Cassettes rerun PBS' greatest hits

By Mary Stevens

As the new TV season unfolds, executives at ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox are starting to sweat over Nielsen ratings. But all remains calm at PBS, where quality has traditionally trumped quantity. Long-time devotees of PBS know it's one place they can turn for low-key but top-notch entertainment that dares to be different.

Rather than trying to appeal to a mass audience all of the time, PBS caters to many different small audiences, which eventually add up to become a good-sized viewership," says Andy Yocom, director of broadcasting for Chicago's PBS station, WTTW-Ch. 11.

"During one half-hour segment, we might hook only the science buffs. In the next hour, we might be watched exclusively by opera fans. The next hour or two of programming might attract art or history lovers. We think that Channel 11 truly offers something for everyone. It's just that everyone isn't watching all at the same time," says Yocom.

However, while PBS programs rarely approach splashy network hits in terms of huge audience numbers, there are several long-running PBS series that are phenomenally successful in their own right—and some of PBS' "greatest hits" are also gaining new fans through the home video market. You'll find these selections not only in video stores but in many bookstores as well.

Yocom calls the home-improvement series "This Old House" possibly Channel 11's most popular show. He adds, "I think it is the best representa-
tive of its genre—showing how to program in which an attractive, congenial host teaches a useful skill in an entertaining manner. Even if viewers aren't really into-it-yourselfers and don't actually attempt any of the improvement projects for themselves, 'This Old House' gives them something to dream about. It's fun to see the transformations that take place."

Although the entire "This Old House" series is not on video, a "best of" package is available in the form of a concentrated 60-minute tape. The "This Old House Home Improvement Video" (Crown Video, $24.95) features Bob Vila and Norm Abram discussing some of the most common and least difficult do-it-yourself projects (installing locks, repairing leaky faucets, replacing an old door and so on).


"Vintage: A History of Wine by Hugh Johnson" was recently introduced by Public Media Video. The four-volume series ($29.99 per tape or $119.95 for the full collection) discusses every aspect of wine production and appreciation, taking viewers to the top wine-making capitals of the world.

Channel 11's longest-running program, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," debuted in 1966 and in Yocom's opinion "may be the most important program in all of television." He admits with a laugh: "That might seem like a lofty statement, but I honestly believe it has the most noble purpose and achieves its purpose with the most integrity of any show around. It serves small children in an unpretentious, healthy, constructive way."

Indeed, parents who are disturbed by the violence or crass commercialism of many Saturday-morning network cartoons might find a pleasant oasis in the sweet, simple and slightly corny wisdom of Fred Rogers, shown daily on Channel 11.

Playhouse Video, a division of CBS/Fox, carries a line of "Mister Rogers Home Videos" ($19.98 each, close-captioned), geared especially to kids at the tender age of 1 to 5. The videos effectively address special fears and problems of the very young.

For instance, "Dinosaurs and Monsters" deals with scary things—both real and imagined. "When Parents Are Away" responds to the anxiety kids may feel when they're left with a babysitter or in a day-care center. (Clearly, while Mister Rogers is smart enough to know that the lives of parents and preschoolers have changed quite a bit

PBS series available on video include (clockwise from top, left) the "National Geographic" series, "Mister Rogers Home Videos" and "Dr. Who" episodes.

Not all your favorites are on tape

To many viewers, PBS is synonymous with fine arts programming—opera, ballet, classical music and theatrical performances—but it is difficult to find these offerings on video. Andy Yocom, director of broadcasting for WTTW-Ch. 11, says his guess is that the restrictive nature of many copyrights associated with top-name classical music stars or certain works of music or literature may be responsible for this void.

Several Tribune readers have inquired about PBS presentations such as "I, Claudius," "Julius Caesar," "The Scarlet Pimpernel" and "Jane Eyre," which are not available on video. Yet art aficionados will find a wide variety of similar programs through specialized sources including Kultur Video (800-4-KULTUR) and Home Vision (800-826-3456).

And at least two well-received PBS drama series can be readily found in video stores: "Brideshead Revisited" (from Virgin Video, six cassettes at $29.95 each or $149 for the entire set); and "Upstairs, Downstairs" (from HBO Video, 14 volumes, $29.95 each).

M.S.
PBS

Continued from page 48 during his long television career.) Another of PBS’ most acclaimed series, now celebrating its 20th anniversary, is also aimed at tiny tots. "What more can you say about Sesame Street," asks Yocom. "It's won countless awards, and it's now being enjoyed by the children of people who loved it when it first came on the air in 1969.

Channel 11 airs "Sesame Street" four times a day, but your kids can watch it on video whenever they wish. The "My Sesame Street Video" collection (Random House Video, $19.95 each, closed-captioned) includes more than a dozen excellent educational programs such as "Getting Ready for School," "Learning to Add and Subtract," and exciting "specials" such as "Christmas on Sesame Street" and "Big Bird in China.

The far-out British comedy series, "Monty Python's Flying Circus," while no longer running on Channel 11, was "certainly very popular during its heyday in the early '70s," says Yocom. "It was a real groundbreaker. The first was the first U.S. station in the country to run it, and at first we raised a few eyebrows. Public television had always had the reputation for being a little stuffy. Monty Python gave us a chance to light up our image and let intellectuals know that it was okay to laugh.

If you still crack up over such bizarre bits as "The Ministry of Silly Walks," "The Dead Parrot Sketch," and "The Man With Three Buttocks," you'll be happy to know that John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin and the rest of the crazy Monty Python gang can join your party anytime. Paramount Home Video has 17 volumes of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" at $24.95 each.

The "Dr. Who" science-fiction series still raises lots of eyebrows in the sense that many people, including Yocom himself, can't comprehend what it's all about. "But for those who can follow along with the story, Dr. Who has an intensely loyal following," says Yocom.

A number of "Dr. Who" episodes are available through Playhouse Video ($19.98 each). They include "The Ark in Space," "Brain of Dr. Morbius," "Day of the Daleks," "The Five Doctors," "Revenge of the Cybermen" and more.

While "Dr. Who" fans may represent one of PBS' most exclusive (albeit most dedicated) audience groups, nearly everyone has at some time or another tuned in to "Nova," which Yocom calls "undoubtedly the premiere science series of all time.

Among 22 "Nova" titles from Vestron Video ($29.98 each) are "One Small Step," a look at America's space program from its inception to the present; "Predictable Disaster," which analyzes earthquakes; "Secrets of the Sexes," which examines the roles that heredity and environment play in determining male and female characteristics; and "Fat Chance in a Thin World," which probes the causes and effects of obesity.

Vestron Video also distributes the "National Geographic" series ($29.95 each, closed-captioned). There are more than 40 titles, including "Born of Fire," which examines volcanic eruptions throughout the world; "The Incredibles Human Machine," which includes a fantastic voyage through the human body; and zoological documentaries such as "The Ballad of the Irish Horse," "The Great Whales" and "Grizzlies.

Still another renowned PBS science series, "Cosmos," will be available soon through Turner Home Entertainment ($19.98 per tape, exact release date unannounced at press time).