many of those things [Robert Sherwood: Oh yes, indeed.] They joint-passed them.

[Robert Sherwood:] And they antedated the New Deal, some of them, by as much as thirty years.

[ER:] Yes. I remember because they came right after World War I, some of them you see, and some of them came before [Robert Sherwood: Yes.] and um I remember very well the eh excitement that was created at the time, and eh the feeling that this was a revolutionary thing that was being done and

[Robert Sherwood: Yes.] But I think that would be fun to write, and-and eh-eh point out the lines into the future.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well that's the thing that really excites me about it, and of course the um parallel of Lloyd George and ah your own kinsman, Theodore Roosevelt [ER: Yes.] of that time [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.]

[ER:] There was a great deal that was um very much eh very similar in the thinking [Robert Sherwood: Very similar.] very similar.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, I'm afraid that our time has run out now but eh I wish we could carry it on because I think [ER: Well.] this is a very- covering a very wide range of subjects.

[ER:] Well I'm always sorry to have an interesting interview come to an end, but I thank you very much for coming today.

[Robert Sherwood:] Well thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt, and you, Elliott. (29:57)

(29:59)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30(87)

Transcription: Rachel Kane
First Edit: Isabel Maier
Final Edit: Mary Jo Binker
Final Check: Natalie Hall

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project