

French evolution

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The language is not only beautiful, but very useful, writes Alison Barclay

IF THE world's next superpower is China, then any sensible young linguist with an eye to a good job will start learning Mandarin.

As indeed they do. In 2003 it was the top choice of VCE students, with 1952 enrolling in Chinese as a first language and another 616 as a second language.

But at No. 2 — *qu'est-ce que c'est que ce qui c'est que ça? Mais oui! C'est le français!*

Let anyone try to tell you European languages are *passed* in Asia-Pacific. 1544 VCE students last year thought otherwise. Count the grown-ups taking French classes at the Alliance Française, listening to Paf records and swooning over the Impressionists exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, and it's obvious that French has lost none of its mellifluous allure.

But how useful is it really? Some 49 countries — one quarter of the world's nations — have French as a first or second language.

French is an official language of the United Nations, European Union, World Health Organisation, World Trade Organisation, the Red Cross/Crescent, UNESCO, Medicines Sans Frontières, Interpol, Amnesty International, OECD, NATO and, of course, the Olympic Games.

Thanks to 1066 and all that, it's embedded in English anyway. Oxford lexicologists say 28.3 per cent of our language derives from French.

"Why learn it? Because it's just the most beautiful language," says one *AssAid* worker, recently back from studying French in Geneva.

French is vital for aid workers in



French look: Melbourne French Theatre's Pierre Liva and Amanda Monflic rehearse, watched by director Colin Duckworth.

L'amour or less ideal

ARE the French really such great lovers, or do they just talk about it a lot? Alfred de Musset certainly thought the heart on the sleeve was a good look.

After a love affair went *mal* he cried his 23-year-old eyes out, then wrote *On ne badine pas avec l'amour* (*Don't Tangle With Love*) about a tragic triangle that causes an innocent girl's death.

Melbourne French Theatre is staging the play next month — *en français, of course*, with English subtitles to help learner linguists.

Directed by Colin Duckworth.

the cast features many of Melbourne's native Francophiles. Duckworth, an Englishman fluent in French, has directed MFT's plays since 1978.

"I really think that drama is an ideal way of combining something of intellectual value and extending the students' interactive language skills," says Duckworth, Melbourne University's Emeritus Professor of French. "It is better than simply teaching them to write a business letter or ask the way to the railway station."

His own initiation was suitably successful.

former French colonies such as Vanuatu and West Africa. In hospitality it's an asset to speak French, as Melbourne chef Shannon Bennett has discovered.

Bennett, owner and chef of Melbourne's *Vue de Monde* restaurant, spoke fluent French after 18 months working in Paris kitchens.

"I thought it was a waste of time

when I was at school," the former Essexton Grammar kid says.

"Then I got to the age of 15 and got into cooking in a big way. I saw all these recipes in French and thought, 'What the hell are they?' That's when I started getting into the vocabulary."

Bennett got his first Paris job at 19, making 70 hours a week, and also

"It was when I was 14 that I heard the music of Debussy and Ravel and decided I would devote myself to this country that produced such extraordinary music," he says.

"Coming from a town in the middle of England and never having met a Frenchman, it was probably a bit strange. Maybe it is something to do with reincarnation."

Capin Hill, 212 Peel Rd, South Yarra, September 3-15. Tickets \$10-\$22 (includes a program). Bookings: 9348 2256 www.mftr.org

worked in Monaco. Back in Melbourne, he keeps his French fluency up to the mark.

"I still go (to Paris) for two weeks, working in restaurants for free, just looking at what they do because French food is really evolving at a great rate," he says.

For historians, musicians, fashion designers, culture vultures and travel-

ers, French can take them around the globe, according to writer and theatre director Colin Duckworth.

"With French and English you can pretty much travel anywhere," he says.

"It is not just useful but essential. I would say, for anybody doing history. You can't be an art historian without knowing French and Italian and German too, otherwise you would be absolutely dependent on your information about painters and sculptors coming via translation, which is often faulty."

According to the 1999 Ethnologue Report, French is the world's 11th most common first language, with 77 million native speakers. Almost 10,000 of those live in Melbourne.

Some work at Melbourne's Camberwell Primary School.

The school has, since 1991, taught up to 48 per cent of its classes in French. A bit alarming for the propops? Not so, assistant principal Helen Warrad says.

"The way we perceive it, most children are anxious in some sense when they first come to school," she says. "Whether someone speaks in English to them or in French, it is all new."

"I speak to them in French and ask them to come in and look at the name tags spread out and find their name and pin it to their jumper. They all do it. We take 70-plus children a year and they don't bat an eye."

From Prep to Grade Six, all 457 Camberwell kids learn maths in French. Depending on which teachers are available, they might also learn art and sport in French. By age 11 or 12, they are bilingual.

Sydney musician Stéphane Huar has released a CD, *Sing and Learn French*, through ABC Melody to help children learn his lovely lingo through song.

Huar was in Atlanta this month talking to 4000 teachers about his CDs, which will soon be issued as far afield as Iran.

"I want to use music to give something to kids — basically what I was given when I was little, to use languages and travel with them," Huar says.

He moved to Australia in 1999, where his accent has proved popular.

"People say, 'Are you from Paris? I love the way you speak,'" he says. "But I don't prefer one language over another. I just think it is good for people to be exposed to all different languages."

"I also speak Spanish, German and Italian. I am a living example of