

Modern Joan of Arc story set for TV

Mark Pattison/CNS

WASHINGTON — It's one thing to see history brought to life. It's quite another to see history brought into the present.

But that's what America's television viewers will get come autumn with "Joan of Arcadia," as the Joan of Arc story is brought into contemporary times.

The drama, which will debut on CBS this fall 8-9 p.m. Eastern time on Fridays, features Amber Tamblyn as 16-year-old Joan Girardi, who's moved to the fictional U.S. city of Arcadia with her parents and two brothers. God selects Joan as the one he wants to speak to — except that God isn't always a he; in the initial episode God takes the shape of the high school cafeteria lady.

Series creator and executive producer Barbara Hall, who worked the last three years on the series "Judging Amy," said she and the writers talk "all the time" when preparing scripts about God and how God manifests himself.

"Every writer's (job) interview was an hour, and these things usually take 20 minutes," Hall told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Hollywood, where they were working on the set.

"We talk about rules of what God can do in this particular universe — not the real universe," Hall said. "Is he angry? Is he patient? We're talking about what qualities God would



CBS/CNS
The stars of the new CBS show "Joan of Arcadia" are pictured in a publicity shot. From left are Joe Mantegna, Mary Steenburgen, Jason Ritter, Amber Tamblyn and Michael Welch.

and would not possess."

Hall was raised a Methodist — she has a brother who is a Methodist minister — yet "I've always been fascinated by Joan of Arc since childhood" after reading a book on the teen-age French heroine, she said.

She wants to place "Joan of Arcadia" in the context of a father-daughter story — Joan's dad (Joe Mantegna) is the new police chief in Arcadia — and also depict "how much trouble God would have in talking to a 14-year-old (St. Joan of Arc's age at the time of her first visions) now." The teen would "have to take the iPod off," she added, referring to the device that plays digitally downloaded music.

Even though Joan's dad is the police chief, and Erik Palladino, late of "ER," is a police detective — and the initial episode deals with a series of murders of young women close to Joan's age — the series is not going to be a crime-of-the-week story, especially with God involved. "That's the last thing we want to do," Hall told CNS.

Instead, she'll have to deal with the typical travails of teenhood, enhanced for TV: the unsettled marriage of her parents (with Mary Steenburgen as her mother, Helen); her sports-star older brother, Kevin

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(Jason Ritter), now confined to a wheelchair after an auto accident; a computer-geek kid brother, Luke (Michael Welch); and being a new kid in school. That, and God speaks to her every day.

Not that Joan welcomes it or expects it. "I was baptized Catholic," she explains in the opening episode to a young-looking form of the Deity, dubbed "Jukeboy God" by the writers. But her family doesn't attend church. "My father has issues with the church," she tells the blond Almighty.

Might "Joan of Arcadia" be a nod to CBS viewers who had tuned in to "Touched by an Angel" for nine seasons? Despite its longevity, "I'm not really familiar with that show," Hall said, though she knows that "Touched" didn't have a teen protagonist like "Joan" does. But she was happy to welcome viewers of all stripes to at least sample the new series.

Hall said CBS has given "amazingly few" suggestions to the show's creators about God and how to treat God dramatically and express God visually.

"We're certain to offend someone's image of God," she noted, but "we are not putting limitations on God. We're having God exposing human limitations."

'Pancho Villa' film leaves much to be desired

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — How a fiery Mexican rebel leader found a creative solution to finance his revolution is dramatized in the blustery "And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself," airing Sunday, Sept. 7, 9:30-11:30 p.m. EDT on the HBO cable channel.

In 1914, Fort Lee, N.J. — not Hollywood — was the movie capital of the world. Director D.W. Griffith (Colm Feore) was immersed in filming "Birth of a Nation" when he received a unique movie offer from none other than revolutionary Francisco "Pancho" Villa (Antonio Banderas).

For gold and 20 percent of the profits, Griffith's Mutual Films could record the first live battlefield action movie of his rebel army's struggle against Mexican government soldiers. Intrigued, Griffith's partner (Jim Broadbent) sent his

nephew, Frank Thayer (Eion Bailey), south of the border to seal the deal and film Villa's soldiers in action.

Upon arriving, crew in tow, Thayer is snatched, blindfolded and ushered before Villa, who is angry that Griffith himself did not come. However, the gleaming gold calms him and soon Thayer is filming the larger-than-life figure in the smoky midst of cannon fire. Thayer is awestruck by the thunderous Villa, who gives Thayer his personal medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The finished one-reeler, however, shot without proper lighting and in evening skirmishes, is nearly unwatchable, so Thayer convinces his uncle that they need to make Villa's life into a full-length movie, capturing what makes Villa tick and doubling the admission to a dime. Bad press from the Hearst publications convinces Villa to cooperate lest the U.S. government actively turns

against him.

But this time out Thayer sees Villa's darker side, as he orders an innocent Englishman shot and impulsively kills a widow for screaming after her husband's arbitrary execution. Thayer records the intense battle of Torreon and departs disenchanted, having thrown Villa's medal back at him. Mutual Films, however, lionizes its subject in the editing room, leaving Thayer cynical about the power of film to manipulate the truth.

Despite credible production values, including on-location shooting and handsome period detail, director Bruce Beresford's biographical drama is a hollow affair. Banderas plays Villa as a bit of a vain buffoon, never letting us get inside the man, perhaps because Larry Gelbart's script keeps characterizations at a superficial level.

The story's little-known basis in

fact is initially quite interesting but the film-within-a-film structure soon rambles and takes on a disheveled look. Adding nothing to the overall mix is gratuitous cursing and Thayer's affair with an ambitious actress (Alexa Davalos), as well as brief bedroom shots of Villa with prostitutes.

Bailey fares better in conveying Thayer's transformation from adoring to appalled by Villa, whose idealistic rhetoric never sounds convincing. Alan Arkin, as an American mercenary and translator for Thayer, seems unenthused by his role, turning in a mediocre performance at best. Beresford doesn't get beyond routine battlefield scenes and one is left with only a marginally better understanding of the history and politics behind Villa's revolution.

Pare is director of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.