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Where leaders learn

The South African who wrote the English lyrics for 'Les Miserables' talks to Marianne Gray in London

HERBERT Kretzmer has very little to be miserable about. Apart from living a fascinating life, which started in Kroonstad then went via Paris and New York to London, he also wrote the English lyrics for Les Miserables, the world's longest-running musical, which is now coming out as an all-star film.

For the film, he has written the lyrics for an additional song, Suddenly, which has been nominated for an Oscar as Best Original Song. We meet in his elegant townhouse in Kensington, London, to talk about the film of the musical which is based on Victor Hugo's novel set in 19th-century France.

The musical has been running worldwide for 27 years, has been seen by 60 million people and shows no signs of flagging. The film stars two Australian leading men —Russell Crowe as the relentless Inspector Javert and Hugh Jackman as the hunted ex convict Jean Valjean — and the gorgeous Anne Hathaway as the hapless Fantine, mother of Cosette, who sells her hair to raise money. Hathaway actually had her beautiful long hair shorn to the scalp during one of the movie's possibly most emotional sequences.

Kretzmer only went on set twice during the shoot. He says he is now a "spare wheel". "Nobody wants a writer round once his work is done," he laughs. "He's just being a tourist." At 87, and with an OBE (Order of the British Empire), a chevalier of the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University (which he dropped out of when a student), he still is totally on the ball as he chats, in a soft South African accent, about his extraordinary life.

In 1985, Kretzmer was 60 and known for his lyrics for West End musicals Our Man Crichton and The Four Musketeers and hit-song lyrics including Charles Aznavour's She and Yesterday, When I was Young. Then London theatre impresario Sir Cameron Mackintosh asked him to write the English lyrics for the French musical Les Miserables, which had been briefly performed in Paris five years earlier.

Kretzmer at the time was a Daily Mail journalist and critic. "Writing song lyrics for me was a spare-time, part-time kitchen table job," he says. Though several of his hit lyrics originated in the French language, he refuses to be described as a translator. "I don't translate," he says firmly. "I recreate.

Songs cannot be translated, they can, however, be retold." He wangled six months leave from the Fantine paper and began work on the Les Mis project in March 1985; rehearsals began that August and on October 8 1985, the show opened, 27 years ago. Kretzmer's affiliation with France started when he spent what he calls his "wandering years" in Paris in the early '50s, trying to write the "great South African novel", playing piano in a bar for food and painting murals for rent money.

Born and educated in Kroonstad, he knew when he was young that he had to travel further afield. "Kroonstad, like every small town in South Africa then, had its share of Jewish immigrants; largely from Lithuania.

My parents owned a small grocery shop which eventually grew into a prosperous furniture store in the main street. It became a big carpet business and my younger brother Basil took it over and moved to Johannesburg, where it thrived” Herbert also moved to Jo’burg, where he wrote commentaries for the African Mirror weekly newsreels, a job he secured through fellow-Kroonstader, former Sunday Times editor Joel Mervis.

After working as a feature writer on Johannesburg’s Sunday Express, he moved to London, where he wrote for several newspapers and interviewed celebrities such as John Steinbeck, Louis Armstrong, Cary Grant and Duke Ellington. He was the drama critic of the Daily Express, covering about 3 000 first nights, and TV critic of the Daily Mail, where he became the UK’s TV Critic of the Year.

All the time he was writing lyrics at home on the kitchen table. “I’ve somehow made a living and profession out of the manipulation of the English language. That’s odd, really, when you consider that our parents spoke a lot of Yiddish at home and I was partially educated in Afrikaans,” he says. “I’ve learnt the value of thrift in the usage of words. In journalism and in lyric writing, language is always employed under constraint.

Application and directness and brevity are vital. “I never considered myself a critic. I was a reviewer, someone who writes for the popular press and tells them about a play. A consumer guide, whose chief function was to answer the question: ‘Is it worth seeing?’ Especially now with the price of tickets so high. “My attitude hasn’t changed; there are good productions and bad ones. I didn’t expect any mercy from my fellow critics when Les Miserables opened and I didn’t get any!”

Les Miserables is on circuit

Source: Sunday Times