

John Nathan mines the journalistic side of a lyricist. Simon Rucker finds flaws in a provocative argument

Herbaceous perennials

INTERVIEW HERBERT KRETZMER

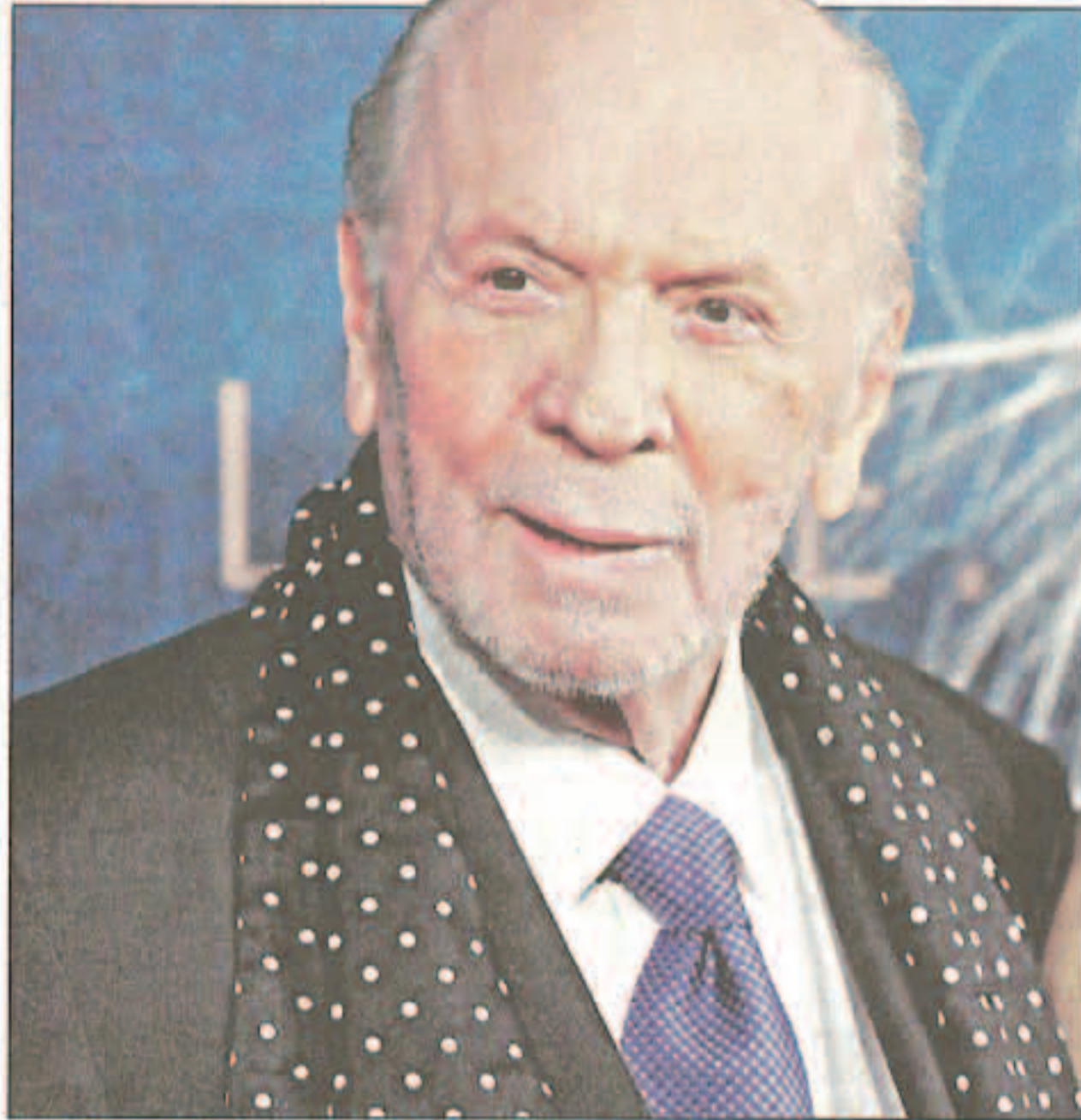
IN HERBERT Kretzmer's Holland Park house (which is as elegant and grand as you might expect a home belonging to the lyricist of the world's most successful show, *Les Misérables*, to be) hanging on the wall of the downstairs WC is evidence of Kretzmer's past life. It is a letter of thanks from Frank Sinatra, not for a song Kretzmer composed but for an article he wrote about the singer in the days when Kretzmer's main job was as a top Fleet Street journalist.

