

Herbert Kretzmer: the man who talked to the stars

A new book brings to life the celebrities interviewed by Herbert Kretzmer, the respected journalist and 'Les Misérables' lyricist, who says they don't make stars like that today

Grey muzzle, low growl, noble profile. Herbert Kretzmer looks and sounds like an old lion these days. Not any old lion, mind you. He is probably the biggest of the big beasts that roamed Fleet Street in the Sixties and Seventies seeking to capture celebrities of the day in deceptively silky paws and offer them up to a glamour-hungry readership.

Marlene Dietrich, Truman Capote, Peter Sellers, Groucho Marx, Irving Berlin... Kretzmer's kind of quarry makes "celebrity" too puny a word. Although he was ruthless in pursuit of the legends of stage and screen, tracking writers, prizefighters and entrepreneurs as well as film stars and actors, he was far too well-mannered to be an outright predator. Some of them became his friends.

"Why don't you come out and see me more often?" demanded Sellers from a poolside in Los Angeles. The comedian's self-absorption was, by this time, trying the patience of his friends. "Because I don't want to be a member of your entourage," replied Kretzmer, one of the few people who had known him before he was famous. Sellers clenched his fist and hit the wall in a fit of blind violence.

"We got over it," Kretzmer says. "There was finally something adorable about the boy. He would have you absolutely helpless, bent over with laughter. You can forgive people everything, everything, if they are able to do that. Fame overwhelmed him like a tidal wave and he drowned... he drowned, poor man."

Kretzmer had luck, charm and nerve. Hanging about with Dietrich's devotees after a performance in Birmingham ("more a congregation than a crowd"), he somehow managed to insinuate himself beside the enigmatic actress in the back seat of her limousine. He escorted her to her hotel room, extracting the promise of an interview the following morning. A condition was that she should be able to "peruse" his copy before publication. She deleted one adjective – "freckled", as a description of her ageing finger – and thanked him in a sprawling handwritten note, which he has kept.

I wonder how many of his famous interviewees – captured in his new book, *Snapshots* – knew that the courteous, well-dressed man from the Daily Express was already a successful lyricist who had written chart-toppers for the French singer Charles Aznavour and the hit single *Goodness Gracious Me* for Sellers and Sophia Loren. Or that Millicent Martin sang his songs on the satirical television show *That Was the Week That Was*. They certainly could not have guessed that he would become as celebrated as any of them – by writing the English lyrics for the unstoppable stage behemoth *Les Misérables*. "I am not a religious man," Kretzmer reflects, "but I do feel I am in some way born under a rhyming planet."

The collection of Kretzmer's encounters with 20th-century legends shows what a proud and revelatory craft showbusiness journalism once was. He operated in the days when a writer could pick up a phone and get through to a millionaire or a film star without layers of publicists and intermediaries. The famous seemed trusting and recklessly available to him with their insecurities and their confidences.

Over breakfast with Yul Brynner (“owner of the most celebrated skull in the world”) in his London hotel suite, Kretzmer discovered a shy philosopher. When he interviewed a homesick Petula Clark in her Paris home at midnight, she took him into the darkened nursery to stand at the cot of her sleeping child. Walt Disney, creator of the most famous rodent in the world, confided: “Mice frighten me... you never know where they are going.”

A fortyish Shirley MacLaine, in a mud-brown sweater, everyday slacks and no make-up, was scathing about airheads. “You can’t be a good professional and just be a sort of showbusiness turnip... I don’t think there’s such a thing as a great performer who has nothing to say.”

The singer Anthony Newley, who was married to Joan Collins, confessed: “Everything in my body revolts against what I do for a living.” He said of his glamorous wife: “Joanie regards life as a kind of Mardi Gras to which she has been invited and from which she intends to be the last to go home.”

The most impressive person he has met, he says, was the publicity-hating author John Steinbeck, who told him after winning the Nobel prize: “I have lived too long. Preferably a writer should die at about 28.” “He was a giant,” Kretzmer says.

Has he ever been wrong about people? “Not wrong,” he replies gnomically. “Mistaken.” Kretzmer, 89 next month, was always “Herbie” in his journalistic days. Now it seems a trifle disrespectful. He is reclining in a zebra-patterned chair in a South Kensington residence at least as grand and gracious as those of the stars he visited. Throughout the house, in posters and on director’s chairs, is evidence of his own celebrity, of what happened when he gave up his day job – by then, television critic of the Daily Mail – shut himself away for five months and emerged with the English libretto for the French musical *Les Misérables*.

“I don’t translate, I recreate,” he explains. “You cannot translate a song. Simply to translate the words into their dictionary meaning isn’t going to work. It doesn’t interest me.” A third of the show, he points out, had no previous existence in any other language.

