

Handout

Miss American Radio Play

America was not yet at war, and the air in Washington was summer pleasant. But neither Katharine Hepburn, nor her supporting cast, nor I thought of pleasantries in those days. We were there to try and convince a handful of congressmen to permit refugees to enter our country. Very small refugees, baby refugees, who would be in the path of the German Blitzkrieg. We did the broadcast and happily our immigration door opened a small, blessed crack and some very small, blessed children escaped Hitler and Company.

[suspenseful music]

[announcer]: Innocent children caught in the whirlpool of inhuman hatred. Children ostracized, excluded from schools and public places. Threatened with physical harm, forbidden the simplest requirements of spiritual survival. Surely our American sympathies go out to these—the most pitiful and helpless of sufferers.

America must do its share in offering refuge to some of these children. As a token of our sympathy and as a symbol of our faith in the ideals of human brotherhood.

Ms. Katharine Hepburn in another original drama, its title—Miss American.

[narrator]: The scene, a great luxury liner returning from Europe to America. It is late at night. A girl stands on the boatdeck, looking out into the darkness, her face to the wind that [slits?] whitecaps on the tumbling seas. Suddenly an older woman approaches and speaks.

[Aunt Mary]: "Well, Ronnie, I must say this is a peculiar way to behave!"

[Ronnie]: "What-what did you say, Aunt Mary?"

[Aunt Mary]: "I said it distinctly and you heard me. Do you realize people have been asking about you?"

[Ronnie]: "Have they?"

[Aunt Mary]: "Oh Ronnie, do come downstairs. Standing up here in the cold!"

[Ronnie]: "Please, I'm all right!"

[Aunt Mary]: "Oh Ronnie, what is the matter with you?"

[Ronnie]: "Poor people."

[Aunt Mary]: "People? Oh that, well after all, my dear, there are always a certain number of undesirables on board a ship this size. And, if you'd only stop wandering up and down the second and third classes, you'd find everything quite right and proper."

[Ronnie]: "Right and proper?"

[Aunt Mary]: "It's the children? I spoke to the captain about them."

[Ronnie]: "Did you?"

[Aunt Mary]: "Staring at us every time we walked the deck. I told the captain exactly how we felt about the matter!"

[Ronnie]: "We?"

[Aunt Mary]: "The things we talked about this morning."

[Ronnie]: "Oh, oh, yes I remember."

[Aunt Mary]: "I should think you would. You were quite definite in your opinions. And of course I—I agree with you. They have no right to take such young children and bring them to New York to—to heaven knows what. But you know the captain, that little charming smile and he changed the subject and well, what difference does it really make? We'll be docking in the morning and away from all of this."

[Ronnie]: "Aunt Mary, there's—there's something I want to tell you—"

[Aunt Mary]: "No, no, tell me later, my dear. Right now the thing for you to do is to go down, get dressed and join the others just as quickly as you can. Come now."

[Ronnie]: "No—no! I want to stay here!"

[Aunt Mary]: "Why, Ronnie!"

[Ronnie]: "Please, a few moments longer. I—I'll come down!"

[Aunt Mary]: "Ronnie, I've never known you— [sigh] Very well, have your silly little mood. But, I don't understand what it's all about. Mooning up here in the dark like a romantic sixteen-year-old. All I say is hurry downstairs, we'll be waiting for you."

[suspenseful music]

[Ronnie]: "Romantic. Yes, it is romantic. I'm in love with— If she knew. In love with— Yes, love at twenty third _____"

[unknown male voice]: "America."

[Ronnie]: "That's a childish thought to have!"

[unknown male voice]: "Patriotic pact."

[Ronnie]: "Of course it is. Of course. [sigh] Getting softening in the brain. Thinking silly things. Over-emotionalized. Ought to go below and join the party. Stop standing here thinking to myself."

[unknown male voice]: "America."

[Ronnie]: "No-no, w-why shouldn't I think it out? How did it start?"

[Ronnie, thinking]: "The things we talked about this morning."

[Ronnie]: "Yes, Aunt Mary did say that—the things we talked about this morning. Those children—"

[unknown male voice]: "Always staring at us."

[Ronnie]: "Why bring them over?"

[unknown male voice]: "Full of foreign ideas. Always staring."

[Ronnie, thinking]: "Not like us. Foreigners. Not like us."

[Ronnie]: "Not like us. I said that, I remember. Not like us. Not like us. Not like us. Not like me. Not like me. Resented their being on board. What happened? Oh, let—let me remember. I went walking on the lower deck. They—they were sitting there, as usual."

[unknown male voice]: "The four of them."

[Ronnie]: "Yes, the four of them, sitting in a row. White faces staring, eyes looking at me. At me. At me. I couldn't stand it. What did I say? Yes, yes, I said, 'You! Children! Don't you know it's bad manners to stare at people?' For a moment, no answer. Three little boys, one little girl. Their staring eyes. Why should they stare at me? I said, 'Answer me! One of you! If you're coming to America, heaven knows why, at least they should have taught you some English!' They didn't move. Four rigid little figures. And then—"

[little boy]: "We all speak English."

