Screens, Doors, and Stairs:

On John Ford's *The Last Hurrah*

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INTRODUCTION

The Last Hurrah has always been considered one of John Ford's minor films.[1] It gets very little attention in the critical or biographical works on Ford.[2] When mentioned, *The Last Hurrah* is often criticized, not without justice. It is longer than it needs to be. Its sentimentality steps over the line more than once. The performance of at least one of the major characters is weak while some others are more than a little over the top.[3] The plot is marred—and the political

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1 Here is the basic filmographic information.

Written by Frank Nugent, based on the novel by Edwin O'Connor
Photographed by Charles Laughton, Jr.
Black and white
Released by Columbia in 1958
121 minutes
The cast:

Spencer Tracy	Frank Skeffington
Jeffrey Hunter	Adam Caulfield
Dianne Foster	Maeve Caulfield
Pat O'Brien	John Gorman
Basil Rathbone	Norman Cass, Sr.
Donald Crisp	His Eminence, The Cardinal, Martin Burke
James Gleason	Cuke Gillen
Edward Brophy	Ditto Boland
Carleton Young	Winslow
Ricardo Cortez	Sam Weinberg
John Carradine	Amos Force
Willis Bouchey	Roger Sugrue
Basil Ruysdael	Bishop Gardner
Charles FitzSimmons	Kevin McCluskey
Arthur Walsh	Frank Skeffington, Jr.
O.Z. Whitehead	Norman Cass, Jr.

I shall, for the most part, ignore both O'Connor's novel and the career of the man who was said to be a model for Skeffington, Mayor Curley of Boston. I think the latter connection is particularly unimportant, in that Skeffington is very different from Curley. In a longer paper I might talk about the novel more. But films in general—and certainly this film—deserve to be studied on their own. What I find most impressive about the film are those things that one finds in movies not novels.

[2] The film itself receives only a few pages of commentary in the two best books on Ford, Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Scott Eyman, *Print The Legend* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

[3] Although I will argue that the character of Adam Caulfield is very important to story, Jeffrey Hunter did not have the best written part to work with. But he still manages to make the least of it. Hunter plays Caulfield as unbelievably naïve and callow. Caulfield's moments of indignation, on the other hand, come across as stilted and forced. O. Z. Whitehead's portrayal of Norman Cass, Jr. is entirely over the top while Arthur Walsh's Frank Skeffington, Jr. is not far behind. (If I am not mistaken, however, Whitehead dressed as the fire commissioner inspired the fire chief in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*.) A large part of the difficulty with these three roles, as well as

and moral point of the film undermined—by a serious implausibility. The doubts about the character of the younger generation expressed in this, and other Ford films, interferes with the film's portrayal of the effects of television and money on politics. And perhaps worst of all, the character of Frank Skeffington is too good. The film would have been a stronger exploration of the moral quandaries raised by machine politics if more of the bad that a Mayor like Skeffington must have done were mixed in with the good that the film claims he did do.

Yet, for all these problems, *The Last Hurrah* remains a powerful and, at times, moving film. Spencer Tracy gives a finely etched portrayal of a man who was much more complicated than his sometimes bombastic actions revealed. (Would that a few of the other actors also looked to find subtleties in their characters!) More importantly, *The Last Hurrah* gives us a powerful account of the causes and consequences of the replacement of machine politics by media politics. Long before political scientists began to recognize the attractive features of the political machines, Ford was pointing to their virtues as well as their vices. And long before television began to play much of a role in our politics, Ford was pointing to its dangers for the way we elect our officeholders. In addition, though the portrayal of Frank Skeffington is, as I have suggested, unbalanced, *The Last Hurrah* does offers us a useful meditation on political morality. I suspect that lack of appreciation for this film on the part of critics and historians rests to a large extent on their inability to accept Ford's break with our conventional political pieties. A reviewer of the novel on which the movie is based, Anthony West, called it "genuinely subversive."[4] And so, I shall argue, is the film. Rather than flee from its subversive quality, I shall suggest that we try to learn from it. By doing so, perhaps we can gain insights into our own political troubles. And, at the same time, I hope we can learn to appreciate a film that, if not a masterwork, is still a splendid example of Ford's directorial skills. Far from being a pedestrian translation of Edwin O'Connor's novel into film, *The Last Hurrah* tells us much about politics and morality through entirely visual means. The simple but powerful visual and spatial schemes Ford uses to tell and comment on the story are so integral to the film that I will relay its message largely by analyzing them. I begin with the horizontal dimension and Ford's use of screens and doors to portray the transformation in politics as television replaces the political machine. Then I turn to the vertical dimension and look at Ford's use of stairs to portray the moral dilemmas of politics.

