PS for 4/12/90

War of the Roses

I finally saw the movie “War of the Roses” after it left the theaters and hit the video circuit. It was quite a surprise to find an old-fashioned morality play lurking behind an R-rated movie with bad words and embarrassingly explicit sexual scenes.

The moral of this black comedy is that, of all the options a married couple can choose, divorce is the worst. Lesson-master Danny DeVito gives it to us straight and unvarnished at the end of a couple of exhausting hours.

The plot is as simple as the special effects are improbable and convoluted. Boy meets girl; they marry and have two children; husband is a successful lawyer and makes lots of money; they buy and furnish the house of her dreams.

They have 18 years of a good marriage: good sex, good income, good children, no adultery, no alcoholism, no poverty, no abuse, no worries. Their biggest problems were making their decorating choices.

Then one day, out of the blue in the middle of the night, Mrs. Rose announces that she wants a divorce; she just doesn’t want to live with Mr. Rose any more. There was no provocation, no fault; she didn’t even deign to offer a reason.

Although she certainly was no lady, she expected him to play the stereotyped gentleman and get out, leaving *her* to enjoy the house that *they* built. To her surprise and dismay, he fought to keep the marriage contract they both had signed and, at the very least, for his equal rights to their house.

Ten years ago, in the popular movie “Kramer vs. Kramer,” the divorcing couple fought for custody of their child. It’s a mark of our age of materialism that, in “War of the Roses,” the couple fought for possession of the house, and custody of the children was irrelevant.

The movie is so busy with the physical and emotional confrontation between the Roses that one scarcely has time to ask *why* Mrs. Rose wants a divorce. The only motive one can reasonably deduce from the script is that Mrs. Rose succumbed to the disease of women’s liberation.

The ideology of women's liberation teaches a woman to rank her own self-fulfillment above every other value, including solemn promises, husband, and children. Mrs. Rose suddenly decided that she would be more personally fulfilled if she lived in the house alone and ran a little catering business making liver pate under her own name.

The popularity of "War of the Roses" among moviegoers this spring was probably due primarily to the fact that it touched a tender nerve in contemporary society. Some people are beginning to lament the fallout from the fundamental change in our divorce law that swept through 50 state legislatures during the 1970s, starting with trendy California in 1969 and ending with Illinois in 1984.

The feminists argued that easy, no-fault divorce would spell liberation for women. What it really did was to enable one spouse to terminate a marriage contract without the consent of the other, and virtually without penalty.

Divorce "reform" laws eliminated "fault," supposedly in order to prevent bitterness. As both "Kramer" and "Roses" confirm, bitterness does not go away; it just takes other forms.

At the peak of women's liberation movement in January 1975, Barbara Walters confidently proclaimed in a three-hour NBC television special called "Of Women and Men" that wives should be liberated from their menial role and from the prison of a home. We were entering a new era of "serial marriages," she said, which means a succession of temporary roommates, without commitment or responsibility.

Probably more women than men have been hurt by this change because more men than women have the opportunity to exchange their spouse of 20 years for a younger model. But plenty of men have been hurt, too, not so much by wives who seek a new, more successful husband, but by wives who want to go it alone, while manipulating old traditions to hang on to custody of the children and the house.

Fortunately, we are beginning to see the divorce rate inching down; 1989 rates are down 4 percent from 1988. One newspaper has even called trying to work things out and stay hitched the "contemporary thing."

Psychologists are trying to figure out why. Perhaps the baby boomers are maturing out of the "Me" generation. Perhaps the fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases is persuading couples to stay together.

Perhaps the post-divorce statistics are having a chilling effect on the rush to divorce. Current figures show that more than 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

Last year, psychologist Dr. Diane Medved started to write a book to help people with decision making about the “morally neutral” option of divorce. When she faced the reality of her data, she found herself compelled to write *The Case Against Divorce*. That case is powerful, indeed.