

# Sunrise at Campobello

USA | 1960 | 144 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Vincent J. Donehue
<b>Screenplay</b>	Dore Schary
<b>Photography</b>	Russell Harlan
<b>Music</b>	Franz Waxman

## Cast

<b>Franklin D. Roosevelt</b>	Ralph Bellamy
<b>Eleanor Roosevelt</b>	Greer Garson
<b>Louis Howe</b>	Hume Cronyn
<b>Missy Le Hand</b>	Jean Hagen

## In Brief

The story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his battle to regain the use of his legs at the age of 39 after contracting polio. He was at his family summer house on Campobello Island, New Brunswick, Canada when he contracted the disease with no known cure. By the time he contracted the disease in 1921, Roosevelt had a long history of public service and had run for Vice President on the Democratic ticket in 1920. He and those around him realized that any political ambitions he may have had would be dashed if he was unable to regain at least the partial use of his legs. When he's asked to nominate Al Smith at the Democratic convention in 1924 he realizes he will have to walk 10 paces to the podium and then stand for 45 minutes. It marks his return to public life.

After his ouster as production chief of MGM in 1956, Dore Schary sought new outlets for his creative energies, and he opted to draw upon his long-standing fascination with the career and accomplishments of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Certain of the substantial dramatic grist inherent in FDR's three-year battle back to public life after he was first stricken with infantile paralysis, Schary sat down and crafted his first attempt at a stage play. This novice effort wound up netting a Tony Award and enjoying an 857-performance Broadway run, and Schary was anxious to spearhead its adaptation for the screen. While *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960) never shakes the evidence of its theatrical origins, it remains a moving homage to the fortitude of a remarkable world leader.

The tale opens in August 1921 at the Roosevelt family's New Brunswick summer home, where Roosevelt (Ralph Bellamy) is rebounding comfortably from the prior year's rebuff of his vice-presidential candidacy in the loving company of his wife Eleanor (Greer Garson) and children. While mulling the future course of his career, he finds himself unable to shake the chill of an afternoon swim. Before long, he has lost the sensation in his legs. Under the worried ministrations of Eleanor, his mother (Ann Shoemaker), and his close advisor Louis Howe (Hume Cronyn), he recovers enough to make an audacious getaway back to New York, managing to conceal his infirmity from the encroaching members of the press.

In the months that follow, the restless Roosevelt searches for ways to direct his pent-up energies. He tirelessly corresponds with Democratic leaders over policy, encourages his reticent wife to lift her public profile so she may act as his eyes and ears, and struggles to strengthen himself so he can once again stand. Howe endeavors to keep his political ambitions burning, much to the dismay of the imperious Mother Roosevelt, who considered politics unseemly for her son even prior to his affliction. His moment of truth comes when New York Governor Al Smith offers him the opportunity to place his name in nomination at the 1924 Democratic National Convention, as long as he is able to man the podium. The spectacle of the convention makes for a memorably rousing finale.

If Schary hadn't recruited him for the stage production of *Sunrise at Campobello*, Bellamy's professional legacy may have primarily been his string of comic portrayals of dull fiancs who get thrown over for the leading man. He does an impeccable job of capturing the diverse facets of a larger-than-life persona—the wit, the integrity, the compassion for the common man, and the iron determination necessary to confront the hand that fate dealt him. "A peculiar thing about *Sunrise* is that everyone knew the story before they came to the theatre, but in spite of that there was suspense," Bellamy recounted in his 1979 autobiography *When the Smoke Hits the Fan* (Doubleday). "I think the appeal was the indomitability of the human spirit—the courage and will to live."

As recounted in his autobiography *Heyday*, Schary had considered casting Anthony Quayle as FDR when his wife suggested Bellamy, who, as fate would have it, lived in the Manhattan apartment building across the street from the Scharys. Within a few hours of the script's delivery, the actor called Schary and wanted to know when rehearsals would start. "The next morning the doorbell rang I opened the door and there stood Ralph, a cigarette holder clenched perkily in his mouth, a fedora perched on his head with the front brim turned up, and a broad smile on his face," Schary recalled. "I grabbed his hand and said, 'Mr. President, welcome!'"