SCREENS AND DOORS

A number of times in the course of the film, Ford puts a television frame inside the movie frame. We see both the frame of the television and what is on that television.[5] We see

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with the role of Kevin McCluskey, which I discuss below in the text, is that they express Ford's extremely jaded view of the younger generation. Ford's lack of sympathy for younger men very much weakens this film.

[4] Quoted in Stanley Kauffman, "Spencer Tracy's Hurrah" *The New Republic*, October 27, 1958, p. 21.

[5] For those who are new to the film or don't recall it well, I will give a quick plot summary: Frank Skeffington is a long time Irish-American mayor of a New England city who is up for reelection. He invites his nephew, Adam Caulfield, who is a sports writer, to follow the campaign from the inside for he knows that his kind of politics is fading fast and that this will be his "last hurrah". We join Caulfield as he follows Skeffington to a number of campaign events. Caulfield works for a publisher, Amos Force, who along with his fellow blueblood Protestants, wants to defeat Skeffington. They have banded together in support of a young and unpolished Irish-American, Kevin McCluskey. They claim to be revolted by the financial irregularities of Skeffington's rule. Skeffington, however, claims that they resent being displaced from political power by the Irish. As part of their attempt to defeat Skeffington, the leading bankers in town—who are all Protestants—have agreed to deny money

Skeffington speaking at a rally on the television and then go with Adam Caulfield to the rally at which he is speaking. And we see even more of Skeffington's opponent, Kevin McCluskey, on television.

A screen is something to see through. Ford suggests, however, that the television screen is a barrier to our seeing the world as it is. Most of what Ford shows us on the TV screen in this film is what we have come to call talking heads. There are no TV shows with elaborate camera movements or cutting or even movements of characters within the scene. Without any of the fancy business that so characterizes good television shows and films—like *The Last Hurrah* itself—a talking head would appear to be the most transparent form of visual communication. It would seem to give us reality in as direct a fashion as possible. However *The Last Hurrah* film shows us that this is not the case.

While most of the criticism of the misleading character of television is directed against McCluskey, the first time Ford shows us events through a television screen it is Skeffington behind the glass. And, very quickly, we recognize that something is very different about television. Skeffington is seen arriving at and then beginning a speech at a campaign rally. It is not a terribly good television speech. As McLuhan taught us, television is a cool medium. When we invite people into to our homes by watching them on TV, we expect an intimate relationship with them. At a minimum, we hope that they don't shout at us. Nor do we want them to bring a bunch of strange friends who are unknown to us. Skeffington, however, speaks loudly and brashly and gestures emphatically. He does so in front of a loud and boisterous crowd. And, on the dais with him are a number of other fellows, most of whom will be unknown to the average viewer. Their presence, however, is likely to raises doubts in our minds about who they are, what their connection to Skeffington is, and to what extent they, rather than we, are likely to benefit from his mayoralty.

Skeffington's nephew, Adam Caulfield, watches the speech on television with his wife, Maeve, and her father—a long time foe of the Mayor—Roger Sugrue. Sugrue and Maeve are not inclined to favor Skeffington under any circumstances. And there is little in what they see that is likely to change their minds. They can, however, sit back and, without noticing or being concerned about the reaction of the crowd, criticize Skeffington. Upset at them, Adam goes to the rally. And there he sees what one can't see on television: A political rally is a collective experience that is likely to move us if we are at all inclined to the candidates. From the vantage point of the audience, Skeffington's speech is an entirely appropriate address, one designed to fire up the crowd and create unity within it and between him and it. And the men on either side of Skeffington now seem entirely appropriate, too. For, in their diversity and close relationship to the candidate, they represent the various members of the crowd themselves.

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for a housing project and park in an Irish slum area. Skeffington responds by blackmailing Norman Cass. He threatens to name Cass's ineffectual and alcoholic son Fire Commissioner and then leave him hanging out to dry. Cass agrees to fund the housing project but then pledges an unlimited amount of money in support of McCluskey's campaign. (He mentions "100, 200, 300, 400 hundred thousand dollars," serious money in 1958.) Skeffington goes down to defeat. After pledging to run for Governor, he suffers a heart attack on the way home. In one of the longest death scenes in film history, Skeffington dies. At his death bed, Roger Sugrue, who grew up with Skeffington but who has made his fortune and broken with him politically, says that he is sure Skeffington would do things differently if he could live his life over. Just before dying, Skeffington replies, "Like hell I would."

The television screen, then, distances us from the event we see on it. We focus on the individual before us, rather than seeing him or her in the context of his associates, his party, and his supporters. We feel freer to criticize what we see before us just as we feel freer to talk, and comment on what we see on television as opposed to what we see in a theatre.[6] We are no longer part of an event but observers of it.

