

SYBIL KRETZMER smiles apologetically as she shrugs and says: 'I do realise it is a little ironic.'

Her husband is Herbert Kretzmer, 91, the Mail's former showbusiness correspondent, TV critic and acclaimed lyricist of *Les Misérables*, the West End's longest-running musical ever. Between them they have seen 'countless' musicals, operas, plays and ballets. The West End is in their blood.

But they have recently been scammed by a very modern form of ticket tout.

Mrs Kretzmer explains what happened. In January, she went to a dress rehearsal of *Wolf Works*, a new ballet, at the Royal Opera House. 'It was the best thing I'd seen in decades and I was very excited about seeing a proper performance, and wanted to take Herbert.'

She Googled 'Royal Opera House box office'. The top result was: 'Royal Opera House Tickets — Buy Now, viagogo Official Site'

'I just presumed it was the official opera house box office,' she says.

What happened next is familiar to thousands of other concertgoers, music fans and theatre

by Harry Wallop

buffs who have inadvertently bought tickets from Viagogo, many believing the site is the official box office, only to discover — to their great cost — it is not.

Viagogo is what is known as a secondary ticketing platform. These websites were launched more than a decade ago as a forum through which fans could sell tickets for events that they could no longer attend. Initially, they were a useful service. Not so now.

Viagogo was selling each *Wolf Works* ticket for £152.99 — nearly twice the face value of £85. But only after Mrs Kretzmer had clicked to 'buy' did she see there was a further booking fee of £85.01, plus a handling fee of £2.88, plus VAT of £17. The total cost for the two tickets was £410.87.

Mrs Kretzmer says she only realised once the money had been taken that she'd bought tickets from Viagogo, rather than directly from

the Royal Opera House. The sky-high prices were not her only problem. When the couple arrived for the matinee performance, an usher took one look at their tickets and shook his head. 'He told me: "These are from Viagogo. Our policy is we do not accept tickets that have been resold at more than face value." The tickets were invalid from the start.'

The usher knew that the tickets were sourced from Viagogo because Mrs Kretzmer had with her a print-out of an electronic ticket with a barcode, and other paperwork from the website.

'He told me it happened all the time,' she adds. 'They actually had a form ready for me to fill out because it happens so often.'

Viagogo is the best known of the four big secondary ticketing platforms which include GetMeIn, Seatwave and StubHub.

In recent years they have gained a reputation for charging eye-watering markups, providing consumers with scant, or even incorrect, information, and — crucially — for selling tickets that are not allowed to be re-sold.

In other words, the sites have become a place where ticket touts offload their wares onto unsuspecting consumers.

Last month, thousands of Ed Sheeran fans discovered tickets they bought on Viagogo had been cancelled by the tour promoters, triggering calls for a crackdown from the public and MPs.

In an effort to beat the touts and secondary websites, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (Rada) earlier this month said it would allocate tickets to its forthcoming run of *Hamlet*, starring Tom Hiddleston, by ballot — a first for a theatrical show.

Sharon Hodgson, Labour MP, and joint chair of the All Parliamentary Group on ticket abuse, has described Viagogo and similar sites as 'parasites'.

In a report published in July in the Consumer Association's magazine, *Which?*, it was estimated that a quarter of all tickets for some shows end up on secondary sites — often within seconds of them being released to the public.

This is undoubtedly big business, with industry estimates suggesting the four main sites had a combined turnover of at least £1 billion last year and are increasingly fuelled by professional touts.

In February, a newspaper investigation found that convicted fraudsters Michael Mayiger and Michelle Meiger were using both GetMeIn and Seatwave to sell tickets.

THE husband and wife team were convicted in 2012 at Southwark Crown Court in London for being part of a £2 million ticket tout ring involving Premier League football tickets. Despite this, they had gained 'trusted seller' status on the sites.

The sites are perfectly legal, but campaigners say they are not doing enough to stop touts using them and that Viagogo, in particular, is consistently flouting consumer protection regulations.

The first problem is the high prices. Want to go to the sold-out *Last Night Of The Proms*? Viagogo has a stalls ticket with a price of £1,540. This is 1,700 per cent more expensive than the £87 face value.

