

HERBERT KRETZMER OBE 05.10.1925 – 14.10.2020

By Liz Lineham

Herbert Kretzmer, who has died aged 95, was the South-African born British newspaper journalist, lyricist and critic known as ‘Mr Mis’ for his key role in transforming an obscure 1980 French “concept” album into the musical behemoth that is *Les Misérables*.

It is without doubt the words that Kretzmer penned in English, when allied to the music of Claude-Michel Schönberg, that lit the fuse of a global phenomenon.

The longest running musical in London’s West End (35 years and counting) and the third-longest on Broadway (16 years), it has enjoyed openings in every major city, been staged by more than 100 touring companies, and seen by upwards of 70 million people in 44 countries to date.

Multi-award winning “Les Mis” – as its fans call it but never Kretzmer, who considered it disrespectful to Victor Hugo’s 19th century masterpiece - garnered 12 Tony nominations in 1987. It won 8, including Best Score (shared by Kretzmer, composer Schönberg and French lyricist Alain Boublil), and topped a 2005 British poll of Essential Musicals.

Ranked in second place in the league of the world’s longest-running musicals (behind *The Fantasticks* with 42 years on Broadway) few would bet against it one day claiming the crown.

In the last decade, a new generation has discovered its magic through the 2012 Oscar-winning film and box-office triumph directed by Tom Hooper. Susan Boyle’s interpretation of the quintessential torch song, *I Dreamed a Dream*, on Britain’s Got Talent in 2009 inspired many more to see the show.

Most recently the words of *Do You Hear The People Sing* have echoed through the streets of Hong Kong unifying those who marched for democracy.

For much of his career, Kretzmer combined journalism with song writing and viewed them as complementary skills because they involved “the manipulation of language under great constraint”. He

tried to write a novel but hated the experience. “It was too free, in a way. Something in me psychically needs to express what I have to say in a tight situation. It's within that cage that I've looked for and found my freedom.” Indeed, he attributed his “thrift” with English, the brevity and directness, to his exposure to the various languages and dialects of his South African childhood.

Kretzmer was a lyricist of some repute long before *Les Misérables*, with two West End musicals to his name. *Our Man Crichton*, based on J.M. Barrie's satirical novel, was written with composer David Lee and starred Kenneth More and Millicent Martin showing at the Shaftsbury Theatre in 1964. *The Four Musketeers* (composer Laurie Johnson), premiered at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in December 1967 starring Harry Secombe as D'Artagnan. It ran for more than a year.

He had also topped the singles charts with songs written with, and for, Charles Aznavour (*She, Yesterday When I was Young*) and for Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren (*Goodness Gracious Me*). It was, however, the lyrics of *Les Misérables* that elevated Kretzmer to the pantheon of the greats. And for more than 30 years, he was, with good cause, a vigilant guardian of his crucial contribution to its success.

It was Kretzmer who made *Les Misérables* accessible to the wider world, his words doing musical justice to Hugo's soaring narrative. The English version he penned ran for three hours in contrast to the original two-hour tableaux vivant by Schönberg and Boublil that had been given a short run in Paris in 1980. He laid fair claim to “all the big songs” including *Empty Chairs at Empty Tables*, *Stars, Do You Hear the People Sing*, and *Bring Him Home*. ‘*I Dreamed a Dream*’ – I did owe the first line of that one to Alain Boublil,” he once conceded.

To those who saw him as a mere translator of Boublil's lyrics, his response combined a characteristic robustness with the skill and precision of a master wordsmith. He was a co-writer, “an equal among equals”.

“You cannot translate a song,” he said. “You can translate a textbook and even a novel, but a song is no more than a

compendium of nuances, references and illusions, with a resonance within a particular culture. It does not have much resonance outside that culture.”

His own French was so “wretched” that he had to work with an English translation of Hugo and a literal translation of Boublil’s lyrics

He would cite *I Dreamed a Dream* as an example. The literal translation runs: “*I had dreamed of another life/In which my life would pass like a dream/I was prepared for all follies/All passions which arise.*”

Kretzmer’s brilliance elevated it to “*I dreamed a dream in time gone by/When hope was high and life worth living/I dreamed that love would never die/I dreamed that God would be forgiving...*”

“I don’t translate, I recreate,” he would say. “At the same time, I take care to advance the cause and to serve as best I can, the meaning and thrust of the song as conceived by the original creator.”

It was a noble ambition, but not one that made for an easy relationship with Boublil. In 1985, when the original English production of *Les Misérables* moved from the Barbican to the West End, Kretzmer found himself demoted in the credits, to “Adaptation by....”.