Ford's dissection of politics before and after the rise of television is focused on the power of machine politics to create connections between people and the power of television to undermine them. A parade aside, all we see of Kevin McCluskey's campaign is his appearance on television. And here, the screen is clearly a barrier. McCluskey is clumsy—a cluck—on and off screen. But, even so, what we see on screen is misleading. What he says is largely scripted for him. And McCluskey's dog is, in fact, a rental prop, one that frightens his own family.

Ford has a great deal of fun with McCluskey's inept television performance. In some ways, this actually weakens one of the central themes of the film. Had Ford given us contrasting views of an inept and foolish man of screen and a polished candidate on screen, he would have more clearly shown just how misleading television can be.[7] Even more, McCluskey's victory would have been plausible. Instead, he sacrifices a deeper point for some easy laughs. And, it is incredibly hard to imagine how such a candidate—a nebbish, in the words of Skeffington's Jewish associate—could defeat the previously undefeated Mayor. Yet, the laughs do hint at trouble ahead. For McCluskey's incompetence is seen by us—and was seen by the audience for this film in 1958—only because they could compare his ineptitude with the polished performances of actors, newscasters, and other television performers. The contrast between politicians and television personalities in one of the first television campaigns points us toward a future in which politicians develop the skills of the television star. Once they do, the screen between us and them becomes even thicker.

While McCluskey's audience sees him through a screen, the people have personal relationships with Frank Skeffington and the political machine he heads. He meets anyone who cares to meet him Most of those he meets, Skeffington knows well. For example, we see him correct his associates about how to address one of his followers—"Always My Dear Lady," Skeffington says.

Not only does Skeffington know his constituents, they know him. Or if they don't know him, they know someone who knows him, or they know someone who knows someone who knows him. A political machine is based upon personal connections. As we shall see in a moment, much can be and is hidden from the more distant followers of a machine candidate just as much is hidden on the television screen. There are two important differences, however. The television screen represents a clear break between the candidate and his handlers on the one hand

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[6] As people spend more and more time in front of a television rather than at live events, they lose their capacity to take part in these events. They begin to experience everything out of context and at a distance. So people talk all the time during movies. As I found out when I take my daughter to the circus, people talk there too. Moreover, they are so distanced from what is before them that they can't get swept up enough in the spectacular events at the circus to actually applaud them.

[7] I suppose we are all now sophisticated enough to recognize the difference between the way people are in "real life" and on television. Or are we? Last year I made a brief appearance on a morning television show in Philadelphia. Despite years of teaching about the media in politics, I was struck by how different the perky, engaged host of this show was from the dour and seemingly depressed person I talked to off the air.

and the people on the other. Much of what most of us see about the candidate is what transpires on television. Those relatively few of us who are interested in politics, but not part of the campaign itself, learn what we can from in-depth newspaper reports. But these reports, we know, are no more than one part revelation and one part spin. We have no personal connections to assure us that what we read has any relationship to the truth. And most people, who barely read the headlines, let alone the analytical pieces in the papers, have even less assurance about the truth of what appears on their television screens. It is no wonder that our attitude towards politics is so cynical.[8]

In a political machine people have personal connections to their political leaders. Frank Skeffington's closest supporters—Cuke Gillen, Winslow, John O'Gorman, Sam Weinberg and even Ditto are not just his retainers. They are leaders in their own communities. More than once we se them tell Skeffington that something he might do will hurt them, and him, in their own neighborhood. Similarly, we see Cuke, O'Gorman, and the others issuing orders to their closest supporters who are also leaders in their own neighborhoods. And so on down the line. There is a long way between the farthest reaches of Skeffington's followers and those closest to him. But the gap is not insuperable. Even at a distance, people have a connection to the mayor both through his associates and because Skeffington himself reaches out to the people directly. That creates a sense of attachment, and of security among the followers of machine politicians.

There is often good reason for the followers of machine politicians to respect their leaders. As *The Last Hurrah* predicts, media politics enables people without sufficient political skill, knowledge, or character to rise into high office on the strength of their performance on television and / or the skill of their handlers. Our politicians today—with the exception of Vice Presidential candidates—do not have to be vetted by men (and women) who are their peers in the way that old-style politicians did. That is not to say that all machine candidates were so wonderful. Political machines brought us Warren G. Harding as well as Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy, Dwight Eisenhower and the two Roosevelts. One would have hoped, however, that

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[8] There are other explanations as well, that take us beyond this film but that are connected to the issues it raises for us. Our cynicism is in large part the product of the investigative journalism in the daily newspaper that has revealed corruptions in politics large and small. The forces examined in *The Last Hurrah* had much to do with the rise of investigative journalism. The fall of the political machine upset some of the chummy relationships between politicians and the press. And the rise of television encouraged newspapers to provide the kind of deeper analysis that could not be found on television news programs. Another factor examined in *The Last Hurrah* that both undermined the political machine and encourages investigative journalism is the dramatic expansion of an educated middle class. This transformation created a market for both reform politicians and muck-rakeing journalists who criticize the old style of politics. Both movements trade in the kind of moralistic ideals that views politicians like Skeffington with horror.