At the time of *Sunrise at Campobello*'s release, Garson took a certain amount of critical flak for her portrayal, from the dental appliance used to simulate Mrs. Roosevelt's overbite to the mannered effort to replicate the lilt of her speech. This niggling tends to obscure the fact that her work here is among the most emotionally honest of her career, from the moments of quiet spousal affection to those





where the stresses of her circumstances bring brief cracks in her resolve. Her work would be responsible for the film's sole Academy Award nomination.

To helm the film, Schary retained his Broadway director, Vincent J. Donehue, who delivered a first rate film for his first Hollywood assignment. "I've always responded to young directors in film and saw no reason why I should not use the same yardstick of choice in the theater—enthusiasm, taste, a devotion to the theme, knowledge of the medium, and the breath of authority," Schary recalled of his hiring of Donehue. Among the supporting cast, Cronyn stands out as the asthmatic, sardonic Howe, and Alan Bunce is effective in reprising his stage characterization of the Happy Warrior. Smith was the first Catholic to be a major party's candidate for the Presidency, and in the year of John Kennedy's run, Schary doubtless

understood the resonance of the film's sequence where Roosevelt rebuffs a bigoted politico who sought to scuttle his endorsement of Smith.

### Original New York Times review

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

Published: September 29, 1960

THE intimate and inspiring close-up of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his family that Dore Schary caught in his popular stage play, "Sunrise at Campobello," has been reproduced on the screen with a photographic fervor that gives it, for better or worse, a wider exposure and sharper focus than it had on the stage.

By setting the action in more places than the three or four to which it was limited on the stage and, at the same time, by bringing the characters and the audience closer together with the camera's aid, Mr. Schary and his original stage director, Vincent J. Donehue, have considerably heightened the sense of living with the vigorous family during a rough time in their lives—the time when Mr. Roosevelt was conquering the effects of infantile paralysis.

This, in itself, is tremendously cozy and convincing with a play that is as personal and privileged, as homey and sentiment-loaded, as this one is. Moving outdoors with the family at their Campobello summer home before Mr. Roosevelt is stricken, going into his room where he lies immobile and anguished in a great old-fashioned bed, actually running the gantlet of reporters when he is taken from Campobello to the train and later wandering about with the family in their New York and Hyde Park homes—these advantages of close association help the feeling and atmosphere.

And, eventually, the opportunity that photography gives to set the scene of the Democratic National Convention at which Mr. Roosevelt appears to get to his feet with the aid of crutches and nominate Al Smith is made the most of in a slam-bang noisy climax by Mr. Schary and Mr. Donehue. There is a lot of so-called documentary quality in this film.

Futhermore, Ralph Bellamy's performance of Mr. Roosevelt is every bit as strong, as full of feeling and characteristic gesture, as Mr. Bellamy made it on the stage. The picture he gives us of a strong man enduring a dark Gethsemane and coming through it with cheerfulness and courage is one of the finest of this year on the screen.

However, it must be mentioned that a tendency to overdo some of the famous Roosevelt expressions — at least, more famous in later years than the ones of his early political probing represented here—induces a bit of vexation, especially when they are shown in close-up, which glaringly discloses their forced and theatrical quality.

Close-ups are also unfortunate in the case of Greer Garson, who plays the role of Mrs. Franklin D. (Eleanor) Roosevelt most sweetly, and with firmness and humor, too. But someone has seen fit to equip her with a set of protruding teeth that make her look positively comic when the camera closes in. Also, we wish they hadn't let her affect such a singsong manner of speech. We are all quite familiar with Mrs. Roosevelt. This sounds like a bit of caricature.

Withal, the strong bond of attachment between the husband and the wife is conveyed in their confidential moments, and the unity of the two in resisting the motherly reactions of Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt, who is played extremely well by Ann Shoemaker, makes for drama with feeling and force.

Add a brilliant performance by Hume Cronyn as Louis McHenry Howe, Mr. Roosevelt's friend and counselor, who is full of a gruff idolatry; a fair imitation of Al Smith by a gravelly voiced Alan Bunce and an inoffensive enactment by Jean Hagen of the secretary, Missy LeHand, and that's the essential accounting on a well-done, moving biographical film.

