

The four-part docudrama series, *Secret Files of the Inquisition*, filmed on location in Italy, France and Spain, debuts Wednesday at 11 p.m. on Vision TV. The hook of the show is that the source material is somewhat unique. The Vatican briefly opened its archives on the subject in 1998 to scholars. The people depicted in the series and the quotations attributed to them are taken from the original transcripts. (Vision TV)

The Inquisition like you've never seen it before

TIM ARSENAULT/ TV COLUMNIST

NOBODY EXPECTS a four-hour exploration of the Inquisition to be compelling viewing.

But they would be mistaken if the series in question were *Secret Files of the Inquisition*. The international co-production gets its North American television premiere Wednesday at 11 p.m. on Vision. The series runs for four weeks with repeats of episodes on Thursdays at midnight.

The \$3-million dramatic documentary is a big deal for the relatively low-profile specialty channel. The dramatic segments were filmed in Spain, France and Italy and director, producer and co-writer David Rabinovitch oversaw the enterprise. Canadian actor Colm Feore, familiar to television viewers for his memorable turn in the title role of the first Trudeau mini-series, does the narration.

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Secret Files of the Inquisition, even at four hours in length, can only scratch the surface of what amounts to an immense topic.

The establishment of the tribunals is credited to Pope Gregory IX in 1233 as a means of battling heresy by the Roman Catholic Church. The Inquisition would last, in various forms and countries, for some 600 years.

The first episode, titled *Root Out Heretics*, is set in Southern France where an obscure — at least to me — group of dissident Christians known as Cathars is depicted as gently helping people get by in the early 13th Century. Their actions are, however, seen as a threat by Pope Gregory IX and the Dominican Order is instructed to do whatever it takes to stamp out Catharism.

The Inquisition, at least as it pertains to this time and place, is shown to be swift and decisive with a speedy progression from arrest to interrogation to torture, if required. The punishments meted out by the authorities ranged from being ordered to wear a yellow cross of shame to confinement in shackles with only bread and water for sustenance to burning at the stake.

The second episode, The Tears of Spain, follows the Inquisition to the late 15th Century. Up to this point, what is now Spain had been a model of civility where Christians, Muslims and Jews lived fruitfully together and enjoyed each other's customs. But the ruling combo of Ferdinand and Isabella aspired to unite the land under their Catholic faith.

The monarchy ran its own Inquisition there, shutting out Rome, and also brought torture to a whole new level. Viewers will learn the source of the expression "Putting one's feet to the fire" and see a range of devious contraptions designed to capitalize on neighbours turning in neighbours. Without exaggeration, the methods these guys perfected make Guantanamo Bay seem like Club Med.

The dramatic portions are fleshed out by comments from several Inquisition scholars whose books would no doubt provide further information for anyone interested in going deeper into the topic.

CTV obviously knows a good thing when it sees one. For sure, the executives know a good thing when they see the ratings.

To that end the network has announced that it has reached agreements to keep the Idol franchises on the air for years to come.

CTV and FremantleMedia signed an extension Thursday that sees the network retain the Canadian broadcast rights to American Idol for seasons six, seven, eight and nine.

CTV sort of came late to the party in that it only started simulcasting the singing contest in September with American Idol's two-part finale for the first season.

The fifth season of American Idol premiered on Fox and CTV just last week to predictably huge ratings.

At the same time, FremantleMedia signed off on a multi-year extension with CTV for the format rights to Canadian Idol. The network has assured itself of a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth season of the summer-long phenomenon.

Auditions for the fourth season of Canadian Idol get underway next month.

FremantleMedia has produced versions of the Idol format in 32 countries.

The second and final retirement of Mario Lemieux this week has the ESPN Classic channel in a reflective mood.

The digital channel for 24 hours straight starting Monday at 7 p.m. will celebrate the National Hockey League legacy of the Pittsburgh Penguins legend.

Dubbed The Magnificence of Mario, the tribute gets underway with Lemieux's second appearance in the NHL All-Star Game in 1990, which was hosted by the Penguins.

The programming event runs through Tuesday's 5 p.m. airing of Lemieux's return from his first retirement in 1997.

In between will be coverage of the 1991 Stanley Cup playoff match between Minnesota and Pittsburgh, the 1992 Stanley Cup face-off between Chicago and Pittsburgh, Lemieux's five-goal game and his head-to-head match against Wayne Gretzky in 1996.

During his 16-year career in the NHL, Lemieux achieved consistent individual milestones and two Stanley Cup wins with the Penguins. In international competition he helped Team Canada to a World Cup gold medal in 2004, an Olympic gold medal in 2002 and a Canada Cup gold medal in 1987. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame after his first retirement.

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