

# REVIEWS

**Ensemble.** Wilmette, IL: Films Incorporated, 1975. Produced by the BBC. 24 programs on 3/4" U-matic (one program per tape), \$3720; 3/4" or 1/2" VHS (two programs per tape), \$3120; 1/2" VHS (four programs per tape), \$1560. Audio cassettes, course books, and teacher's notes also available.

*Ensemble* is a video cassette series designed to teach beginning French to high school or college students. Each lesson of approximately twenty-five minutes is divided into three parts, and is introduced with colorful scenes of France and lively music. The three segments include 1) a grammatical explanation, with a short sketch exemplifying selected structures (10 minutes); 2) a series of cartoon stories, with a section for visually cued repetitions of words and phrases modeled from the cartoon (5 minutes); 3) a serialized story entitled "L'amour de la vie" to build listening comprehension and to tie the episodes together lesson by lesson.

The first segment of each lesson contains a grammar unit which is clearly and carefully explained. However, grammar instruction is not confined to part one of the tape; rather, additional grammar throughout interrupts the development of the lesson materials and the viewer's concentration. Nevertheless, the skits do reinforce and exemplify relevant grammar, despite a cloying appearance, and what some may consider triteness, owing to a simplistic approach to contextualized language.

In segment two, the cartoon portion of the lesson featuring Renard the fox and various other animals, the viewer is struck by the awkwardness of both technology and animation--often the animals remain immobile, including their mouths. Thus, at times, it is difficult to determine who is speaking when more than one animal is present, or if it is merely the fox narrating the episode off-screen. To an average American student used to more advanced animation from the ever-popular video games or even the Saturday morning cartoons, *Ensemble* will appear highly unprofessional.

Segment three, the serial story entitled "L'amour de la vie," is at best disappointing for, on the whole, the story fails to hold the viewer's attention. Each episode recounts the continuing story of Michel, a university student, and his search for life outside the university setting. One is not intrigued to know what will happen to

him; he lacks charisma as the script lacks authenticity. In addition, the level of comprehensible French exceeds what Krashen would term the "i+1," for although the tape script incorporates some expressions from previous episodes along with some English cognates, by and large, new vocabulary and grammar constructions are used which will be unfamiliar to the beginning student. Often the conversations (the audio) have nothing to do with the surroundings in which they take place (the visual), a fact which is potentially confusing for the neophyte language learner who must rely heavily on visual clues to understand the audio counterpart. To that end, students may lose interest in "L'amour de la vie" since the stimuli provided to enhance understanding are minimal.

Besides a brief introduction by the narrator, and a sketchy summary in the workbook, there are no follow-up materials--no repetition of key phrases, no drills, and no exercises. The third segment then is not only slow-moving, it also appears isolated from the other portions of the lesson since there are no materials which suggest further relevance. One positive feature of segment three, however, is that it occasionally provides the viewer with scenes of different regions in France and a selection of conversational speech by French natives.

As a whole, this reviewer finds *Ensemble* to be a marginal teaching aid at best, despite what was undoubtedly a concerted effort by the authors and publisher to find a balanced audio-visual medium to create interest and motivation to learn French. Further, besides the aforementioned tendency to tire the students with unimaginative characterization and low-level animation, the script also contains elements which could be interpreted as mockery of religion in the cartoon series (a monk interested only in wine and food) and abuse of women (a man strikes his girlfriend and is unreprimated for the act). In short, *Ensemble* leaves too much to be desired both technically and pedagogically to be considered a valuable adjunct for serious language instruction at any level.

A reworking of the series might consider the omission of the middle segment (the cartoon of Renard the fox), since its only apparent function is to reinforce the grammar--something that could easily and more effectively be accomplished by redoing the remaining segments. A more intriguing plot for the serial story as well as preview and follow-up materials throughout, perhaps following the model of the highly successful BBC Spanish counterpart, *Zarabanda* should also be considered.

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**Petit, Bernard. Lawrence Wylie in the Vaucluse.** Brockport, NY: Educational Communications Center, S.U.N.Y. College at Brockport, 1983. 3/4" U-matic cassette for \$90.

