



Wednesday, May 9, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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Q&A

# The Inquisition's story is in the details

By Mark Rahner  
Seattle Times staff reporter

Anyone who can cite chapter and verse of Monty Python's Flying Circus knows: "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" But thanks to Seattle-based filmmaker David Rabinovitch, you can now set your TiVo for it.

His engrossing four-part "Secret Files of the Inquisition" begins at 9 tonight on PBS. I extracted the truth from the former KCTS vice president, 56, whose show has already won a Canadian Gemini Award for best direction in a documentary series.

**Q:** You will answer my questions or face the consequences.

**A:** Well, I feel like a heretic before the inquisitors.

**Q:** You based your documentary on recently unsealed [in 1998] Vatican documents.

**A:** The opening of the Vatican's archive of the Holy Office of the Inquisition stimulated us to locate records of the Inquisition that are actually stored just about anywhere an inquisition was held. So as our series goes across several centuries and across Spain, France and Italy, our research took us to those places where we found a lot of material that just hasn't been unearthed yet.

**Q:** Viewers received vomit bags at the 1970 Inquisition movie, "Mark of the Devil." Will we need them for yours?

On TV  
"Secret Files of the Inquisition," 9 tonight, KCTS.

**A:** Absolutely not. In fact we've just received a preview of the review in TV Guide, which criticizes us for being overly bloodless. And I think that perhaps if Mel Gibson had

directed our series you might need those bags. But my taste as a



INQUISITION PRODUCTIONS

"Secret Files of the Inquisition," based on Vatican documents unsealed in 1998, uses interviews and reenactments "to tell a story that's never been told," said filmmaker David Rabinovitch.



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filmmaker is that the horror in our minds, the horror that we don't see, is far worse than anything that we could depict in such a graphic manner.



INQUISITION PRODUCTIONS

Pierre Clergue, priest to the village of Montailou, France, in the 1300s, eventually faced the trials of the Inquisition.

#### Information on the Web

To find out more, visit

[www.inquisitionproductions.com](http://www.inquisitionproductions.com).

**Q:** What are the biggest new revelations?

**A:** It's not like we found that Galileo's eyes were drilled out or anything like that. The biggest revelations in our series really come in the small details, in the intimate details that inquisitors pried from victims in their confessions. In one case where a woman was being tried as a witch, the

Inquisition wanted her to describe in detail the devil's sexual parts. And ultimately she does, because it's the only way off the rack for her.

**Q:** Did you see any parallels with events today?

**A:** I think the series really resonates for our time in a number of ways. If we look at the suppression of medical research by the church and the Inquisition during the Renaissance, there are clearly parallels with the controversy over stem-cell research today.

If we look at the Inquisition in the index of prohibited books, we can take this immediately to issues of freedom of expression and freedom of thought in many countries around the world.

If we look at contemporary terms such as the ethnic cleansing and tribal biases, whether it's in Bosnia or Darfur, I think the scenes of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 are quite parallel. And of course it all leads to the big overarching issue, that nearly 800 years after the Inquisition was instituted, we're still struggling to develop mutual respect if not tolerance among peoples of different faiths.

**Q:** So: religious extremism, torture to get confessions, imprisonment without due process, a terrorized citizenry. This all works out fine in the end, right?

**A:** I think the Inquisition, many historians will tell us, was in fact a precursor to the Holocaust. And very much like the Holocaust, it's not a story of nameless people in numbered files. Every story, every person portrayed in our series was a real person with a name, an address, a family, an occupation. We know all of these details, thanks to the Inquisition. And where that leads us is that there are survivors. There are descendants. This story is very much alive in the hearts of the descendants of these people. So if there's something positive to come out of it, it is that these voices speak to us from these files across all these centuries to say: 'Let these things not happen again.'

**Q:** How was this allowed to take hold?

**A:** At the commencement of the Inquisition in the medieval period, the Church of Rome is the only accepted form of Christianity and there's no distinction between church and state. The law of the church is the law of the land. So it's very much again relating to issues of controversy in our society today.

**Q:** So, Queen Isabella had lots of people killed in the worst faith-based initiative of all time. One lesson here is that our founders were onto something with this separation-of-church-and-state thing.

**A:** Well, you know, the kind of campaign slogan for Ferdinand and Isabella, who called themselves the

Catholic monarchs, was "One nation, one religion." And with the expulsion of the Jews and later the Muslims, they were pretty much successful at that. Now we live in a pluralistic society, which is the greatness of American democracy.

**Q:** How many times have you had that Monty Python line thrown at you?

**A:** I'm rather bored with the references to Monty Python, although I did look at the song-and-dance routine with "History of the World: Part I" on YouTube recently. After several years of working with this, we can laugh about it now. I can tell you there's dark humor that enables humans to survive any kind of situation.

**Q:** You encountered funnier things, and I always thought the Inquisition was full of yuks.

**A:** Not so much funny in terms of laughs out loud, but I think one of the most shocking attention-getters for us when we embarked on it was the moment when I learned that people could be condemned for what they ate or what they didn't eat. If *conversos*, who were Jews who had converted to Catholicism, declined to eat pork, they could be condemned by the Inquisition. The Inquisition had an "olfactory patrol" of informers who would go around smelling what people were cooking in their kitchens, and if the kitchen didn't smell like pork lard ... that would be enough to call a person before the Inquisition.

**Q:** The inquisitors were obsessed with the Other White Meat!

**A:** [Laughs] You might put it that way. And we also have one of the country's leading authorities on the history of the Catholic church, who has developed a prototype for an Inquisition video game. It's a learning tool. You know, how to talk your way out of a cellar.

**Q:** I shudder to think what the controllers for that would be like.

The show is a long piece of work with lots of locations and reenactments. What kind of an undertaking was this for you?

**A:** It was a *massive* undertaking. There's more than 40 principal roles. There's hundreds of sheep. There's pigs, there's horses. There was a crew of maybe 60 at most times. There were 100 days of shooting on location in Spain. So it was like fighting a war with a small guerrilla band.

**Q:** You feel that you endured a trial, then?

**A:** Well, we set out to tell a story that's never been told, to tell it as authentically and with as accurate detail as we could create, and we really had a sense to honor the memories of the victims whose stories we were telling, so we had to get it right.

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