I don't want to entirely belittle the achievements of the kind of investigative journalism that focuses on corruption. Yet I don't think that, on the whole, it has made our politics better. There is undoubtedly less corruption in American politics now than at any other time in our history. Yet cynicism about politics is no lower than in the distant past and is far higher than in the fifties and early sixties. Partly because we—and our journalists—have standards of political propriety that are too distant from the realities of political life, we see corruption everywhere in political life. That is, we have become entirely intolerant of the relatively innocent trading of favors that makes it possible for an extremely diverse political community to agree about anything. This is one, but not the only, explanation of why new policy initiatives are so difficult to undertake today. In addition, by concentrating so exclusively on ferreting out corruption, our journalists give a highly misleading picture of our politics. And, even more, our journalists miss phenomena, such as the declining political power of the working class that one can only grasp by looking at the bigger picture, at the structural problems of our political life.

with the rise of a more educated and affluent electorate, the quality of our political candidates would have improved dramatically from that found in the first half of the twentieth century. While we have many politicians who are impressive in one way or another today, one could make a case that, taken as a whole, our political candidates are no better, and are, in some ways, far worse, than those of an earlier generation. Our McCluskey's are not nearly as clumsy and unpolished as the one in *The Last Hurrah.* But many don't seem to have minds of their own any more than he did.

Our political candidates today share another characteristic with Kevin McCluskey—their production requires substantial sums of money. Money has always been important in politics. *The Last Hurrah* foresaw, however, that the rise of media politics would provide a new means by which the wealthy can exert influence not available to those without means. There are many plausible explanations of the rightward tilt of American politics in the last thirty years. But the decline of Democratic political machines—and the labor unions associated with them—and the rise of expensive media politics financed by the rich explains a great deal of it.

The connections of people to Skeffington and his machine are expressed visually in this film by means of doors. Doors have a frame and can, themselves, frame things, just like a television screen and like the frame of a film. But they are a frame designed to be passed through. And that is precisely what we see happening again and again in this film.

In the initial scene we see Skeffington come down the stairs from his bedroom and then pass through a door into his study. The camera—and that means us, too—join Skeffington and his political associates there. The camera moves around the room as Skeffington and his associates do, now looking from one view, then from another. Not everyone gets this intimate view of the mayor and his associates. This is emphasized by Skeffington's opening the doors of his study, passing through them, and then closing them as he enters the foyer of his home where he meets citizens of his city, who, themselves, pass through the front door of his house. Yet, while the doorways are barriers between one level of connection to Skeffington and another, they, unlike the television screen, are permeable barriers. People move in and through them. Some people start all the way outside and wind up in Skeffington private office. And those people have connections to the people who are in the next vestibule and the one after that.

Citizens have various levels of connection to Skeffington. And there are various Skeffington's to see. There is, to use theatrical terminology, a front stage, where Skeffington meets his public and a back stage, where he plans his political stratagems. But perhaps the theatre analogy is too simple. For, in a number of different sequences, we see that there are many rooms to go through as we go from the public Skeffington to the most private one.

In Skeffington's house, we can begin with the privacy of Skeffington's bedroom upstairs. I will say more about it later, as I will about the stairway that takes him downstairs and up. Then there is Skeffington's office. There is foyer where he meets citizens one on one. And there is large area immediately outside his house where Skeffington talks with more citizens. And then there are the streets through which he rides in a limousine while his police escort signals his presence with a siren.

In Skeffington's office, too, there are a series of doors we pass through as we go with Adam, and Skeffington's lieutenants, from the outside office to Skeffington's inner sanctum. On his first visit there, in a long sequence, Adam learns about one source of Skeffington's animosity

to Adam's boss, the newspaper publish Amos Force. Force's father, it seems, once prosecuted Skeffington's mother for taking some food from the house at the end of her days work as a maid, as was customary in those times.[9] Skeffington relates this story to Adam in a long expository sequence that is unusual for Ford in that, during it, Skeffington and the camera both move from one part of his office to another.[10] Tag Gallagher has criticized what he calls Tracy's "aimless wandering" during this sequence.[11] Yet Gallagher fails to recognize just how this scene is connected to Ford's plan for the film as a whole. Ford's camera generally is stationary in this film. That is true when we see things on the television screen and in other circumstances where he shoots through glass, as in the scene in which Amos Force directs his editor to do everything he can to defeat Skeffington, or when Skeffington is meeting the public. But both the actors and the camera move through doorways into the more intimate spaces in which Skeffington and his political associates work together. And the camera and actors typically both move in these sequences. Here, I think, Ford is emphasizing both the political intimacy of the setting and the dynamic relationship between Skeffington and his associates and between them and the political world outside the room. Politics at this level involves an on-going interchange of information and advice, a continuing interplay of subtle cajoling and direct instruction. And, at all times, the participants in political discussion have to bear in mind the expectations and reactions of those outside the room. Ford's unusual style of shooting these sequences—unusual for him, that is—aims to bring these features of political life home to us.

