

## ● REALLY BIG SHOW

# Joan of Arcadia

## God talks to a teen

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IT'S one thing for a teenager to argue with her parents. But 16-year-old Joan Girardi (Amber Tamblyn) suddenly finds herself trying to argue with God.

"Is God snippy?" asks the bewildered Joan, who, in the promising new CBS drama "Joan of Arcadia" (Fridays at 8 p.m.), is continually bumping into the Almighty. God appears in many guises — as a cute boy on the bus, the cafeteria lady at school or a little girl playing in a park.

One of the best reviewed new series of the fall season, "Joan of Arcadia" is not — God, forbid — "Touched By An Angel" for the younger set. It shows Joan battling her geeky younger brother, Luke (Michael Welch), comforting an older brother, Kevin (Jason Ritter), who's been recently paralyzed, and adjusting to life in Arcadia, the town her family has moved to so her dad (Joe Mantegna) could take a job as chief of police.

That's enough for any teenager to deal with, but then God starts appearing to Joan and giving her very specific tasks to accomplish, like getting a job at the local bookstore or taking honors chemistry courses. Inevitably, these assignments help Joan mature. She makes new friends, inspires her dejected brother to find a job, and gets a whole new outlook on life.

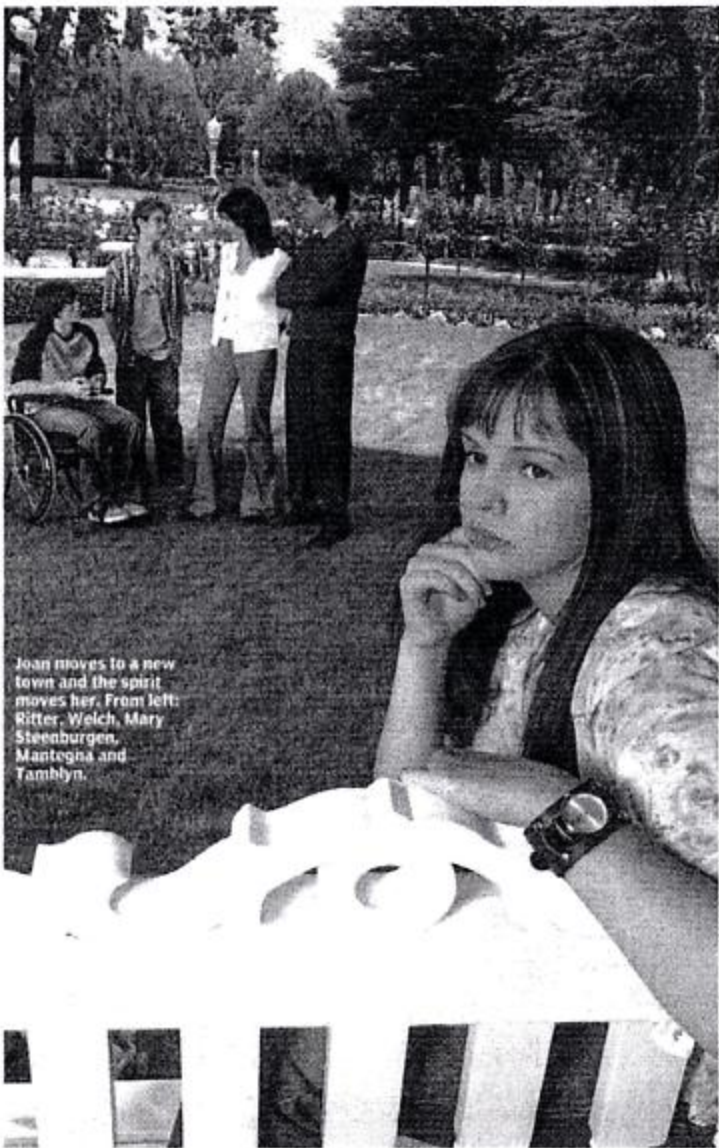
"One of the really amazing qualities of the show is its underlying philosophy," says Tamblyn, the 20-year-old daughter of Russ Tamblyn, who played Riff in "West Side Story" and Dr. Lawrence Jacoby on "Twin Peaks." "[Creator] Barbara Hall takes the silliest idea and by the end of the episode it's been turned into a life metaphor. For instance, in the show we're doing now Joan becomes a cheerleader. It sounds not that important, but she learns about not judging people too quickly and it all ties back to her family."

The series manages to take God seriously without embracing any one religion. Hall, who created the Emmy-winning CBS series "Judging Amy" and was a consulting producer on CBS's "Northern Exposure" as well as co-executive producer on NBC's "I'll Fly Away," does this by grounding every episode as much as possible in science and philosophy. Wander onto the set of "Joan of Arcadia," says Hall, and you're likely to hear people discussing string theory and the concept of original sin more often than talking about plot lines.

"Every story meeting is like that," says Hall, 42, a divorced mother who converted to Catholicism from Methodism and whose philosophy is also influenced by Buddhism and Sufi-ism. "We spend five minutes on character arcs and act-three breaks and the rest of the time it's a debate about what God would and wouldn't do," she says. "Like I know, I can only address that in the context of the show."

"I have a lot of rules about what God can tell people and say to people," Hall adds. "We can't let God get mad, for example. It's a huge temptation to make him a scold or a nag. He has to be basically rooting for us."

Another prominent feature of the series is its music. Joan Osbourne's 1995 hit "One of Us" provides "Arcadia" with its theme, but the soundtrack also includes the work of contemporary pop artists



Joan moves to a new town and the spirit moves her. From left: Ritter, Welch, Mary Steenburgen, Mantegna and Tamblyn.

such as Three Doors Down, Avril Lavigne as well as more thoughtful fare by the late Warren Zevon.

It's no surprise to find out Hall has her own band (she plays the guitar) and that Tamblyn has just recorded a song called "God and Me" with her dad's old friends — Billy Talbot of the band Crazy Horse and Neil Young.

Working on "Joan of Arcadia" has inspired Tamblyn to write more (she's a published poet). The spiritual environment on the set also made it easier for the cast and crew to deal with the sudden death of Jason Ritter's father, John Ritter

of ABC's "8 Simple Rules."

"Joan had just finished up his work [on the show] so it was good for him because he had that week off," says Hall. "In a way, it's been hard for us because we haven't been able to see him."

"I had just written a script where Joan confronts God about the issue of death," she adds. "It just reminds you that you can't be flippant because you're talking to people all the time who have to deal with serious pain. We all do."

**Joan of Arcadia**  
Friday, 8 p.m., CBS