



Les Miserables writer Herbert Kretzmer: He dreamed a dream

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'It's too much for an old Jew', jokes Herbert Kretzmer about the number of trans-Atlantic flights he has taken since December. First there was the New York opening of the movie, then the Golden Globes, and in a few days the 87-year-old lyricist will return to Hollywood for the Oscars.

Along with Alain Boublil (original lyrics) and Claude-Michel Schönberg (music) Kretzmer represents a third of the essential trio who created the musical Les Miserables, a show that can reasonably claim to be the greatest on earth. Since it opened in 1985 to largely negative reviews, it has broken almost every box office record.

"If you're interested in historic parallels, I constantly remind myself that when Victor Hugo published the book in 1862, he got precisely the same reviews as our show, and precisely the same public reaction."

But Hugo probably didn't have to continue working opposite one of his harshest critics, as Kretzmer did after the critic Jack Tinker labelled the show "The Glums" in his Daily Mail review. Kretzmer continued in his job as the paper's television critic, sitting opposite Tinker in the open plan office. Relations thawed, eventually.

On his, Schönberg and Boublil's Oscar nomination for Best Original Song, Kretzmer is counting no chickens.

"I have a very realistic view of its chances", he says. The song is Suddenly. In the Tom Hooper-directed movie, which has been nominated for eight Academy Awards in all, Hugh Jackman sings Kretzmer's tender lyrics about parental love. It's up against songs from four other movies, including the title number from Skyfall.

"What do I mean by realistic?" says Kretzmer, but before he answers his own question the housekeeper brings in a tray of tea for which Kretzmer expresses gratitude with an avuncular "Thank you my dear".

Although home is an elegant Kensington house (where he lives with his even more elegant American wife Sybil), the picture above the fireplace reveals where the heart is. The oil painting depicts a verdant South African plain bordered by hazy, distant mountains. The scene is not far from the small town of Kroonstad where Kretzmer, the son of Jewish immigrants who fled Lithuanian pogroms, was born. With a mug of tea in hand Kretzmer returns to his point.

“What I mean by realistic is that there are songs that come at you like a fanfare. They announce themselves as contenders for big prizes. Skyfall is such a song. Other songs [such as Suddenly] whisper in your ear. That’s appropriate for this song, because in the movie it’s sung to a sleeping child. You don’t shout to a sleeping child. That doesn’t mean we won’t get it because the Oscars are capable of surprises. I’m prepared to be surprised.”

The South African accent has softened in the years since Kretzmer landed on these shores in 1954 and embarked on a career as a top flight Fleet Street journalist. He was the Daily Express’s drama critic for 18 years and then the Daily Mail’s TV critic for eight. As with his South African identity, his Jewishness runs deep but is borne lightly.

Carefully weighted sentences are often punctuated with Yiddish words and Jewish one-liners. One time he was reviewing a production of Macbeth, and during the scene where the witches list the ingredients for their spell, including “Liver of blaspheming Jew”, Kretzmer leaned across to his old friend, the late David Nathan, former drama critic of this newspaper, and whispered “Chopped liver of blaspheming Jew.”

While a TV critic, lyric writing was conducted mostly by night in Kretzmer’s Knightsbridge flat (formerly John Cleese’s). Situated behind Harrods, it was big enough to accommodate a grand piano and it was there that Kretzmer would eventually write Les Miserables, though long after he wrote the comedy hits Goodness Gracious Me for Peter Sellers and Sophie Loren and Kinky Boots for Avengers stars Honor Blackman and Patrick Macnee.

In 1964 he had moderate West End success with a musical called Our Man Crichton, based on JM Barrie’s class satire, The Admirable Crichton. And later in the 1970s the hits She and Yesterday, When I Was Young turned Charles Aznavour into a British chart success. But none of this prepared Kretzmer for how life changed when Cameron Macintosh asked him to write the libretto for Les Miserables. Nothing could.

