

# Peter 'hunky-dory,' Roxanne axed

It is something of a rule, recognized by almost everyone, that people are responsible for their own actions. This is true in both law and psychiatry but not, it appears, in Palm Beach County, where a judge settled the notorious Pulitzer divorce trial by finding Peter Pulitzer responsible neither for his wife's behavior nor even his own. He got the children and she got the gate.

The judge, Carl Harper, pinned something of a scarlet letter on the rambunctious Roxanne, holding her to



Richard Cohen

a standard of conduct that not only had precious little to do with her qualities as a mother, but one that her former husband himself could not have met. Nevertheless, Peter got sole custody of the five-year-old twins and the legal equivalent of a sterling reference.

It is no easy chore to take the side of the former Mrs. Pulitzer. Witnesses testified that she made love with a handyman, a French baker, a Grand Prix driver and another woman — a millionaire, but still a woman. In addition (and presumably in her spare time) she dragged her husband to discotheques, kept him up until dawn and engaged in seances during which — and for reason I think I prefer not to know — she took a trumpet to bed.

At the trial, Peter Pulitzer said he took up cocaine just to keep going — although at his age and with that schedule not even liquid oxygen would have sufficed. He evidently lacked her energy, not to mention her Borgia-like tastes, but physical stamina was the least of his problems. His problem was that he either chose to share some of her lifestyle or acquiesced to her demands. Either way, the word "no" was apparently sparingly used.

Consider for a moment that Peter Pulitzer admitted taking cocaine and marijuana — to please her. Consider that he went to the discos. Consider also that he admitted joining his wife and another woman in bed and consider finally that if, as the Freudians believe, there are no accidents, then this marriage was not one, either. Instead,

until things got out of hand, it was probably a meeting of the minds.

And consider that Peter Pulitzer was not one of the Pulitzer children — too young to know better — and not even the junior partner in the marriage. He was — and is — a man in advanced middle age, 21 years older than his wife. Nevertheless, he financed and participated in what he described as her lifestyle, although just not to the degree she did. One wonders if it was his morals or simply his age that governed his temperance.

But as far as the judge was concerned, none of this seemed to matter. Peter Pulitzer's behavior was just hunky-dory while Roxanne's was despicable. The judge was just half right. But he was totally wrong in thinking that Roxanne's late-night shenanigans necessarily meant she was a bad mother — or, at the very least, a worse mother than Peter Pulitzer was a father. In fact, we have the testimony of the nanny (no day-care in Palm Beach), that Roxanne was a good mother. There was no testimony that she abused or neglected them — or made them suffer.

What did suffer, though, was the concept that men and women should be judged equally. Instead, the judge — admittedly given an awful choice — lambasted Roxanne, quoted a country-western song to characterize her financial demands ("She got the gold mine, I got the shaft") and felt nothing but sympathy for Peter when he saw "the . . . painful hurt and frustrating concern exuding from his doleful eyes and aging face" — a face, incidentally, that had been lifted.

So completely did the judge side with Peter that he gave him sole — not joint — custody of the children. As for Roxanne, he gave her the label of "gross marital misconduct" — as if Peter's coke sniffing, pot-smoking, disco-dancing, menage-a-trois was coerced at gunpoint or that the man, at 52, had slipped into senility.

Whatever Pulitzer's reasons — love, weakness or just plain sloth — he did what he did and should, like anyone else, have been held accountable for it. It took the sexism of the judge to make him into what he was — an innocent victim. Peter Pulitzer made his own bed. It's nobody's fault but his own that he found a trumpet in it.

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