

In movies, no marriage woes are irreconcilable

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NEW YORK (AP) — In the movies, there's often no such thing as irreconcilable differences.

Hollywood adheres to many clichés, but one of its more interesting habits is its insistence on reuniting divorced or separated parents. On the big screen, exes are magnetically pulled together, much to the glee of their children.

Going by the movies, one would think most divorces ended in reconciliation. Of course, remarrying an ex-spouse is a rarity. Statistics on it are hard to come by, but nearly half of first marriages in the United States end in divorce, and more than 60 percent of second marriages do.

Yet the movies keep coming, constantly urging the nuclear family back together. This summer (the following will include spoilers), both "Popper's Penguins" and the "Crazy Stupid Love" have featured separated parents again finding romance between themselves.

Such films, though, are seen by some as indulging in an unrealistic and unhealthy fantasy for children. Divorce is difficult enough for kids to accept, the argument goes, without Hollywood promoting remarriage like it was the only truly happy ending for a family.

Speaking about "Mr. Popper's" (a film aimed squarely at children) on "Ebert Presents: At the Movies," Mubi.com film critic Ignatiy Vishnevetsky called such plot lines "dangerous." As a child of divorce, he's sensitive to movies that sell a false sense that the marital problems that lead to divorce can be quickly patched up.

"I feel like if you're going to make a film for an audience of children, you have to acknowledge that children are actually fairly smart," says Vishnevetsky. "Playing into these wish-fulfillment fantasies over and over isn't necessarily the best thing. Acknowledging the reality of how things work might be better."

He sees the source of such films as part of Hollywood's nostalgic tendency to reassure us about how things were before, "instead of showing us how change can be a good thing."

It was the philosopher Stanley Cavell who first termed the movie genre "comedies of remarriage." Looking at films of the '30s, he noticed the trend in screwball classics like "His Girl Friday," "The Philadelphia Story" and "The Awful Truth."

But in those films, children are not involved. The closest they come is Mr. Smith, the fox terrier that Irene Dunne and Cary Grant fight over in "The Awful Truth."

The granddaddy of the remarriage film with children is 1961's "The Parent Trap," which has been remade several times, including a 1998 version with a young Lindsay Lohan. In "The Parent Trap," twin daughters conspire to reunite their parents.

"It's not unusual for kids to have fantasies of reconciliation," says Christy Buchanan, professor of psychology at Wake Forest University and co-author of "Adolescents After Divorce." "So to the extent that Hollywood perpetuates the notion that this can happen for kids who are experiencing this type of longing, that could be difficult for families."

In "Mr. Popper's," Jim Carrey plays a real estate developer who has turned cold and overly career-focused. When a shipment of penguins arrives, they help him reconnect to his two children, to nature and to his former self. His wife (Carla Gugino) gradually softens and the two begin formally dating again.

It's remarkably similar in plot to another Carrey film, 1997's "Liar Liar," in which forced honesty restores him (again playing a coldhearted businessman) to his old self and his ex-wife. (Carrey's "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," too, was considered by some critics to be a modern example of the 1930s comedy of remarriage.)

Dr. Simon Casey, therapist and author of "Couples in Chaos," believes any such trend might simply be filmmakers working out their own issues.

"It is an unhealthy proposition, but then again, I don't believe that is what motivates Hollywood," says Dr. Casey. "I sometimes wonder if some of these films are the direct result of their unresolved personal experience they put on the screen to create their own escapism."

Often cataclysm brings exes back together. When faced with world destruction, petty squabbles recede and ex-husbands finally shine. They include: "Outbreak" (1995), "The Day After Tomorrow" (2004), "Independence Day" (1996), "2012" (2009) and "War of the Worlds" (2005). In the HBO period melodrama "Mildred Pierce," nominated for a leading 21 Emmys this year, it's domestic upheaval involving a child that leads to remarriage.

"Crazy Stupid Love" is more squarely aimed at adults than "Mr. Poppers," but its journey from separation to divorce is more unlikely. When Steve Carell's character learns that his wife (Julianne Moore) has cheated on him, they split and he starts sleeping all over town. But he, taking inspiration from his young son, eventually realizes his true love for his wife and their reunion seems promising.

"Ultimately we wanted the sense that there's an unbelievable gravity pulling them together, but circumstance is driving them apart," says John Requa, who co-directed the film.

Moore acknowledges "there is a fantasy about giving everything a happy ending," but she believes there's truth to such stories.

"I just had a friend of mine that had separated from her husband, she suddenly had this revelation that she wanted to be with him again," says Moore. "She felt that their family deserved another chance. So I do think that that stuff happens."

And certainly, Hollywood has always been interested in extreme and unlikely tales. Happy marriages are almost as uncommon in movies as rational divorces.

Several stars have remarried their exes. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton tried it in 1975, but it only lasted a year. Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood married a second time in 1972 and remained together until Wood died nine years later. Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson twice married, and twice divorced. Eminem and his wife, Kimberly, married in 1999 and 2006, the second time lasting about three months. Earlier this year, Marie Osmond married her first husband, 26 years after they divorced.

Dr. Robert Epstein, a psychologist and author of parenting guide books, thinks Hollywood's feeding of reconciliation fantasies "does no harm at all."

"Hollywood is about fantasy and happy endings, and the downside of disappointment is more than offset by the uplift of hope," says Dr. Epstein.

There are, of course, numerous authentic movies about divorce and children. Noah Baumbach's semi-autobiographical "The Squid and the Whale" (2005) portrayed the confusion and pain two young boys experience when their parents separate and try daily-alternating custody.

"Kramer vs. Kramer" (1979) and "The War of the Roses" (1989) showed the bitterness of divorce. 2009's "It's Complicated" found the comedy in Meryl Streep's late dalliance with a former husband (Alec Baldwin). It's not emotionally hard for the children -- they're mostly grown, and far more level-headed than their parents.

It might be surprising, but "Mrs. Doubtfire" (1993) and "The Santa Clause" (1994) are the rare movies that end both optimistically and with acceptance of divorce. In both films, the fathers (Robin Williams, Tim Allen) go to great lengths to stay present in their children's lives after divorce.

In "The Santa Clause," all Santa's son needs to do is shake a snow globe, and his father will swing by in sleigh, ready for a father-son adventure — just so long as he has him back to mom's at a decent hour.