L'Affaire du Coffret
Synopsis

A bilingual radio drama in 60 episodes of 4 minutes
Produced & Broadcast by Radio France Internationale,
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THE STORY LINE

"L’Affaire du Coffret" is a bilingual radiodrama aiming to familiarise listeners of RFI with the French language.

The series was first broadcast in May 2004 by RFI’s English service and is produced over the years 2003 – 2005 in 16 bilingual versions: Albanian, Arabic, Brazilian, Cambodians, Chinese, English, Farsi, German, Laotian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese and Ex-Yugoslavian.

"L’affaire du coffret"... relates the adventure of a foreign journalist, Lucas, who is in Paris to write an article on George Sand. Lucas’s French skills are virtually inexistent, but he has prepared his trip well, making sure to pack his computer which contains a grammar back-up, a dictionary, a Paris city guide as well as practical information. All this could have resulted in a fascinating article, except that...

Two weeks after his arrival, Lucas wakes up in somebody else’s hotel room with the mother of all headaches. As if that weren’t enough, he can’t remember a thing. Room service (who ordered room service?) brings him breakfast and a parcel containing € 20,000, a walkman with a minidisc and a note: "à bientôt, Nadia". Nadia who?

Lucas decides to have a listen and finds himself in the middle of what could be an airport, judging from the different sounds - and someone definitely says "airport" and "Paris", though the rest of it is a bit difficult to understand. Lo and behold, but that’s Lucas himself, speaking in French with someone called Nadia, who introduces him to a third person come to welcome... them? her? Curious and somewhat puzzled, Lucas steps out of the hotel room to find this mysterious "Nadia". Wrong move - no sooner has he opened the door than he gets roughed up by a stranger. And that is only the beginning.

Thanks to the recordings on the minidisc, Lucas discovers that a coffret belonging to George Sand has been stolen. Worse, he makes as good a suspect as everybody else. Who stole the coffret? Is Lucas an accomplice or a victim of circumstance? He decides to trust no-one and to carry out a private investigation; rather a tall order for someone who has lost his memory and doesn't speak French beyond "bonjour" and "au revoir".

METHOD: ON THE SOUND TRACK

A number of French courses include a story line used as an excuse, whether poor or plausible, to present and practise the different aspects of the language, the underlying objective being to learn the language for its own sake. "L’affaire du coffret" offers a change of perspective: a compulsive story line as a means to a different end.

Indeed, as far as Lucas - and the average adult learner - is concerned, language is first and foremost a means to an end. Hence acquiring linguistic and cultural skills comes down to learning to use the different tools one needs to accomplish whatever task one undertakes.

Accordingly, Lucas has to decode the recordings that Nadja has left him, and then act on what he has understood, while gradually learning to master the basics of French. He hears, listens to, and gradually understands the sound leads, and ultimately learns to use the language himself in order to follow up on the different leads.

"L’affaire du Coffret" features a foreign hero who is far from being the naïve beginner language learners at the elementary level are often mistaken for. On the contrary, Lucas is both shrewd and resourceful and makes expert use of a variety of strategies in order to understand what is said and to make himself understood. Furthermore, listeners soon find themselves in Lucas's shoes; and like the hero, they learn by experiencing.
Each act includes a wide range of communication situations in a variety of contexts and balances the use of the four skills. The language used in the different situations consists of short sentences and useful key expressions, at times even onomatopoeia: all in all, an effective survival kit in spoken French.

Each act takes the learning a level further:
Act I: Giving and asking for information about oneself and one's immediate environment
Act II: Naming and describing
Act III: Participating and interacting
Act IV: Expressing agreement, opinions and feelings

The language and culture content is dealt with in the sound design using two complementary approaches: in passing, so as to be simply heard; and in-depth, so as to be understood. This strategy results in a learning spiral similar to the progress made at the level of the investigation.

THE FORMAT

"L’affaire du coffret" consists of 60 four-minute episodes relating a story in four acts. Each act consists of three series of five episodes. The serial combines progress in communication skills with a flexible broadcasting rhythm. For instance, a daily four-minute episode from Monday to Friday results in an act being broadcast in three weeks, and the whole serial in four months.

The organisation of the serial in series of five episodes underlies the linguistic and dramatic progress. Each episode provides its particular piece of information and gives the hero another piece of the puzzle. Every fifth episode is a turning point: the hero recaps his findings and manages to place a piece or two in the right places of the puzzle, which, in turn, often results in a change of perspective. Likewise, every fifth episode recaps the language content and enables the hero and the listener to access a new level of communication skills.

Thanks to the use of the listeners’ mother tongue, the listening experience remains a pleasure whilst helping the listeners become familiar with spoken French.

- The hero of this crime story thinks in his mother tongue, which is also that of the listeners. This helps the listeners to experience the story from the inside and to identify with the main character.

The use of the mother tongue to reflect on what has been said also ensures thorough comprehension of the language content, whilst

- avoiding lengthy explanations, and keeps even the most distracted listener updated in the investigation.
- An experience of immersion: Lucas has to manage in French when communicating with the other characters and learns gradually to speak French correctly. The misunderstandings, as well as the problems he faces, add a comical dimension well known to anyone who has visited a foreign country.

The original concept of "L’affaire du coffret" takes into account the specifics of any radio product, namely the fact that the listeners are liable to remember and retain only those sound elements which are highlighted. Hence the following features:

- "Sound snapshots": realistic compositions featuring everyday expressions in authentic settings.
- Playlets: short sentences and basic vocabulary performed by professional actors.
Bilingual decoding sequences: Lucas reflects on what he has just experienced and makes sense out of the linguistic and cultural sound leads.

Original music which sustains the dramatic tension and "punctuates" the different moments and moods of the story.

The key elements of the language are used again both within the episode and in subsequent episodes; they reappear within a variety of sound backgrounds in order to offer a captivating and effective learning experience.

Flashbacks remind the listeners of the crucial events of the story and of the key elements of the language Lucas needs to carry out his investigation.

In conclusion, "L’affaire du coffret" consists of a not so routine mission offering the listeners a trail to follow and a mission to accomplish within an authentic and enthralling world of sounds.

L’affaire du Coffret online and for podcast:

https://savoirs.rfi.fr/fr/apprendre-enseigner/langue-francaise/laffaire-du-coffret

L’AFFAIRE DU COFFRET

A bilingual radio drama in 60 episodes of 4 minutes
Produced & Broadcast by Radio France Internationale - France

Delegate Producer: Lidwien van Dixhoorn
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