Another central sequence in the film takes place during the funeral of Knocko Minihan. Again, Ford shows us a series of three interconnected rooms in which different kinds of political and personal transactions take place. There is a private kitchen, where Knocko's widow, Gert, meets Skeffington and accepts a check Skeffington claims is from his own late wife. Of course, both the widow and Skeffington know this is not true. But accepting it as true allows the widow to take the money offered her without shame. Even here, in the most private room of her home, we see that there are times when honesty is not appropriate in politics—or friendship. Then there is a hallway where Skeffington meets his own allies as well as other politically connected citizens, including one of his long time, if ineffectual, opponents. It is here that we see policeman and firemen bringing food from the city jail and hospital to a presumably private funeral. And, it is also here that Skeffington insists that the undertaker charge Gert Minihan only $35.00 for the funeral or face trouble with the city licensing authority. Finally, there is the parlor, where the funeral takes place. This is the most public space, in which most of the attendees at the wake—who are brought there almost entirely by the Mayor's presence—put on, for the benefit of the widow, a show of affection for Knocko Minihan even though the deceased was evidently a most unpleasant fellow.

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[9] Skeffington tells the story as an explanation of Force's distaste for him. But it is clear from a later sequence that Force remembers little about the incident. As Skeffington points out to Force, Norman Cass and the other bluebloods—after barging into their Plymouth Club—they hate him because he represents the rise of the Irish and their own displacement from the seat of political power.

[10] As Tag Gallagher points out in *John Ford:The Man and His Films*, p. 367, expository sequences are fairly unusual in Ford films. And they typically involve little movement of either camera or actors. Think, for example, of the long shots between Tom Joad and the ex-preacher Casey toward the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

[11] Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, p. 367.

Near the end of the film Ford takes us into another public space, the auditorium where Skeffington's supporters are gathered to hear election returns. And then we go, with Skeffington and his lieutenants, through a doorway to a small room, off to the side, where the returns are analyzed and dissected.

Skeffington has a persona for each location. And, in all but in the most private place in his own home, where we see Skeffington reading a book of poetry, he is on stage giving a performance for his followers. And, at the end of the film, he puts on a show even in the privacy of his own bedroom, as he lies on his death bed surrounded by friends and enemies. Each of these performances is a little different from the others.

McCluskey, on the other hand, essentially has one persona, the one that goes over the airwaves and is heard by everyone. True, he does meet privately with some people. Yet in the world of media politics, the image one has on the air is so powerful that it dominates most others. One might think that this makes for a kind of consistency and honesty that machine politics lacks. Isn't it better for out political leaders to have one face that we all gaze upon rather than a different face for each of us?

That is to forget something that Skeffington apparently has never forgotten. Conflict is central to politics. Sometimes a politician has to try to minimize that conflict. As Skeffington tells Adam and his wife Maeve, man's greatest friend is the compromise. Skeffington is the master of compromises. He chooses an Italian-American hero, Mother Cabrini, to become the subject of a statute thereby satisfying or at least placating those who wanted Christopher Columbus, Garibaldi, and Rocky Marciano. Skeffington's political machine is itself the product of compromise among different groups of people. It brings together diverse peoples: Irish and Italians, Jews and even the Wasps represented by Winslow. Left to their own devices these groups struggle with one another—as we see when Skeffington loses his bid for reelection and they turn on one another. It is Skeffington who holds them together. He does so, in large part by knowing both "what people really want" and "what (they) can settle for."

Skeffington shows Adam only indirectly that sometimes a politician has to create conflict. He does this every time his entourage roars down the street, reminding both his supporters and critics that Skeffington is there. Political campaigns are motivated more by hate than love. Skeffington knows how to stimulate—and take advantage—of the hatred of both his supporters and opponents.