[Ronnie]: "Well, at last, the saints speak!"

[little boy]: "No, that is not my name."

[pause]

[Ronnie]: "He said that, then he closed his mouth and the four of them were sitting there once again. Those eyes of theirs, staring, staring. I said, 'What are you sitting there for? I've been watching you all through the ship. You sit there in those deck chairs, hour after hour. What are you waiting for?'"

[little boy]: "America!"

[suspenseful pause]

[Ronnie]: "She said that. The little one. And then she closed her mouth so tightly I could see the muscles of the corners of her lips. She sat there—tense, frightened. Not another sound from any of them. Their eyes beyond me—on the sea, on the horizon. I said, 'All right. You're waiting for us to reach land. But, what's that got to do with the four of you getting up, running around, having fun? Come on! Don't you know how to laugh? You! You know how?'"

[boy]: "When we are in America, then we will laugh."

[Ronnie]: "So that's it, you don't like the sea! You're waiting for the land."

[older boy]: "No, we are waiting for America!"

[Ronnie]: "Waiting for America? What silly nonsense were these children thinking! Couldn't laugh until America? I thought to myself, How silly! Both of these children strangers, aliens, foreign to our sorts. Aloud, I said, 'Listen, the four of you! Are you trying to rid me in your infant continental manner? If you're waiting until you land until you laugh, I'm warning you, you better start laughing now! [exasperated laugh] There isn't much to laugh about there, let me assure you. The dumbest, dumbest place on Earth. Why do you think I went abroad? Laugh in America? Don't make me laugh! We've got depressions and recessions and concessions and dissensions and . . .'"

[Ronnie continues]: "And while I kept talking, the children's faces grew angrier and angrier. Their eyes larger and larger—hating me for what I was saying. Angrier and angrier, until at last one of them cried out—"

[little boy]: "No! No! Wait!"

[Ronnie]: "Wait?"

[little boy]: "Miss American, wait, what you say. It is not right."

[Ronnie]: "What's not right?"

[little boy]: "All these things you say of America. I—I do not understand. I do not know. But-but, this I know—it-it is not right."

[yelling and shouting]

[Ronnie]: "Now, now! Wait a moment, wait a moment. And what is right here, Professor?"

[little boy]: "America is . . . is good. And-and is a good place. B-because, because, because, Jan, you say it."

[Jan]: "Because—because in America a-all men are—are—"

[other voice adds]: "Created equal—"

[Jan continues]: "Ya, and they are en-endowed by-by—"

[other voice adds]: "Their creator with—"

[Jan continues]: "With rights of life and—"

[other voice adds]: "Liberty—"

[Jan continues]: "And liberty and pursuit of happiness."

[Ronnie]: "Bravo! Right out of the Ol' Declaration of Independence. So, where did you learn that and what does it mean?"

[children]: "Jan teacher, Ja, yes, yes!"

[Jan]: "He learned the war. He gave me a book. I read. H-how you say it, Miss American? I teach."

[Ronnie]: "You. Teach. You? And, what do you teach? All—all that about life and liberty? What can it possibly mean to four children like you?"

[Jan]: "Maybe I do not understand everything you say, Miss American. What me learn, it mean that no matter what is wrong in America, it can be fixed. We are free and equal, and we can work and help America."

[pause]

[Ronnie]: "Help America. When he said that, I didn't have anything more to say. Nothing cute or bright or clever. Four little children. I stood in front of them. Suddenly, I wanted to say so—so many things to them. But my throat, I couldn't—I couldn't. Until one of them said—"

[older boy]: "Please Miss American, what the book say about America, it is all right?"

[Ronnie]: "Right?"

[children]: "Tell us of it, Miss American. Bitte."

[Ronnie]: "America. It's—it's very large. And very beautiful. And all the people in it, all their fathers, all their fathers' fathers, came over the water to it. Just the way you're doing. And there's a bigness to it, and a braveness to it. And you need never be afraid. And no matter what goes wrong there, there's always hope. As long as there's someone like you to remind the rest of us. That the—the American way is the human way."

[pause]

[Ronnie]: "That's what I said to them, yes. And they came close to me and touched my hands. And they smiled at each other, and at me. And so I—I'm in love, yes in love. With my country, for remembering four little people who want to help us."

[patriotic music]

[drumroll and applause]

And so, ladies and gentlemen, we bring this program, starring Katharine Hepburn, to a close. The broadcast was especially written for this occasion by Arch Oboler. The cast included Betty Cane, Jackie Grimes, May Grimes, Jackie Kelt, Adley Klein, Ed Lattimer, Bobby Reddig, and George Walley, and, speaking, Raymond Edward Johnson. The music was composed by Leib Stevens, who conducted the orchestra.¹

¹ "Miss American," transcript, radio play written by Arch Oboler, first aired June 26, 1939.