Desperate to see the Broadway blockbuster, *Hamilton*, when it opens in London in November? Well, Viagogo had a single ticket for £4,499.10 on its site recently.

But even for events where tickets are still available from the official box office, the prices on secondary sites are often double the face value.

Take *The Ferryman*, a West End hit. When the Mail checked, there were a handful of tickets available directly from the Gielgud Theatre, including two tickets in row R for a matinee on September 2 at £139. On Viagogo, a

pair of seats in the same row for the same performance is £264.

The sites themselves point out, correctly, they do not set the prices. The sellers do. But the sites do set the commission fees. And this is where they make their money.

Which? calculates that the sites take 10 per cent commission from sellers and between 17 per cent and 34 per cent from buyers.

They invariably then charge 'delivery fees' on top, even when the ticket is electronic. Then there is the sneaky practice of often not declaring these fees and VAT until the last stage of the transaction.

Certainly, Viagogo never states the VAT or fees upfront.

This infuriates Keith Kenny, who works for the Cameron Mackintosh Group, one of the West End's biggest producers. He argues the failure to state fees and taxes upfront breaks the Consumer Contracts (Information Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013.

'Viagogo is the worst of them all, it flouts the law at every turn and should be brought to justice.'

MPs periodically try to clean up this market. Two years ago, the Consumer Rights Act set out new legislation for the secondary ticketing market. Namely, any tickets sold on these platforms had to state clearly the seat number to give the consumer the confidence it was legitimate.

MOSTLY, this regulation has been adhered to by GetMeIn and Seatwave (both owned by Ticketmaster) and StubHub (owned by eBay). Viagogo frequently ignores this stipulation.

The other new stipulation in the Consumer Rights Act is that the seller and the platforms had to give 'information about any restriction which limits use of the ticket'. The most important restriction might be: is this ticket valid?

An increasing number of event organisers are using this legislation to try to stop touts. They are stating clearly in the terms and conditions that tickets cannot be resold. If they end up on secondary ticketing platforms, the platform itself is breaking the law by failing to disclose the tickets are invalid, promoters argue.

This was the route taken by Ed Sheeran. Last year, a ticket for a charity performance by Sheeran at the Royal Albert Hall — face value £75 — was advertised on a secondary website for £2,330.

So when he announced his 2018 stadium tour earlier this month, customers had to tick a box saying they agreed the tickets could not be resold before they were allowed to purchase them.

'We made clear that if they were bought for resale, they were invalid. We have the right to cancel any ticket we wish,' says Stuart Galbraith, his tour promoter.

'I also wrote to the four main platforms and implored them not to allow Ed Sheeran tickets to be traded on those sites, because if they did those tickets would be invalid. Three of the platforms adhered [to] our warnings. Viagogo chose to ignore it.'

Last month, Galbraith's team cancelled 10,000 tickets they discovered had been resold on Viagogo and some smaller sites.

Unfortunately, this means that 10,000 fans who thought they had legitimate Ed Sheeran tickets from Viagogo are out of pocket — such as Claire Connor, 27, a marketing manager from Oxfordshire.

After she failed to get tickets from Sheeran's site, she turned to Viagogo. 'It came up top on Google. I thought it was reputable,' she says. She spent £854 on four tickets for his 2018 Manchester show.