Modulating political conflict is a difficult task that is made easier when politicians can wear a slightly face to different people. To present a different face to various audiences need not be dishonest—political moralists notwithstanding. Indeed, it may simply be a way talking to different audiences about what is of importance to them while ignoring matters that are relatively unimportant and yet divisive. When political campaigns come to the screen, however, politicians have to find another way of escaping from the divisive issues. They typically respond by becoming mushy. McCluskey's campaign is a good example. For, as Martin Cardinal Burke puts it in the film, McCluskey is a "mealy mouthed maneuverable piece of dough." Now politicians are always mealy mouthed and maneuverable to some extent. They often have to tread a fine line between conflicting ideals and interests. One way to do this is to be ambiguous.[12] Yet ambiguity

[12] Indeed, it is the capacity of politicians like Skeffington to emphasize different aspects of themselves to different audiences that makes it less necessary for them to mislead us or lie to us. A politician who has to speak to

has its costs and not just to the politician whose tortured English leads us to wonder whether he is actually saying anything. Faith in our polity as a whole is undermined when politicians do not seem to stand for anything. And this is but one reason that voting has declined precipitously in the television era of politics. The machine era polity had troubles of its own. Most voters, however, had little doubt whose side they were on. And voting rates in the heyday of the machines were higher than they are today, and not just because some citizens were able to vote more than once.

Not only does Frank Skeffington play a variety of roles in politics, most people recognize that this is what he is doing. He is a larger than life figure not least because of his own theatricality. But his skills as a performer are not hidden from his followers. Skeffington's theatricality is of a kind that is very hard to recreate in an age of television politics.[13] Television purports to give us reality. And so it leads us to expect greater restraint and a conversational demeanor from our politicians—and many of our performers, too. It is very suspicious of the ritualized dramatic gestures of past. Today the grand gestures of the performers and politicians of the past seem phony to us. We make fun of them. Think, for example, of Bill Murray's smarmy lounge singer. Think, too, of how contemporary performers, such as David Letterman, are so often at pains to ironically distance themselves from their own theatrical bits. Skeffington's theatricality is vital to his political success, however. Today we assume that, in the past, people somehow did not notice just how ritualized and calculated the charms of politicians or performers were. That, of course, is nonsense. People were no more naïve in the first half of the twentieth century than they are today. Indeed, precisely because they attended live political rallies, and live theatrical and musical performances, so much more than we do today, they were more likely to recognize grand theatrical gestures for what they were. But men and women expected important moments in their life to be elevated in tone and gesture. People gained confidence in their political leaders like Skeffington because these leaders took their own

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all audiences at once can't just tell each group how he agrees with them. He has to make sure that nothing he says in support of one group's views will offend another. A politician like Skeffington can take another tack. If his views on some issue are likely to offend or displease the group to which he is speaking, he can simply ignore the subject, provided that this group does care much about the issue. He simply does not place the issue in the public space created by the relationship between speaker and audience. That tactic is not available when a politician has to talk on television to everyone at once. All issues of importance to any one group of people are placed in the public space. Even if they know they differ on some matter with a politician, a group of people can ignore it if it is relatively unimportant to them and if it is not brought before them. They are less likely to do so when that issue is put into the public space of a political campaign. The only way the television politician can encourage them to do this do this is by being ambiguous.

[13] Yet the career of Ronald Reagan shows that it is not impossible to do so. It is no accident that Reagan began his show business career in an earlier, pre-television age. Reagan's age very much helped people accept the showy flourishes of his political persona. What might seem phony in a much younger man seemed fitting in Reagan. We knew his theatricality was, so to speak, the genuine article. It was clearly formed in an era in which such behavior was widely accepted. I don't think a younger politician could get away with much of Reagan's shtick. Anyway, many of us who did not entirely approve of the ideological direction of the Reagan presidency were fairly immune to his power of self-dramatization.

(To see the importance of age in our evaluating the demeanor of artists, compare the public persona of Louis Armstrong with Miles Davis. What we find acceptable in Armstrong would be offensive if we saw it coming from Miles. That is not to say that Miles's anti-entertainment persona was not an act all its own. Miles in fact confirmed that in no small measure it was. But it is not a style of performance that easily translates to politics. We won't soon see Presidents turning their back on the Congress while giving the state of the union address—although Clinton might have been tempted to try this.)

actions—and their relationships to their followers—seriously enough to try to impress themselves on their audience. The self-presentation of old style political candidates went far to define the tone and direction of his interests and concerns. Bringing matters into the public space created between candidate and electorate made it an important matter. Leaving things—and sometimes especially controversial things—aside indirectly said something about what men and women would have to agree tacitly to ignore if they were to manage to get along together. A coalition, like Skeffington's, that includes Jews and Blacks as well as Italians and Irish must agree to leave certain matters aside.[14] Much the same can be said about the private dealings of a political candidate—as in Skeffington's ritualized denial that the money he handed Gert Minihan came from him.

