

GOOD SHOES CAN OPEN ALL POLITICAL DOORS

RUNNING IN HIGH HEELS

(WITH EMILY CSENDES, M.T. MANELSKI, PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY,
SHERRY HENRY, AND DR. HEIDI HARTMANN)

DIRECTED BY M.T. MANELSKI
(ELM FILMS AND 52 WOMEN FILMS 2005)

Reviewed by Melanie Roe

Melanie Roe will receive a master in public policy degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2007. She is a member of the Kennedy School's program "From Harvard Square to the Oval Office," which trains and encourages female students to run for public office. Prior to attending graduate school, she worked on John Kerry's presidential campaign as part of the advance staff in New Hampshire during the primary race and as part of Senator Kerry's traveling staff during the general campaign. She graduated from Wellesley College in 2000.

In 2006, a prevalent political dilemma is whether the American people are ready and willing to elect a woman to the most powerful position in the world, that of president of the United States. First Lady Laura Bush has declared a resounding yes, while Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are still considering the possibilities. Democrats and Republicans alike wonder, if a woman runs, can she win? Will women automatically favor her? And what are the advantages and disadvantages a female candidate faces in the male-dominated arena of politics? These are just some of the questions M.T. Manelski tries to answer in her documentary film *Running in High Heels*. In it she explores the meaning and implications of feminism, sexuality, privilege, vanity, and image in the world of campaigns and constituencies. Unfortunately, while she asks the questions and exposes viewers to an array of opinions and issues, the lack of a common thread in the film is all too apparent and unsettling. However, I uncovered five lessons in Manelski's assessment of women in politics today that can guide us as we look toward 2008 and beyond.

The documentary follows the campaign of Emily Csendes, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from an affluent background, who decides to run for state senator in New York after working on Wall Street for a couple of years and then as a public school teacher in Harlem. The film introduces Csendes as she stands on a street corner, in flip-flops and a suit, handing out literature to passersby with a careless one-line pitch "Emily for New York Senate." The tone of her campaign is set by a simple statement made jokingly to her campaign manager (and the camera): "If you aren't voting for me, leave me alone." This sets up lesson number one: first

impressions matter. As the viewer continues to follow Csendes on the campaign trail, that statement seems to keep repeating itself as we find her to be too casual and almost apathetic—someone any other candidate would never want handing out their campaign literature. Moreover, as a viewer, I never felt close to her, and as a young woman with a similar background, I never felt she had the professional drive, nor interest, to represent me.

Interspersed with Csendes's story are Manelski's interviews with various female leaders from across the political spectrum. While her questions seem thoughtful, she fails to lead the discussion, resulting in conversations that seem superfluous to the point. Her objective was most likely to allow these individual interviews to speak for themselves and shed some light on the story and the issue, but I often found myself wondering what their particular comments had to do with Csendes's disjointed race or the analysis of women as political candidates. However, there is one instance in which brilliant editing creates a virtual debate that leads us to our second lesson. As the film tries to uncover the reason why so few women are elected to office, particularly given that women compose 52 percent of the American population, and how we should overcome the all too infamous gender gap, Manelski presents us with a drastic divide between women. We see Phyllis Schlafly, founder of *Eagle Forum* and a prominent conservative, describing feminists as enjoying being victims and "[waking] up with a little list of who [they are] going to hate today." The camera then turns to Sherrye Henry, author of *The Deep Divide*, as she says "I am proud to say I am a feminist." Back to Schlafly as she declares with a look of disgust "their bitterness comes across," and back to Henry who with a smiling face says "it's only a desire to live in an equal existence with all." And so we find lesson number two: we must learn to bridge the gap within our own gender constituency.

Too often newspaper articles and television broadcasts covering female politicians emphasize wardrobe, hair, skin, and general demeanor, which leads us to question why men are not submitted to the same superficial scrutiny. Early in the documentary, Manelski brings to the forefront two of the most traditional fashion features of women: hair and high heels. Csendes is constantly presented as worrying about her hair; as she is preparing for her big debate she seems more "worried about the cameras" than her platform. We wonder if this is about vanity or a product of the exaggerated scrutiny she knows the media will subject her to. Manelski visits a plastic surgeon to discover the depths of vanity within our gender, and the conversation quickly moves to "designer vaginal labioplasty," which makes a point, but does little to advance the documentary's discussion. The film then moves on to high heels as a symbol of femininity and the question of how far women will and should go to conform to this conventional image. Manelski interviews a podiatric surgeon who describes the pains and discomforts women experience in the name of fashion. In her interview, Myrna Blyth, author of *Spin Sisters*, rightly claims that men do not care if you wear Manolo Blahnik's or something from Payless ShoeSource, but we know that women do care, notice, and, most importantly, judge other women according to fashion. The podiatric surgeon has the correct assessment (and reveals lesson number three) when dealing with shoes, hair, and femininity: use them, but do so wisely.

Inevitably, a discussion of women politicians turns to their personal life—the role of marriage and family—and its influence on voters' perceptions. Henry describes the simple but troubling dichotomy: if a woman does not have children, female voters will automatically think “she will never understand my life,” while if the candidate does have children, the voters will tend to frown upon her for leaving her home and children behind. Recognizing this is the first step toward understanding why we are not running and winning and learning how to speak to a public who is not convinced of a female candidate's viability.

This brings us to lesson number four: We must appeal to women directly and make them realize that a woman's personal life has no greater bearing on her ability to serve in public office than it does for any other elected official. Henry makes us realize the alternative: with little female representation, men will most likely do little to pass pro-women legislation or legislation that is important for women, children, and families.

Promotional material for the documentary credits the film with “[raising] issues that are provocative ‘without pulling punches,’” but perhaps this is where we find the last lesson of *Running in High Heels*. In the cutthroat world of politics in which women are a minority even while being a majority of the population and in which our femininity might work for or against us, isn't it time to look beyond the ladylike image and perhaps throw some powerful punches? As we watch Csendes struggle through her campaign, viewers might often find themselves hoping that she would do just that. This brings us to lesson five: don't shy away from passionately defending what you believe in.

Running in High Heels is a fragmented documentary that tries to achieve too much in ninety minutes. Manelski raises many vital questions and pressing issues, but, in the end, it is unclear if we have come any closer to devising some form of a “silver bullet,” or even a general path to follow in order to attain political equality. I cannot help but feel that she opened the floodgates of information and questions and leaves us to search through our interpretations to try and form some sort of hopeful conclusion. I had hoped that the last scene would be one of introspection, where she would look us in the eye and say what we need to look for, achieve, or even ponder. Instead we hear a prediction: if women insist on running in high heels it could take us up to seven hundred years to achieve gender equality in politics. My answer: unacceptable. As we approach the 2008 presidential election, we have the chance to shape the discussions and drastically change the fate of women candidates. We must prove that we can run (and succeed) whether we choose to run in high heels, flats, or flip-flops.

For more information on *Running in High Heels*, go to www.52women.org.