This 38-minute videotape was filmed in May 1983, when Professor Bernard Petit of SUNY at Brockport accompanied Harvard Professor Lawrence Wylie to Peyrane, Roussillon, the original "Village in Vaucluse." The initial sequences in black and white with old stills, explain the purpose of the taping, a search for new material on life in France for intermediate French classes, then switch to a color presentation: an introduction to the village and its surroundings, with music accompaniment consisting of an old folksong played on the recorder.

The first third of the tape (in fact, a little more than a third) shows Lawrence Wylie walking through the village, pointing out landmarks (cafes, church, restaurants, school, etc..) changes, explaining its original industry (the extraction of ochre from the colored rocks), and its new population (many Parisians and foreigners have bought and restored houses there). Voiced over are Professor Petit's comments, and a few village voices and noises are heard in the background, most noticeably the mistral, a strong wind that often blows there. This part is entirely in English.

The next part presents excerpts from a series of interviews Wylie conducted with a number of village people, most of whom he has known since his first visit. These are done in French, with a few comments in English by Petit or Wylie, and a translation into English runs at the bottom of the screen. The French villagers' speech is definitely southern accented, but very understandable. We hear Georgette, the cafe owner, bemoan the changes modern life has brought to the leisurely pace she knew as a youngster, the lack of activities for the few young people left in the village, who have become "decadent" and have nothing but television; we hear the mayor, a successful restaurateur, express optimism about his town; we listen to a shop owner berate the unhealthy new way of making bread; thus we learn about the villagers' attitude to life in general and to their own circumstances in particular. As the interviews progress, we come to understand the basic mistrust that most of them feel towards outsiders, French and alien tourists, investors or recent dwellers, "foreigners" all, though their money is welcome. Townspeople, women in particular, make searching comments on family life, expectations for life and happiness: children and their success still play a large part in their sense of life accomplishment. They show their efforts to adapt to the changes while expressing nostalgia for what they feel they have lost.

Some discussion of Wylie's original book occurs, revealing opposition by those who felt his divulging inside secrets was going against a hallowed tradition and represented an invasion of privacy, but showing that most people had become very friendly with their American observer. In fact, Wylie, who has returned many times, is always greeted as an old friend in the film.

Two most interesting points are made in this study: one indirectly, the other more explicitly. The first one ties in with the villagers' distrust of outsiders. The tape shows a youngish couple, Michel and Isabelle Stangel from Metz (in Lorraine), who opened a restaurant in town, still only patronized by a handful of local couples, but who have "made it" thanks to customers newly-established in town (such as the writer Jean Lacouture and his wife, who have become good friends on a first-name basis) and tourists. They are shown with their children, two young black boys, visibly adopted, but there is no further comment. The viewer is left to speculate whether the rather hostile initial reception Isabelle states the couple encountered when they arrived had anything to do with those children. Yet she claims that her family is now accepted. Some elaboration after this surprise would have been welcome.

The other point, that every aspect of the village life is politicized, is made mostly in Wylie's final summation. He explains, for instance, how the senior citizen club, started a few years ago, is now frequented only by a few people, because its president was the mayor's father. Since the last election, most members stopped going. This is an important trait of French life, rightfully brought out in this film.

In a short time this videotape gives a fascinating capsule view of typical village life in France today. The added perspective of comparing data and people of a generation ago to those of today enhances its conclusions, even for those who are not familiar with Wylie's celebrated book; it should certainly whet their appetite and spur them on to discovering a classic. Visually, the tape is very professional: good filming, good editing, an author who seems to have made the most of his subject matter. It should be very useful to show American students what life in a French village is like, from cafes to the central square, from the school to the restaurants and shops. The local architecture and tiled roofs, the surrounding landscape, the little cars and climbing streets, the children in the classroom are all there, much more real than the few stereotyped photographs most students know, like that of the little boy with the French bread. In fact, the townspeople speak, gesture, walk, eat,

smoke, as French people do, and much of this should be highly revealing to American viewers. This material would be suitable for first-year students, as cultural enrichment, but would benefit mostly intermediate or advanced students as far as French language level.

