Richard Harris makes rare TV appearance in ‘Abraham’

By Jay Bobbin
Tribune Media Services

In terms of timing, Easter unquestionably is ideal for the debut of a new miniseries about one of the literal fathers of religion.

‘Abraham,’ the TNT cable drama having its initial run in two parts at 7 p.m. Sunday and Monday — and then being shown complete on three occasions next week (3 p.m. Sunday, 11 a.m. Wednesday and 7 p.m. Saturday) — marks a rare television appearance by Richard Harris in the title role, with Emmy-winner Barbara Hershey portraying the shepherd’s wife Sarah.

Verified by experts from the Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Protestant faiths, the teleplay recalls the couple’s divinely inspired pursuit of a better life and a higher understanding — a quest that brings them considerable pain, even after attaining their long-held hope of having a child.

Directed by fellow Emmy recipient Joseph Sargent (“Miss Rose White,” “Love Is Never Silent”) and produced in association with Italian and German firms, the saga also features veteran actors Maximilian Schell and Vittorio Gassman.

Filmed in and around the Atlas Mountains of southern Morocco over a 10-week period, the venture involved two years of preparation before the cameras ever began rolling, and it marks the first step in TNT’s plan to re-create the entirety of the Old Testament.

“Abraham” is not Harris’ first depiction of a religious character — he played Cain to Franco Nero’s Abel in “The Bible. . . In the Beginning.” director John Huston’s 1966 adaptation of the Book of Genesis.

Harris’ initial reaction to the offer to play Abraham was hesitation, although he now claims to be happy he did. “I rejected it in the beginning,” he admits, “because I’d been so subjected to the Cecil B. DeMille type of Biblical [staging], which was always kind of overdressed rubbish, and overromanticized. I said ‘No’ to it while I was in New York, but [the producers] were so enthusiastic about my doing it, they flew in from Rome. I told them my objections, and they sort of calmed all of those. I didn’t want to make a typical Hollywood version, then I heard they were going to make it in the Morocco desert, and I saw the wonderful [costume and set] designs by Enrico Sambatini.

“I was also very anxious for the picture not to be a religious picture, but a deeply spiritual one and those are two different things. Institutionalized religion came hundreds of years after Abraham, of course. I also felt that the script and the production should not be political, and that no one should be offended by it. They calmed that [worry] by having three scholars from each of the major religions, who would be on the set daily to make this as authentic as one could make it.”

He adds that “the most amazing thing of all” was the spirit of cooperation among the consultants from the different faiths. “I found them all deeply respectful of the other person’s point of view. There was never a clash between them.

“As a Catholic myself, I instinctively fell to my knees with my arms outstretched [in prayer] when the giving of the land of Canaan over to Abraham’s descendants . . . but I suddenly heard, ‘Stop! Stop!’ A Catholic scholar who was on the picture then came over and said, ‘You can’t do that. That will offend the Jews. That is a Christian symbol of worship. They all supported each other and showed me what would be acceptable, and I found that very encouraging and illuminating.”