

Herbert Kretzmer dreamed a dream – and *Les Misérables* never looked back

Herbert Kretzmer, lyricist of '*Les Misérables*', which has its world film premiere in London tonight, recalls how the record-breaking show got off the ground

By Liz Hunt 7:00AM GMT 05 Dec 2012

Herbert Kretzmer has never met Susan Boyle, but he would like to. Not least to thank her. "What is it about that moment on television?" he asks. "This dumpy little lady walks on to a stage and within minutes she's a universal legend. Everything about her is stardust. And she revived interest not only in the song but in the show. She gave it new life."

The song was, of course, *I Dreamed a Dream*. The show, *Les Misérables*.

Les Mis, it must be said, had been ticking along very nicely without SuBo: the longest-running musical in the West End (now 27 years and counting), the third-longest running Broadway musical (16 years) and the second-longest running musical in the world, with openings in every major city. It has garnered eight Tony awards and topped a poll of Essential Musicals.

But Kretzmer is right. Boyle's showstopping turn on Britain's *Got Talent* in 2009 brought *Les Mis* to a new audience here and, courtesy of the Youtube clip of that audition, to millions elsewhere. Now, a film of the musical, directed by Tom Hooper (his first since the Oscar-winning *The King's Speech*) and starring Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway and Hugh Jackman, will extend its reach still further. Kretzmer has seen a rough cut and describes it as "successful beyond my wildest dreams".

"It's a great gamble that Tom has taken. It is an innovation in cinema terms, in that for the first time – at least, at this significant level – singers in a musical on film have sung 'live', with the orchestral accompaniment added afterwards. If you are singing while you're acting, you're able to make all the little slurs and hesitations that you wouldn't if you were just singing a song. It is more real. You can hurry a word or two, or hold a phrase back, or even speak a word or two."

Without Kretzmer, it could be argued, there would never have been a film. *Les Mis* started life, somewhat unpromisingly, as a French "concept" album before a short-lived opening as a musical in Paris in 1980. Over five intense months in 1985, Kretzmer created the English libretto, with soaring lyrics to inspire, amuse and move to tears. The words he penned lit the fuse of a global phenomenon.

Yet outside the theatre, Kretzmer's role in *Les Mis* and his own extraordinary journey from a small town in South Africa to the West End and Broadway via Fleet Street, is little known. A tall, slightly stooping but still debonair figure, Kretzmer, 87, will attend the world premiere of the film in Leicester Square tonight as a member of the original team that gave *Les Misérables* life and longevity. He refers repeatedly to the brilliance of the producer (Cameron Mackintosh), the genius of the co-directors (Trevor Nunn and John Caird), the incredible talent of the French originators Claude-Michel Schönberg (music), Alain Boublil (lyrics) and the poet James Fenton. He is, however, very clear about his contribution. He did not merely translate *Les Misérables* – his French is "wretched". He read Victor Hugo's novel in English and worked with a literal translation of the French libretto.

“You cannot translate a song,” he says. “You can translate a textbook and even a novel, but a song is no more than a compendium of nuances and references and illusions, with a resonance within a particular culture. It does not have much resonance outside that culture.

“So simply to translate the words into their dictionary meaning isn’t going to work. It doesn’t interest me.”

He cites *I Dreamed a Dream* as an example. The literal translation of the French lyrics is: “I had dreamed of another life/In which my life would pass like a dream/I was prepared for all follies/All passions which arise.” Kretzmer’s interpretation elevated it to “I dreamed a dream in time gone by/When hope was high and life worth living/I dreamed that love would never die/I dreamed that God would be forgiving...”

The original Paris production was an hour shorter than the show that opened at the Barbican in October 1985. “That means that a third of *Les Misérables* as we know it had no previous existence in any other language and may fairly be described as original material. The other two thirds consist of adaptation and, yes, some form of translation.”

It’s a point that Kretzmer is determined to underline. “I don’t translate, I recreate,” he says. “At the same time, I take care to advance the cause, and to serve as best I can, the meaning and thrust of the song as conceived by the original creator.”

He speaks slowly, with studied precision, selecting and rejecting words until he has the exact combination to convey his thoughts. It is a discipline instilled in him by many decades as a journalist and lyricist.