Two minor criticisms: one, the audio quality of the tape is definitely somewhat inferior in the first third, the walking tour of the village. The "mistral" blew strongly during much of the outdoor filming, and distorts the sound. Perhaps shortening that sequence (one-third of the present tape) or using a different soundtrack for some parts would remedy this problem. The other has to do with what is, in my opinion, the excessive length of this first part, all in English, definitely less interesting than the interviews themselves. We have Wylie's direct comments, again in English, in the final interview aptly summarizing his conclusions. By contrast, the introduction is too long. This viewer, for one, would have preferred the give and take of dialogue with villagers to show restoration of houses, changes in the school, to what is essentially Wylie's monologue. What may be Petit's deference to Wylie thus detracts a little from what is otherwise a very well-done and informative pedagogical tool. It would be a welcome addition to any French language and civilization program, and should be required viewing for all students planning to visit France or study there.

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**Zarabanda.** Wilmette, IL: Films Incorporated. Produced by the BBC. 25 programs on 3/4" U-matic (one program per tape), \$3875; 3/4" or 1/2" VHS (two programs per tape), \$3250; 1/2" VHS (four programs per tape), \$1625. Student texts, teacher's guide, and audio cassettes also available.

*Zarabanda* is an appropriate title for this multimedia approach to beginning Spanish. "Zarabanda," meaning confusion and excitement, describes the events that follow Ramiro Montero throughout Spain in his search for a more prosperous lifestyle than that currently experienced in the small town of Piguera. Recently out of high school, Ramiro obtains a job in a small garage which, unknown to him, specializes in stolen cars. The plot takes him from Segovia to Madrid as he makes many friends (and girlfriends). His "affairs" eventually involve in politics--to be more specific, kidnapping the former leader of Mexico. The conclusion is sure to surprise you.

The reasons this series is so popular for classroom use are many. The series provides an excellent framework for the beginning Spanish class. The visual format is based on a notional-functional syllabus in which each episode introduces a particular subject. For example, students learn how to say what they want and don't want, how to introduce themselves and ask about others, how to express likes and dislikes, how to order a meal, and much more.

Each program is approximately twenty-five minutes long and begins with a brief explanation of the context and grammar studied in that particular lesson. Then vocabulary and conjugations are written out on the screen so that the students can see the spelling and punctuation. This information will then be used in a scene in which the learner can utilize the previously presented material.

After approximately every five chapters is a review. This allows the students to "catch up on" everything they learned while maintaining their interest. The setting will occasionally shift to the different regions around Spain in order to initiate cultural discussions and allow the students to hear the accents and dialects associated with the distinct areas.

The teacher is also aided by a manual which gives examples of vowels, consonants, intonation, stress, and accents for pronunciation purposes. The booklet enhances each chapter with a short dialogue taken from the first scene in each episode; it then explains, in a bit deeper detail than in the film, the meanings of certain words and phrases that may be difficult for the learner. This is repeated using the second scene. Next, major grammatical points are explained in more detail. For example in chapter one:

- 1) The difference between "un" and "una";
- 2) How to say "I want";
- 3) How to say "I don't want";
- 4) How to ask questions;
- 5) How to say what someone else wants.

Following the explanations are practice exercises using the items previously outlined. When following along with tapes students respond during pauses. Towards the end of each episode the narrator informs the viewers that the final excerpt will continue uninterrupted. To end each chapter is a "Key to Comprehension Scene." The "Key" is an aid often used to help the students grasp the general idea of what will take place. This is helpful in answering questions about grammar and vocabulary, especially after the episode has ended.

In conclusion, "Zarabanda" is an excellent contribution to education for both teacher and student, as well as for the self-learner. The possibilities are as numerous as the results are rewarding.

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Rassias, John. **Contact French**. Farmington Hills, MI: CBS/Fox Video, 1983. 10 Video-cassettes and User's Guide. \$200 per cassette or 10 cassettes for \$995.

*Contact French* is a ten-lesson videocassette series designed to teach the fundamentals of French in a dynamic, energetic way. John Rassias of Dartmouth College gives the aural-oral method a shot in the arm. He first presents a short scenario in which he is usually the main character, then drills the main grammar points with his entourage and the TV audience, whom he cues enthusiastically. A text graphic appears at the bottom of the screen to reinforce the drill, which is always presented orally first.