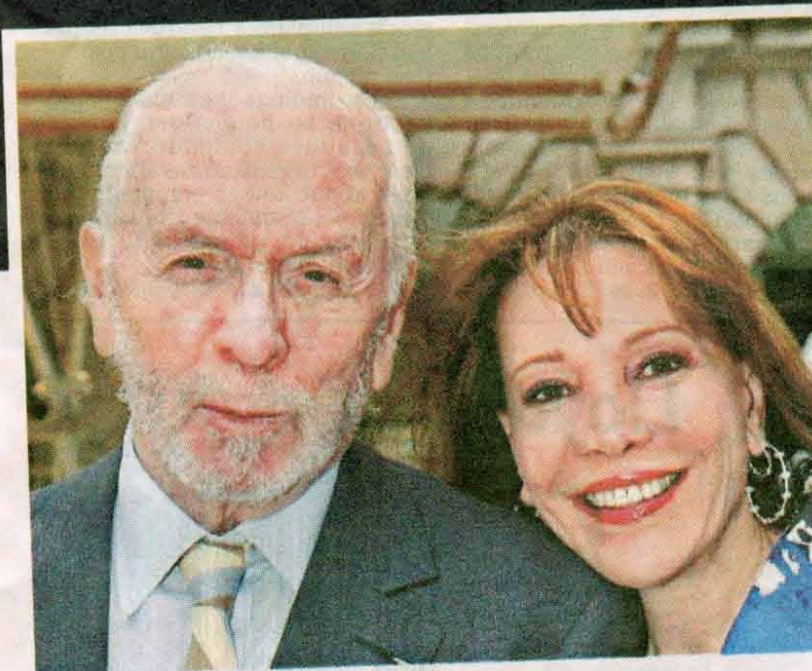
'I thought this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was prepared to throw some money at it.'

Her delight, however, turned sour when she discovered, from a message on Sheeran's website, that her tickets were invalid. Mrs Connor says: 'I feel

The scourge of modern ticket touts

They charge sky-high prices, fat hidden fees — and your tickets aren't valid. And even a West End legend's fallen victim ...

Fighting the touts: Superstar Ed Sheeran. Inset: Herbert and Sybil Kretzmer were left out of pocket



Pictures: ALAN DAVIDSON / REX SHUTTERSTOCK

the tickets were valid. In one revealing email, the company appeared to admit it *knew* it was selling dud tickets — blaming Mrs Kretzmer for showing her Viagogo correspondence to the usher.

It read: 'Thank you for providing the proof required, as you showed your Viagogo confirmation email to the venue you have invalidated your tickets. Unfortunately, we cannot provide a refund as the tickets were valid for entry.'

Mrs Kretzmer says: 'Here they are showing they know they cannot sell or use these tickets legally, and because I honestly showed the requested paperwork to the ticket taker, and that act alone invalidated them... well, Viagogo knew very well what they were up to and were trying to make muggins here take the fall.'

Viagogo was summoned to a Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee in March, but failed to attend. There, Nigel Adams, the Conservative MP, said Viagogo 'makes Stan Flashman look like Mother Teresa'. (Flashman was a renowned British tout.)

The Swiss-based company said it did not have 'adequate representation' in the UK to attend. But it

has since emerged that Viagogo's parent company, VGL Services, has offices in the heart of the City, at 71 Fenchurch Street.

Last month, Ed Sheeran's tour promoter Mr Galbraith, Nigel Adams and Sharon Hodgson went there to challenge the company but were turned away.

VIAGOGO, in a statement to the Mail, insisted it abided 'by all applicable laws', adding: 'It is legal to resell tickets in the UK for Ed Sheeran or any other event, regardless of what these people might claim. We believe anyone who has bought an Ed Sheeran ticket through Viagogo will get into the event.'

For its part StubHub insisted that 98 per cent of sellers on its site are private individuals, but pointed to the 'misuse of computer software, bots, to bulk buy tickets' when they are first released for secondary sale.

Ticketmaster says it works 'with artists, including Ed Sheeran, as well as promoters to help take touts out of the equation. Our

number one goal is to get tickets into the hands of fans.'

Ms Hodgson is clear about what must be done: 'We need existing legislation to be enforced. We need the police and trading standards to follow through. And if they break the law, they need to feel the full weight of the law.'

The Competition and Markets Authority announced in December it was undertaking an 'enforcement investigation' into the market. Campaigners hope that it will recommend stringent action against the worst offenders.

Until then, the touts will continue to use the secondary ticketing platforms to rip-off fans.

As Keith Kenny, of the Cameron Mackintosh Group, says, referring to the controversial loans company: 'I call Viagogo the Wonga of the entertainment industry. It exploits demand with astronomical markups. At least with Wonga you were guaranteed to get the money.'

With Viagogo there's no guarantee your ticket will be valid, as Mrs Kretzmer discovered. She and Herbert did in the end get to see the ballet after the Royal Opera House found two tickets to sell her. 'I loved the show,' she said, 'but it was also a very expensive lesson.'