

CBS series poses questions about God

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Paula Doyle/CNS

WESTWOOD, Calif. — Inspired as a child by the girl "icon," St. Joan of Arc, Barbara Hall grew up to eventually create and produce the acclaimed CBS television series, "Joan of Arcadia," a contemporary drama about a teenage girl's visits from God.

The show was both "jinxed and unstoppable," Hall said in a talk at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Westwood to members of Open Call, an entertainment industry spirituality group.

Hall, an award-winning writer and producer of such television shows as "Chicago Hope" and "Judging Amy," said she got the idea for the show thinking about how her daughter would talk to God if she met the creator in person. She would probably argue, Hall figured.

When Hall went to pitch the show to CBS, she had no more than three sentences out of her mouth before network executives said they wanted the show.

The quick acceptance, however, preceded a number of production challenges, including casting the demanding part of "Joan" (played by Amber Tamblyn) and coping with disasters that occurred during the filming of the pilot episode, including the heart attack a crew member suffered.

Just as bad things happen to good people in real life, "Joan of Arcadia" mirrors the kinds of tragedies that people encounter. Joan's brother, Kevin, played by Jason Ritter, lives life in a wheelchair because of injuries he suffered in a car accident.

A recent episode, titled "Death Be Not Whatever," dealt with human suffering over the death of a loved one.



CBS/CNS

Joan (Amber Tamblyn) and "Little Girl God" (Juliette Goglia), right, are pictured in a scene from the CBS show "Joan of Arcadia."

Coincidentally, the script was written just days before the death of Ritter's father, popular actor John Ritter of "Three's Company" and "Eight Simple Rules."

"I wanted the series to be as dark as life is," said Hall. "The show is mainly about questions, not answers."

When Joan sees God, appearing in different disguises, ages and genders, she wrestles with the assignments she is given, many of which don't immediately make any sense.

"I have more questions about God than answers," said Hall.

Raised Methodist, Hall as a young adult was not affiliated with any religious denomination. Seven years ago she became a victim of a violent crime and afterward "sort of had an understanding of something bigger than myself," she said.

She embarked on a spiritual jour-

ney where she studied every major world religion. A couple of years ago she became a Catholic.

She decided to "make the leap and figure everything out later," she said.

An underlying principle of "Joan of Arcadia" is the belief that God is available to everyone all the time, Hall explained. Another central theme is self-discovery.

"The most important thing about 'Joan of Arcadia' to me is the idea that everybody is here (on earth) to fulfill their true nature," said Hall.

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She believes that depression and alienation occur when people become separated from their nature and purpose in life.

While no one religion is held up over any other one on the show, clergy from various denominations show up to guide Joan as she tries to fulfill God's sometimes confusing requests.

"It's not going to happen that we do a show about God and not mention religion," said Hall, who stood her ground with industry executives wanting a religion-free show.

Hall believes the show's "across-the-board appeal" comes from each episode's unpredictability and, perhaps, the portrayals of God by males and females, dog walkers and punk rockers alike.

"The main thing people like is it's not what they thought it would be," said Hall.

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