"Your column was most compassionate and sensitive and I am most grateful to you for it. Again, my most sincere thanks," it says.

"It's on loo level," says Kretzmer, displaying as much irreverence for the missive as pride. "Halfway between sitting and standing, it is nicely balanced between the two."

• Once only available for viewing by friends and family, and presumably the occasional visiting workman who has been caught short, Sinatra's letter is now published in *Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth-Century Legends*, a compilation of Kretzmer's journalism. Although the Sinatra article was an appreciation of the singer's career, the book mainly contains interviews with, as the subtitle says, "legends".

It amounts to a *Who's Who* of the last century's greats—to mention randomly: Truman Capote, Lionel Bart, Cary Grant, John Paul Getty, Marlene Dietrich (who also sent Kretzmer a thank-



Herbert Kretzmer and a brace of legends: Groucho (top right) "past caring" and Sinatra: gracing the toilet

you note), Marcel Marceau, Groucho Marx. Although the list is long—90 people—the articles are short.

"I was out to get some essential moment, statement or gesture that would illuminate the person," explains Kretzmer, choosing his words, it seems, as carefully as he would for a lyric. At 89, the voice is a low rumble. If a coffee percolator could talk it would sound like Herbert Kretzmer. Born in South Africa, he arrived in London in 1954,

and joined the *Express* in 1960. He was doubtful that the interviews could be revived. "They were disposable journalism. But, over the decades, I realised the names still had resonance."

Initially, he was only going to preserve them for "the *mishpocheh*" but then a publisher made an offer. Perhaps inevitably, with interviewees drawn from showbiz, many are Jewish: Neil Simon, Peter Shaffer, Richard Rodgers, Otto Preminger, Anthony



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ance and escorted groups of children to safety using mime to keep them amused during dangerous border crossings, Kretzmer informs us.

Many interviewees became friends. "Sellers became a very good friend for years. As did Anthony Newley. I went on seeing these people until the day they died. Some are still alive; I see a lot of Terrence Stamp. He comes over and watches a game sometimes."

A few would never become friends—Leni Riefenstahl for instance. For the interview with Hitler's favourite film maker, Kretzmer abandoned the urbane charm with which he encouraged stars such as Cary Grant to make him their confidante.

"With Riefenstahl, if I had a stance it was adversarial. I knew that whatever I wrote would reflect my dislike. That only happened two or three times."

Perhaps the saddest of the interviews turned out to be the shortest. "Groucho was past caring," remembers Kretzmer. "He clearly didn't give a damn. He had been interviewed by a thousand people like me." But still, the result is a telling portrait of the man at the end of his life.

Kretzmer, though now three years older than Groucho was when he met the last living Marx brother in 1976, is certainly not past caring, clearly does give a damn and, because of this, probably has a good many more years in him. And, although journalism has played a major part in his professional life, it's as a lyric writer that Kretzmer will be remembered.

"Old songwriters don't die," he says. "They just de-compose."

Newley... "Peter Sellers was the supreme example of a man smothered by his Jewish mother," says Kretzmer. "Poor old Peter. Anthony Newley was not very forthcoming about his Jewishness. And although Henry Miller was not Jewish, he said 'I like Jews and have always been befriended by them!'"

In some interviews, Jewishness is most present in Kretzmer's new introductions. Marcel Marceau, the son of a kosher butcher, was in the French Resist-

Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth-Century Legends is published by Biteback at £25. John Nathan is the *JC's* theatre critic