He demanded a meeting with the show’s producer, Cameron Mackintosh, the man who had personally drafted in 60-year-old Kretzmer at the last-minute to write the libretto after the poet James Fenton had failed to deliver following eighteen months on the project.

“I said, ‘Cameron, if you go ahead with that billing, you have my blessing, but that is the show you do. You do the show by Boublil and Schönberg,’” Kretzmer told the critic John Lahr in a 2013 interview in *The New Yorker*. “‘It’ll be a two hour show and it’ll be in French.’” He got the credit he demanded.

In 2012, Kretzmer found he had a new battle on his hands when documentaries by British broadcasters, BBC and ITV, in advance of the big screen version of *Les Misérables*, failed to mention him. This was despite a film credit as “lyricist” and a new song, *Suddenly*, written at the age of 87 for the movie, which would receive an Oscar nomination. He is believed to be the oldest British artist ever nominated (together with Schönberg and Boublil), for an Academy Award.

While this unthinking ignorance may have been a constant irritation, Kretzmer enjoyed to the full what he saw as the blessings *Les Misérables* bestowed on him and the financial spoils of his great talent. With his second marriage to Sybil Sever, whom he met in 1986 at a party to celebrate the opening night of *Les Misérables* in New York, his happiness and contentment was assured. He described the match as his “late life stroke of luck”.

He continued to draw enormous pleasure from journalism – he was an avid daily reader of British and American newspapers and of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* which chronicled events in the Street of Shame as Fleet St was known. But it was the arts and entertainment that continued to enthrall him.

He and Sybil were regulars at First Nights, premiers and award ceremonies including the Baftas and the Golden Globes and Oscars (Hooper’s film was nominated at both in 2013), and were generous patrons of the arts.

At their home in Kensington, west London, the couple regularly hosted gatherings where the great and good of show business and the arts mingled, surrounded by Kretzmer’s extensive collection of vintage film and theatre posters, show business memorabilia, classic photographs of Hollywood stars, and oil paintings of his beloved South African veldt.

He chose to make London his home, but Kretzmer remained close to his roots. He was a passionate supporter of Black Civil Rights and a contributor to the South African Legal Defence Fund which provides financial assistance for legal fees. He co-created the

Rand Educational Fund to help village schools and contributed to charities housing orphaned Aids victims. In a private capacity, he supported the studies of many impoverished South African students.

Herbert Kretzmer was secure in public recognition of his work; in 1988 he was appointed Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government, and received an OBE in 2011. Many among his friends and peers thought him deserving of a greater honour still but a knighthood was not to be. However, it was the acclaim of his peers in SODS, the Society of Distinguished Song Writers, an exclusive club of no more than 50 members including Don Black, Tim Rice, Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson of ABBA – and Alan Boublil with whom he maintained a friendship to the end - that he treasured above all.

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Herbert Kretzmer was born in Kroonstad, a small town some two hours drive south of Johannesburg in Free State, South Africa, in October 1925, one of four sons of Jewish-Lithuanian immigrants who ran a grocery shop and later a prosperous furniture store.

He described his childhood as idyllic and his earliest “blissful” memory was listening to beautiful African songs sung under a vast expanse of sky. Perhaps, he would muse, with a sense of gratitude, such experiences sowed the seeds of his passion for rhyme and rhythm.

Kroonstad was truly a one-horse town – named after a horse called Kroon that had pulled its Voortrekker rider to safety in a swollen river – and home to a hundred or so Jewish families who had fled the pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century. It boasted one high school and a cinema or “bioscope” as it was known locally, and it was there that young Kretzmer was introduced to the glitz and glamour of fame, to Hollywood celebrity – and to the “lilt and lurch” of popular songs that thrilled him from the first. He was just 8 years old when he saw his first film, Gold Diggers of 1933. He walked home in a state of euphoria: “I had seen the promised land”.

From then on, every Saturday afternoon – unless he was being punished for some misdemeanour - was spent immersed in this glorious world that he knew he would one day be part of. Consumed by some 50 films a year through childhood and his teenage years fuelled that desire and intensified his fascination with celebrity.

He didn't want to join their ranks but he wanted to know those stars he saw on screen, to experience their aura and understand whatever it was that made them unique and able to bewitch lesser beings. And the songs entranced him: Gershwin, Porter and Berlin were his heroes. What they did, he believed he could do, too.

The movies did more than inspire him, he later recalled. They educated him, too, helping a youngster whose parents spoke Yiddish, German or a form of Latvian at home and who had a limited understanding of English and Afrikaans, learn how to behave in wider society. How to ask a girl out, for instance; what to wear at a party, choosing from a menu or coping with bullies at school.