What followed has gone down in musical theatre history. The poet James Fenton had been working on the libretto for over a year but without much success. So January 1985, with time running out, Macintosh turned to Kretzmer and gave him five fevered months to write the show.

Although it had been a moderate success in Paris, Kretzmer has always rejected the term translation to describe his work on the show which was co-directed over here by Trevor Nunn and John Caird. He not only had to create new material for the London version, which would be a third longer, but re-write nearly all the existing material. The result is the longest running musical in the West End and which has played to over 60 million people in 42 countries.

The pressure of those five months was famously intense. But less well known is the high pressure lyric-writing job that preceded it. In the 1960s Kretzmer was part of the highly talented team conscripted by Ned Sherrin for the satirical show That Was The Week That Was, for which Kretzmer wrote songs inspired by the news of the day.

The show went out live on Saturday evenings. News of Kennedy’s assassination broke at about 6.30pm on a Friday. That evening Kretzmer received a call from Sherrin telling him he wanted a song about the assassination for the following day’s show.

“I said, ‘Are you crazy? A song?’ I’d been in tears. The world was in tears. I said I couldn’t do it. He said, ‘Yes you can. We have a production meeting tomorrow morning at 10.’

“I felt challenged in a way that I’ve seldom been challenged in my life. If I couldn’t meet the demand, it meant I was committing myself to a lifetime of writing songs for pure entertainment — love

songs, silly songs such as Goodness Gracious Me. At dawn I came up with the essential idea — a song that didn't mention the words Kennedy or assassination but tapped into the Wild West myth and which supported the idea of a young man being shot down in a Texas street. Once I had the idea, it wrote itself."

Sitting in his armchair, Kretzmer recites the lyrics he wrote 50 years ago.

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.

Another song that stunned the TW3 studio audience into silence was also based on an American news story. Kretzmer cannot remember the details — "I think it was a new outrage against black civil rights workers attacked by the white man in the South" — but he can certainly remember the lyrics.

It was performed in the style of a Black and White Minstrel Show number, which most (white) people at the time considered to be innocuous light entertainment.

I want to go back to Mississippi,
Where the scent of blossom
kisses the evening breeze,
Where the Mississippi mud
kind of mingles with the blood,
Of the niggers hanging from
the branches of trees.
"It gets more strident after that", says Kretzmer.

It might be too simplistic to say that the controlled anti-racist rage of that song was rooted in the injustices of apartheid South Africa. But as a London critic he could not bear the kind of casual racism that characterised many a British comedy with its post-colonial jokes, usually about Asian immigrants. Kretzmer's earliest memory helped mould those attitudes. It is of being a baby strapped spreadeagled to the back of the black woman who worked for his family.

"I remember distinctly that she was working, and singing. And I remember to this day the rhythm of her movement, her voice, the heat of the sun beating down on my back. It was a moment of bliss."

Whether or not that moment helped shape his professional life is impossible to say. But it was his first encounter with music and rhythm. And it wasn't until it was clear that *Les Misérables* was a hit that he could give up journalism and devote his life to that vocation. Still, journalism also had its rewards. Kretzmer is working on the proofs of a book called *Snapshots*, an anthology of his show business interviews, among them Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich. It will be published later this year. Clearly he will take in his stride this weekend's Hollywood celeb fest and Oscar parties.

In the meantime, the stage show of *Lez Mis* (a term Kretzmer never uses out of respect for Hugo), boosted by Susan Boyle's version of *I Dreamed A Dream* on Britain's *Got Talent*, and now cata-

pulted back to the number one West End show by the Oscar nominated movie, goes from strength to strength.

It takes almost a vision of a post -apocalyptic planet to imagine a world without Les Miserables. Kretzmer must have a sense of immortality.

“Absolutely not,” he says. “Otherwise I’d be like Cole Porter sitting in the front row of his shows applauding louder than everyone else at his own ingenuity. Occasionally I look at my watch and if it happens to be 7.30 in the evening I think that at this moment a baton is being raised, not only on my show, but every show in London. It’s a magical moment.”

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