Song-writing and journalism are, he says, compatible. “Both involve the manipulation of the English language under duress. You cannot negotiate with a bar of music, just because you’ve thought of a great rhyme. You may have something that would have even Sondheim quaking in his shoes, but you can’t put it in if there isn’t space for it. You are interrupted by that bar – like the bar of a jail. And you have to find your freedom while you are in prison.” Journalism, with its constraints of space and deadline, is the same, he says.

Kretzmer arrived in London in the mid-Fifties, after an unsuccessful stint as a semi-starving “novelist” in a garret in Paris. One of four sons of Jewish-Lithuanian immigrants who ran a furniture store in Kroonstad, in Free State, South Africa, he had no musical training beyond a “glib facility for playing the piano by ear, which is a euphemism for playing it badly”.

Songs were what inspired him. “I was unaccountably moved by the lilt and lurch of popular songs as I grew up. I was drawn to them, I don’t know why. They made me happy and excited. And I felt I could do them.”

He wrote lyrics for university productions but “all I ever wanted to be was a newspaper man”. He was a trainee reporter in Johannesburg and then worked for several British nationals as reporter, columnist, theatre and TV critic, and describes himself during this period as a “kitchen-table lyricist”, knocking out the words in his spare time.

Yet he enjoyed notable success, writing songs for *That Was the Week That Was*, winning an Ivor Novello Award for the Peter Sellers/Sophia Loren duet *Goodness Gracious Me*, and collaborating with Charles Aznavour to bring French songs to an English-speaking audience.

But the big time eluded him – until the day Cameron Mackintosh invited him to tea. Kretzmer had written to Mackintosh to persuade him to back a revival of a 1964 musical, *Our Man Crichton*,

for which he had written the lyrics. Mackintosh wasn't interested, but wanted to meet. "We talked about everything and anything and then, between the sofa and door of his office as he was showing me out, my entire life changed. He said, 'Tell me why you didn't go on as a lyricist.' And I said, 'But I have.' He asked me to name a couple of songs and I named two, both with music by Aznavour. One was She, and another called Yesterday When I Was Young.

"Cameron stopped, threw his arms wide, did a reasonable impression of a man in a swoon and said, 'God, you've just named two of my favourite songs.'

"That was in June 1984. Six months later, when he was in serious trouble with Les Mis, and without a presentable libretto, he sat bolt upright in his bed one morning and thought of me. He said 'That's the guy', based purely on his remembering that little snatch of conversation." Kretzmer, then the Daily Mail's TV critic, had to beg his editor for leave of absence, working day and night in his Knightsbridge flat for part of the week, then hurrying across town to the Barbican to show Mackintosh and his team what he had.

When the show opened, the reviews were horrendous. Kretzmer's colleague, the Mail's influential critic, Jack Tinker, with whom he had shared a desk for years, dismissed Les Mis as "The Glums", a name that stuck. "I did not thank him for that," Kretzmer says. "I was shocked. The first thing you pray for after a first night is that you avoid disgrace. What I wasn't prepared for was the vilification." The public thought differently. Les Mis became a "word-of-mouth" hit that has never flagged. Yet Kretzmer had no way of knowing it would survive. "I went back to the paper for a year after the show opened. So at night I was earning untold sums of money in the West End, and in the day I was there in the office with my Styrofoam cup of coffee. But all I knew was that I had one show in one town in one theatre. I had no idea that a miracle had befallen me. After a year, when we'd opened in New York, in Tokyo, with an endless list of future openings set up, I knew I could safely abandon ship.

"And my whole life changed around that time. Not only the show, but I had met a young lady [his second wife, Sybil] in New York – what I call my late-life stroke of luck."

The rewards of Les Misérables have been immense, he acknowledges, gesturing to his surroundings in the large, elegant house in Kensington, the walls hung with oil paintings of his native South Africa. And Kretzmer, who has a son, a daughter and two grandsons, does not trouble to conceal his delight in it all. "I've loved everything I've ever done. It's been a charmed and blessed life...

"When the father of my favourite lyric writer, Larry Hart [Rodgers and Hart], was dying, he said to his two sons, Larry and Teddy, who were at his bedside: 'Don't grieve for me boys, I haven't missed a thing.' I love that. I'm not ready to go – I'm currently reworking Our Man Crichton – but I'm very much of that frame of mind."

'Les Misérables' opens on January 11