Yes, it was the movies that helped mould him and the young Herbert Kretzmer decided that journalism would give him greatest access to those who inhabited them. To become a “newspaper man” was his goal from the age of 11. He fulfilled that ambition, launching his career with a stint writing the commentary for African Mirror, a weekly cinema newsreel in Johannesburg, followed by a job on Johannesburg's *Sunday Express*.

And yet the desire to communicate in another way, to convey emotions via the lyrics of popular songs was deep-rooted, too. Kretzmer would say he was “unaccountably drawn” to this challenge, despite no musical training beyond a “glib facility” for playing the piano by ear. He honed his fledgling talent writing lyrics for productions whilst studying at Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

The world beyond South Africa beckoned, especially Europe. In Paris in 1953, he fulfilled the dream of many a young ex-pat artiste, living in a garret on the Left Bank, playing the piano by night in a bar in St Germain-des-Pres in return for a meal, painting murals for cash and trying – and failing - to write a novel by day. One year later Kretzmer arrived in London with £150 to his name (which he promptly lent to someone in greater need and never got back).

Fleet Street welcomed and nurtured his talent. He joined the now defunct *Daily Sketch* as Show Business Reporter and by 1960 was senior drama critic for *The Daily Express*. He had agreed to take over from the infamous Bernard Levin, who was leaving, for two weeks only as the job did not appeal to him. He continued in it for 18 years, covering more than 3,000 first nights. In 1979, he moved to *The Daily Mail* as television critic, winning two national press awards for his work.

In the days before agents, PRs and publicists, these were jobs that gave him unfettered access to the men and women who adorned the glittering world he had worshipped as a boy.

He interviewed most of the great celebrity figures of the 20th century, from Frank Sinatra and Muhammad Ali to Groucho Marx, Rex Harrison, Henry Miller and David Niven, Shirley MacLaine and Judy Garland to Leni Riefenstahl, Dr Jacob Bronowski, J. Paul Getty, Matt Busby – and even Errol Flynn's father. Some, such as Peter Sellers and Terence Stamp became close friends. Among his subjects were, of course, his true heroes: the lyricists and song writers, Alan Jay Lerner, Richard Rodgers, Frank Loesser and Irving Berlin.

In the 2014 collection of his work, *Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth Century Legends*, Kretzmer explained that, because of deadlines and numerous editions in the days of copy taking and hot metal, he rarely had more than an hour with his subjects before he had to file. Hence the title 'Snapshots' but "an image caught on the run can often reveal more than you'd get from a considered studio portrait," he wrote. He was right: from a train journey with the actress Patricia Neal on the day she received an Oscar

nomination, to a taxi ride with Cary Grant or sneaking into a limousine with Marlene Dietrich, Kretzmer gave his readers a revealing peek into the shadows beyond the “white glow” of fame in which they lived.

During this time Kretzmer described himself as a “kitchen table lyricist”, knocking out the words in his spare time in his Knightsbridge flat, close to Harrods Department store and formerly the home of John Cleese. (Strangers who would telephone hoping to speak to funny man Cleese were disappointed when “they got me instead” Kretzmer would say). However, he achieved some significant successes. In 1963 he received an Ivor Novello Award for the Sellers/Loren duet *Goodness Gracious Me*. He was also invited by Ned Sherrin to work on BBC’s ground-breaking satirical series, *That Was the Week That Was*, penning songs inspired by news event of the week.

On Friday November 22 1963, President John Kennedy was shot in Dallas and the news broke at 6.30pm UK time. Sherrin called on Kretzmer to create a song for the actress/singer Millicent Martin, to be broadcast the following evening. It was the movies of his childhood that inspired him, drawing on a Wild West theme, to pen the iconic *In the Summer of his Years*.

*A young man rode with his head held high,
Under the Texas sun,
And no one guessed that a man so blessed would perish by the
gun, O Lord,
Would perish by the gun.
A shot rang out, Like a sudden shout,
And Heaven held its breath,
For the dreams of the mul-ti-tude of men rode with him to his death,
Lord Rode with him to his death.*

The song was recorded by numerous American vocalists in the tumultuous days that followed the assassination.

There was more chart success, too: In 1974, *She*, the song he had penned with French singer Charles Aznavour as the theme tune of

the British television series, *Seven Faces of Women*, topped the UK Singles Charts for a month. His inspiration, he confided to Sue Lawley on Desert Island Discs in 2003, was a British woman with whom he had recently broken up with after a year-long affair.