In addition to allowing them to hold a diverse coalition together, speaking to different audiences in different ways allows politicians to respond appropriately to the political sophistication of the audience before them. In a previous paper, I defined political artifice as "the effort to encourage others to reach certain political conclusions by offering them arguments that they will find convincing regardless of whether we accepts these arguments ourselves." And I pointed out that "political artifice almost always requires a political leader to withhold something of her own beliefs from others."[15]

Now political artifice is very much frowned upon by strict moralists, just as Adam frowns on the hypocrisy of Skeffington and his followers not only attending but essentially organizing a funeral for Knocko Minihan, a man most of them detested. But isn't there something a bit naïve and foolish in expecting every citizen in a liberal democracy to approach politics as if it were a debate in a seminar room? Knocko's widow, and her friends and neighbors, can't discuss the important issues of politics in the way Adam can or we can. Yet Skeffington not only serves their interests politically, he helps them in their everyday lives. Skeffington provides for Knocko's widow, Gert, by giving her a $1000 check. At the same time, he saves her pride by swearing that it is an inheritance from his own late wife. He protects her from the undertaker who is trying to gouge her with a lavish and expensive funeral. He provides food from city offices for the funeral. And, simply by attending, he brings out most of the people who attend this funeral for a man most unloved by his neighbors. In doing so, he salves the wounds of Knocko's widow and, as his lieutenant, John O'Gorman points out to Adam, encourages some to pray as well.

To convince Adam that Skeffington is not wholly cynical in his political exploitation of Knocko's Minihan's wake, O'Gorman tells him that all of the people attending it were likely to vote for Skeffington anyway. This is, of course, true. But it is not the whole story. The reason they are likely to vote for him is precisely because of his long history of helping his friends and neighbors one by one in just this way, as well as because of his efforts to use the public treasury to provide them with better housing and playgrounds. Skeffington's politics serves the interests of the Irish and other later immigrants to his city. But it also exploits their resentments. He speaks to them and for them in a way they can understand. To some extent he shares those

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[14] This, of course, was true of the Democratic coalition as a whole in the New Deal era. The Northern and Southern wings were held together by a tacit agreement to keep certain issues almost entirely out of politics.

[15] Marc Stier, "The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth" in Laura Duhan Kaplan and Laurence F. Bove, eds. Philosophical Perspectives on Power and Domination (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1998.) This paper is also available at my web site, www.stier.net.

interests and resentments. Yet is also clear that he stands above them. Skeffington has a deeper and more complex understanding of the political circumstances of his city. He does not talk to those of his followers most distant from his political machine in the way he talks to those closer to him. (It is doubtful that the talks to himself in the way he talks to his associates.) Yet it is his ability to speak their language that allows Skeffington to represent them.

Those who get closer to Skeffington can come to see just how he appeals to people in various ways. Those like Adam—or us—who come to this kind of politics with moralistic notions in mind are likely to be repelled. But, it is precisely because Skeffington can speak to different people in different ways that his kind of politics enables him to respond to the moralistic criticism of machine politics in an effective way. Adam's revulsion against his uncle's politics is turned around as he comes to understand how politics must be played if Skeffington is to truly serve the interests and ideals of the working class community he represents. He recognizes, for example, that Skeffington's use of city funds to provide jobs and benefits to the working class men and women he represents is a fitting response to the prejudice and poverty that has stood in their way.[16]

By being taken in to the mayor's confidence, Adam is elevated from an outsider to an insider. And, in doing so, he is asked to recognize certain things about politics that the outsiders cannot recognize, if only because of their simple faith in Frank Skeffington. (Of course, the bluebloods can't recognize the political necessity that drives Skeffington's kind of politics because they are not fighting, like he is, an uphill battle against poverty and prejudice.) Adam is not the only one to come down this path. Winslow, the blueblood Protestant who once worked for the banker Norman Cass, undoubtedly preceded him. And, of course, we are taken down the very same path in this film. For Anthony West is right: This film is subversive precisely in that it leads us to question the moralistic assumptions about politics that most of us bring to it. It legitimizes not just political artifice, but such things as the illegal use of city funds and even blackmail.

The film, and Skeffington himself, are even more insidious than Anthony West might have imagined. For Skeffington and the film try to convince us of the justice of his kind of politics in two, very different, ways. The more obvious one is by showing that Skeffington's sometimes dubious methods are justified both by his entirely legitimate and praiseworthy goals and, also, by the prejudice and equally dubious tactics of his upper class opponents. That Skeffington uses methods that cross the line of not just propriety but legality is further justified because his corrupt activities are said to benefit his constituents but not himself.[17] This may be true only if we are talking about financial benefits. For Skeffington surely benefits from the power and prestige his position affords him. At any rate, there is another, subtler form of influence way in which the film encourages our acceptance of its critique of political moralism. In the course of the film, Adam becomes a political insider. Adam is thrilled and not a little honored to be brought into his uncle's inner circle. And so, in effect, are all of us. To be

[16] If machine politics were still around when African Americans finally came into their share of political power, there would have been no need for affirmative action. Of, if the beneficiaries of the political machine, and their descendants, could recognize just how much they owe to the benefits provided to them in virtue of their ethnicity rather than their individual merit, affirmative action would not be so controversial.

