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Oscars 2013: Herbert Kretzmer dishes on 'Les Miz's' 'Suddenly'

Kretzmer went for the ideas and feelings in his English-language lyrics for 'Les Misérables.' For the film version, he collaborated on the new 'Suddenly,' which is up for an Oscar.

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To speak with Herbert Kretzmer, writer of the English-language lyrics for "Les Misérables," is uncannily like being let in on his creative process. He chooses his words — considering one, tossing it out, employing another, while muttering asides like "yes, that's better" — as if he were composing on the spot. Kretzmer was 60, and the longtime theater and television critic of the U.K.'s Daily Mail, when he took leave to tackle the "Les Misérables" project on a five-month deadline before the London debut of the musical in 1985. He's now 87, and last year he and French composers Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil collaborated once again, to add a new song to the musical — "Suddenly," sung in the movie by Hugh Jackman — which has been nominated for an Oscar.

How did a new song come to be added to this very well-known musical so late in the game?

The commercial benefits of a successful new song on a movie soundtrack speak for themselves. It's an obvious ploy to help sell a movie. But if you're making a serious movie, it should fulfill a dramatic purpose. [Director] Tom Hooper found that purpose deep in the pages of [Victor] Hugo's novel, just after Valjean has acquired the guardianship of little Cosette, when he feels what he's never felt before — a love for this child that is paternal and protective and overwhelming. It's the wonder of any parent gazing into the face of a newborn child. So I open my song, "Suddenly you're here/suddenly it starts/can two anxious hearts beat as one?" But there's a fear that comes with the challenge of caring for a fragile life, so I added these lines: "Trusting me the way you do/I'm so afraid of failing you."

I've seen side-by-side comparisons of some of the original French-language lyrics and the ones you wrote, and they are markedly different, though the ideas and emotions are the same.

I'm not a translator. I don't believe a song can be translated; it is something too ephemeral. You can't get hold of it with your fingers; it's like a collection of references and allusions. Some of the most memorable lines are the most mysterious.

There's that striking moment in "I Dreamed a Dream" where these lines come in: "But the tigers come at night/with their voices soft as thunder."

I remember the exact moment when those lines came to me: It was 2 or 3 in the morning and I was standing at the corner of the desk in my flat on Basil Street, looking over a couple of lines, about to go to bed, when those words just jumped into my mind. I'm still not entirely certain what

they mean. Obviously, the tigers are the bad news, the troubles, but there's a resonance to those words that might not achieve the same effect in another language. Tom Stoppard said in a lecture that when he came across a great phrase, he'd simply drop the pencil, clap his hands together, and say "Thank you, Lord, keep 'em coming." That's what I thought of then. It was a gift from somewhere, and I'm grateful for it.

When you approach your work, do you take on the responsibility of telling the whole story, the way a playwright or a screenwriter would?

Absolutely. On the day I began work on "Les Misérables," which was March 1, 1985, I wrote out a slogan of three words and pinned it to the wall at the corner of my desk: "Tell the story." My job is to distill the essence of the novel in song, and to never stray from the mood and thrust of the original text. If we've succeeded, it's because we've stayed close to Hugo.

Before you took on "Les Misérables," you wrote some enduring songs, such as "Yesterday When I Was Young" for Charles Aznavour. How would you say your career as a newspaperman prepared you?

Journalism and lyric writing are compatible professions in that they involve the manipulation of language under great constraint. I tried to write a novel once, and though I finished it, I did not enjoy 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.