The short scenario and practice drill take place on location--at the Charles De Gaulle Airport, on a street in downtown Paris, or at the Sorbonne, for example. The scene then suddenly shifts to Professor Rassias' well-appointed study where he speaks to the learner in English, giving a pep talk on language learning or explaining a grammar point more fully. This part of the video is a little too long, especially if the teacher has already covered the same points in class. It is much more interesting to see and hear Rassias speak French than to listen to him talk *about* the language. If one were learning to speak French at the office or at home, perhaps the mini-lectures in English would be more helpful.

The basic elements of French are presented in increasing order of difficulty. Lesson one teaches greetings, the subject pronouns, and the verbs *être* (to be) and *aller* (to go). The students are instructed to listen, practice orally, then listen again to the scenario. The *User's Guide* gives a list of the vocabulary used in each lesson along with the English translations and a brief explanation of the grammar. The series is especially effective in practicing the present tense of verbs, including all three regular conjugations and sixteen irregular verbs. Expressing the immediate future by using *aller* plus the infinitive is introduced in lesson four and the future tense in lesson five. The only other verb tense taught in this series is the *passé composé*, which comes up in lesson seven. The form and use of the imperfect, conditional, and subjunctive are not dealt with at all.

The "Rassias Method" seems to be most effective in teaching the most basic, concrete elements of language. This series, which claims to "provide the essential tools to master the French language," leaves out aspects of French that are particularly difficult to learn, such as the difference between the use of the *passé composé* and the imperfect. The focus is on teaching survival French, and in this area Rassias is second to none. The vocabulary presented in the series is based on the learner's immediate needs when traveling in a French-speaking country. Rassias dramatizes then drills the expressions and vocabulary for making a hotel reservation, using numbers, making a phone call, taking a taxi, and telling someone that you are ill or in pain. The 48-page *User's Guide* and ten-hour video program (each lesson lasts approximately one hour) teaches the basics: verb conjugations, vocabulary lists by category (clothing, food, etc.), and useful expressions. The learner who has had no previous contact with French will learn a great deal, but he or she will still be a long way from mastering the language. By putting together elements presented in the series, the learner could speak in simple sentences, but would be at a loss when trying to form a complex sentence or talk about abstract ideas.

*Contact French* would be useful in a school setting for reinforcing the classroom teacher's presentation of vocabulary and verbs. The series would be especially helpful for those students who need remedial work. Rassias' clear and dynamic explanations and practice drills would hold the attention of even the most recalcitrant student. At the university level, this series could provide a new dimension to the language laboratory experience. Instead of listening to audio tapes, students could reinforce what they are learning in class by practicing with Professor John Rassias. By consulting the guide, the teacher could easily coordinate what is being taught in class and the video program dealing with the same topic. This series could also be used very effectively in a methods course for language teachers. Although most teachers would not have the courage to march into class dressed as Napoleon, they can nonetheless improve their skills by imitating Rassias' energetic drill techniques and use of dramatic elements, which make language learning more lively and effective.

In addition to the ten cassette series just described, the producers of *Contact French* offer an eleventh video called *Accent French* (\$200). This alternate lesson presents eleven interviews with people working in Paris, including a wine merchant, a musician, a university guard, and a baker. Accompanied by a user's guide giving transcripts of the interviews in both French and English, this video program is appropriate for students at the intermediate or advanced

level. The interviews give students the opportunity to hear native speakers representing various social levels and professions. It provides excellent practice for more advanced listening comprehension and can be ordered separately.

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## What do these 40 languages have in common ?

Arabic	Amharic	Swahili	Hausa
Serbo-Croatian	Russian	German	Creole
Cambodian	French	Persian	Polish
Vietnamese	Spanish	Korean	Dutch
Portuguese	Swedish	Yoruba	Hindi
Indonesian	Tagalog	Mandarin	Greek
Norwegian	Turkish	Bulgarian	Thai
Hungarian	Cantonese	Hebrew	Urdu
Afrikaans	English	Danish	Twi
Japanese	Finnish	Italian	Zulu

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