The big time, though, eluded Kretzmer – until the day in June 1984 the producer Cameron Mackintosh invited him to tea. Kretzmer had written to Mackintosh, a rising star of musical production with the award-winning 1981 musical *Cats* under his belt, to try to interest him in a revival of *Our Man Crichton*. Mackintosh wasn't interested although the two men got on well. "We talked about anything and everything and then, between the sofa and the door of his office as he was showing me out, my entire life changed," Kretzmer would recall. "He said, 'Tell me why you didn't go on as a lyricist'. And I said, 'But I have'. He asked me to name a couple of songs and I named two, both with music by Aznavour. One was *She* and another called *Yesterday when I was Young*."

The songs were two of Mackintosh's favourites and he "leapt about like a leprechaun". When, some six months later, Mackintosh as producer and co-directors Trevor Nunn and John Caird of the Royal Shakespeare Company were in serious trouble with their plans for *Les Misérables*, Kretzmer was the man they turned to. Mackintosh, by his own admission, had sat up in bed one morning, recalled that conversation and Kretzmer's "French connection" and decided he was the man to save them.

Over lunch at The Ivy, the London restaurant beloved of the showbiz elite, Mackintosh spelled out their ambitious plans for a show greatly expanded from the Paris original. He had a theatre booked - the Barbican - and directors and cast waiting but no workable English libretto. The show was due to open in October 1985 which was just eight months away.

Kretzmer's editor at the *Mail*, the legendary David English, took some persuading to allow his TV critic the time off to work on a musical, but eventually agreed, telling him later "I could see in your eyes you were going to do it whatever I said".

So, on the evening of March 1 1985 Kretzmer came home from the office, placed a teddy bear – a Christmas gift from Terence Stamp – on his desk, lit a candle and stuck a message on the wall in front of him. It said: “Tell the story”.

Initially, the plan had been for a collaboration with Fenton but Kretzmer preferred to work alone. The two men never met although Kretzmer would acknowledge the poet’s contribution in the “architecture” of the show. An intense five months followed, of working day and night writing a new prologue, new scenes, around half a dozen new songs, and recreating new lyrics for others from the French original. This was interspersed with trips to the Barbican and meetings at his flat to show Mackintosh and the team, including Boublil and Schönberg, what he had.

I Dreamed a Dream has its following but if there is one song that stands out in the score it is, for many, *Bring Him Home* and it was this that gave Kretzmer his greatest challenge. He found that the “stately melody” he had to work with was “totally at odds with the agitated emotions that the song was trying to convey”. A late-night crisis meeting with Nunn and Caird failed to solve the problem until, as Caird was leaving, he turned to Kretzmer and said, almost as an aside: ‘Sounds to me like a prayer.’

“I realised he was right. As a prayer, suddenly everything fell into place. ‘God . . . on . . . high, hear . . . my . . . prayer, . . . in . . . my . . . need, you have always been there’. By 5am that morning, after a feverish, three hour burst of creativity, Kretzmer, had his showstopper – just 17 days before the premier.

“I took *Bring Him Home* into rehearsals the next morning and hearing Colm Wilkinson, our original Jean Valjean, sing it for the very first time, I knew we had discovered something special and thrilling.”

The show opened on October 8 1985 and the reviews were mixed. The reaction of Jack Tinker, *The Daily Mail*’s influential theatre critic with whom he had shared a desk for years, wounded Kretzmer in particular. Tinker dubbed the show “The Glums”, a name that stuck. The public, however, thought differently and Les

Misérables became a word of mouth hit that has never lost momentum.

Kretzmer returned to the Mail as TV critic but quit after a year when, with openings in New York, Tokyo and beyond, the show's success – and his future financially - seemed assured. Thereafter, he continued with occasional journalism, and also worked on two new musicals, *Kristina*, with ABBA's Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, and *Marguerite*, with Schönberg and Boublil. Latterly he was reworking his musical *Our Man Crichton*.

Kretzmer was not a religious man, seldom referencing his Jewish heritage because “the word Jew carries too much weight.” However, he studied Buddhism because he felt in need of “a guiding hand” and from his newspaper days had practised meditation every day. He believed he was born under “a rhyming planet”. “I had a knack. I didn't question it. I exercised it. I was grateful for it. I tried to play by the rules, no false rhymes and avoid cliché like the plague.”

He once said “I've loved everything I've ever done,” a sentiment echoed in an anecdote he was fond of telling about the death of the father of Larry Hart of Rodgers and Hart fame. “Don't grieve for me, boys,” the old man told Hart and his brother. “I haven't missed a thing.”

Herbert Kretzmer is survived by his second wife Sybil, a son and daughter by his first wife Elizabeth Margaret Wilson with whom he maintained a warm relationship following their divorce in 1973 after 12 years of marriage, and by two grandsons.