[17] This is by no means impossible. Richard Daley did not become a rich man as mayor of Chicago. He had interests more important to him than the pecuniary ones.

educated in politics by his charming uncle gives Adam, and us, a superior understanding of political life. He comes to stand above—and see himself as above—not only the working class his uncle and his own father came from but, also, the college-educated moralists of his own generation. To the extent we come to accept the viewpoint of the film, very much the same thing happens to us. Many critics of *The Last Hurrah* have complained about the character of Adam. Tag Gallagher says that "the Adam character is a useless bystander, not even a narrator" as the character was in the O'Connor novel.[18] Yet Adam's relationship to Skeffington is important to our understanding of the politics of Skeffington and men like him. Every big city boss had college-educated men who willingly served them, not just out of self-interest, but because they recognized that the old style of politics could, and often did, have purposes higher than merely holding power. The loyalty of men like Paul Douglas and Adlai Stevenson to the Chicago Democratic Party was not just a matter of convenience but also a recognition of the legitimate role of much that the political machine did. Central to the film, then, is an effort to show us how a college-educated person, who, perhaps like us, is naïve about the ways of the political world—the name Adam is no accident—can come to see justice and even nobility in a rogue like Frank Skeffington.

STAIRS

Just as Ford explores the connections between people in old style politics by a visual focus on the horizontal dimension, he emphasizes the noble motives for Skeffington's questionable actions by a visual focus on the vertical dimension. He does this largely by attending to three staircases.

The first is in Skeffington's house. At the center of that house is a winding staircase with a landing between the first floor, where Skeffington's office is, and the second floor, where his bedroom is. On the landing is a portrait of Skeffington's late wife. On his way downstairs every morning, Skeffington places a flower in front of the portrait. He looks lovingly at her each time he ascends these same stairs.

Skeffington conducts all his business on the first floor. On the second floor, we see him, alone, reading poetry. And we see him die, under the concerned eye of his boyhood friend, Cardinal Burke. The two floors symbolize the ideals the motivate Skeffington, and the political realities that require him to act in ways that seem problematic. Each morning he descends from the higher plane on which his ideals were formed, and continue to be refreshed, down to the daily and often brutal world of politics, a guardian descending into the cave to rule for the sake of the ruled. Each evening, he returns to the higher plane. Ford's visual scheme suggests the Platonic / romantic explanation of what leads him up to the higher plane: love, in this case, Skeffington's love of his late wife, Kate.

Skeffington takes Adam on a sentimental journey to visit a second set of stairs, those at the neighborhood of triple-deckers where he grew up, along with Roger Sugrue and Cardinal Martin Burke. Here Skeffington is again portrayed as an intermediate between extremes. Sugrue,

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[18] Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, p. 367. Scott Eyman offers a similar criticism of the Adam character in *Print the Legend*, p. 463.

became a wealthy businessman who despises Skeffington, not doubt because of his alliance with the Protestant bluebloods. He grew up on the lower level in what is now a Chinese laundry.[19] Martin Burke, who became the representative of the ideals Skeffington still recognizes, grew up on the top floor. Skeffington grew up between them, just as he now mediates between high ideals and low realities. And it was here on this level that Skeffington at age six met his future wife who he "has loved ever since."

Finally, and with tongue in cheek, Ford shows us a third stairway, that found in the blueblood Plymouth club. On his way up the stairs to crash the lunch attended, among others, by the Protestant conspiring against him, Skeffington is told that no one but a member is allowed on the second floor of the club. He responds by pointing to the rickety stairs and by telling Ditto to cite the club for a safety violation. The difficulty of climbing rickety stairs is a symbol of the dubious moral stance of Skeffington's opponents. And Skeffington's running up the stairs perhaps suggests that he is bringing his own ideals to a place that only pretends to follow them.

And the end of the film, Skeffington's closest political associates, perhaps for the first time, ascend the stairs in his house, to his deathbed. Ditto hesitates. But he is called on to join the rest. As they rise up the stairs, we see that these men, who are sometimes rough and contentious and sometimes wise and sentimental, have been ennobled by their association with Skeffington. They are far from the heights Skeffington ascended. But they are pulled up by their connection to him. In the eyes of Ford's film, this is perhaps the greatest justification of the life Skeffington has led.

[19] As early reviewers have pointed out, one of the flaws of the film is that the enmity between Sugrue and Skeffington, as well as the lesser enmity between the Cardinal and Skeffington are almost entirely unmotivated.