

Telly it to the people

As local TV comes of age, Rosalind Sykes tunes into TéléBocal and decides it beats the nationals.

What's on telly tonight? When you live in France, the answer is more often that not, Not Bloody Much. Apart, that is, from mediocre telefilms, recycled celebrity interviews, anaesthetic news broadcasts and endless stretches of advertising – the result of the lacklustre labours of a self-satisfied and entrenched audiovisual elite. French television offers little that challenges received wisdom or talks to or about 'the people' – no amount of frantic zapping will land you an equivalent of British productions such as *EastEnders*, *Have I Got News for You* or *Question Time*.

But there is a small oasis in this desert of dross. TéléBocal is an alternative, local channel which, for the past five years, has been viewed exclusively on screens in slightly seedy bars and cafés around the 10th, 11th and 20th *arrondissements* of Paris. If not exactly the toast of *le tout Paris*, Bocal has generated a regular 4,000-strong audience and enough interest to have earned a three-month stint on mainstream television, beginning on 16 September.

'We wanted to democratise television,' says its founder, 43-year-old Richard Solvied, 'to make it accessible to and representative of the people. In France, television is despotic. It glorifies success. You have to have achieved something before you can appear on it. But others have things to say too. We want to show what national television doesn't want to show, because they think it's not important enough. We want to let ordinary people have a say, not just the specialists.'

Local residents are invited to attend a monthly ideas meeting at the hangar-like HQ in the 20th, where they mingle with TéléBocal staff and young directors looking for a first break. If accepted – projects include portraits of fellow locals, reportage and fiction – TéléBocal supplies both technical expertise and audiovisual equipment. Its charter sets out strict stipulations: no voice off, no artificial lighting, no political figures.

Programming must have a 'realistic, spontaneous feel' and, even for fiction, residents rather than professionals must be used – 'Every human being has within him the soul of an actor.'

Labelled '*gaucho-alternatif*' by the press, TéléBocal is socially committed, following the progress of groups such as *les sans-papiers* (illegal immigrants) and *les sans-domiciles* (homeless), and demonstrations against everything from McDonalds to the Front National. But this championing of worthy causes never feels 'worthy', thanks to a pervasive humour. The skits, portraits and interviews that complete the programming – 'Ten Top Tips for Giving Birth' (expert panel: neighbourhood women from 20 to 80); or the Bocal take on the celebrity interview, 'What Ever Became Of...?' (local residents who vaguely resemble celebrities) – range from the gently provocative and Pythonesque to the quasi-anarchic.

Is Solvied worried the television broadcasts will be competition for the bar screenings? 'No. The content and format will be completely different. The people who come to watch in bars don't watch television at home. For them, the broadcasts are a spectacle, in a convivial, social setting, where they can discuss things afterwards.'

Solvied is old enough to remember the early days of television, when he would sit around the screen with his family or mates. He admits this communal experience has influenced his work. TéléBocal may be '*télévisuellement incorrect*', but it makes of television a thought-provoking, interactive medium, rather than the passive, isolating one it often seems to have become.

TéléBocal, 2 Cité Aubry, 20th (01.43.48.02.08/ www.telebocal.com; email telebocal@wanadoo.fr). TéléBocal is broadcast from 16 Sept, for three months, for three hours nightly in the 3rd, 11th and 20th arrondissements on Channel 36 (without cable or satellite).