Though stooped and slow on his feet, Kretzmer is still a monumental presence. The weighty slowness of his speech, and its beautiful formality, makes him sound mournful. “When my life changed, it was obviously a great pleasure not to have to set out every morning smartly dressed, sober, but I don’t feel I’m on cloud nine. I don’t feel that euphoria that comes of success. I’m grateful for everything, but I’m not in a state of delirious joy.”

While still a newspaperman, he did a brief course in Buddhism (“I felt I needed guidance and a steady hand”) and he practices meditation every day as a way of achieving harmony in his life. “The journey never ends... though I prefer not to use the overworked word journey.”

Kretzmer caught the fame bug early and irrevocably. As a boy growing up in the one-horse town of Kroonstad in the central flatlands of South Africa, he was exposed to the glamour of Hollywood through strictly rationed Saturday afternoon visits to the local cinema. Star-struck, impatient, he wanted to know more about his screen heroes. What were they really like? What made them who they were?

“I never wanted to be famous myself. I never saw myself as a star or a hero, but I wanted to be near the golden people, to become a part of their world.” Aged 12, he had a vision of his future. “I saw myself on a hilltop with a microphone in my hand and the wind blowing in my hair. I was reporting on something I could see but could not clearly identify, and I felt a sudden rush of excitement. I knew that somehow, somewhere, I would be a communicator. Not the centrepiece of

the tableau, but an observer.”

He seldom refers to being Jewish. “The word Jew carries too much weight and is not strictly relevant to what I do.” However, his parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, coping with a new land and a new language. They gave their four sons the basic notions of civility and decency, but it was films that provided Kretzmer with social sophistication: how to enter a room, how to address a girl, how to order from a menu.

From his earliest career in Johannesburg and then London, there were always two strings to his bow – newspaperman and lyricist. He sees the professions as compatible. “In rhyming and journalism, you work under constant stricture. You are held loosely behind bars. There is something about being constrained that appeals to me: the freedom inside the cage.”

Young Kretzmer spent a bohemian year in Paris writing a novel in a garret on the Left Bank, doing odd bits of journalism and keeping body and soul together by playing the piano in a St Germain-des-Prés bistro in return for a hot meal. The *mise en scène* was perfect, he says drily, but the novel was lousy. And he couldn’t stand the solitude.

He joined the Daily Express in 1960 when it was selling four million copies a day. (He was its drama critic for 18 years and the Daily Mail’s television critic for eight.) It was quite normal for him to do an interview in the morning, write it in the afternoon and then attend and review a play at night – everything appearing in print the following morning. His prose is crisp. He is not a word-waster. Some pieces are the result of very brief encounters. “Short is good,” he growls. “I like short.”

If he were still in the game, he doubts whether there are many celebrities he would like to interview. “Now it is an organised affair,” he says. “I always resolutely refused to have anybody else in the room. I doubt whether you’d get away with that now.” The singer Rosemary Clooney (George Clooney’s aunt) was accompanied by three or four aides. “Well,” she said. “Fire away. What’s your first question?” Kretzmer replied: “Is there a room in this flat where we can talk alone?” “She took me into an oak-panelled room and told me she had been in a psychiatric institution for eight years.”

Kretzmer says “there is no one for whom I felt an intense visceral dislike”, but there were some who were “hard to like”. One was Sonja Henie, the Norwegian ice-skating champion who had been a film idol of his adolescent years. “She carefully cultivated the image of a smiling, fair-haired, spinning figurine,” he says. “This façade veiled a less attractive woman.” She was a Nazi sympathiser. Kretzmer’s 1960 profile skewered her as a “shrewd Norwegian icicle”, nasty, stingy and bitter.

A colleague at the Express remembers Kretzmer as “slightly apart from the rest of us, not stand-offish but with no particular friends – and no enemies either. People were in awe of him. Because he had written *Goodness Gracious Me*, it was assumed he didn’t really need to be working at the paper. Osbert Lancaster [the cartoonist] was at the same group of desks. He would make crisp remarks; Herbie would make droll ones.”

The beginning of the end of his career in newspapers happened in 1984 when Kretzmer tried to persuade Cameron Mackintosh to back a sharper, angrier version of a 1964 musical he had written, *Our Man Crichton*. Mackintosh declined. But as Kretzmer was crossing the great expanse of carpet to leave, he inquired: “Why didn’t you go on writing lyrics?” Kretzmer listed his songs, including *She and Yesterday When I was Young for Aznavour*. They were among Mackintosh’s favourites. “Six months later, when he was stuck for a lyricist for *Les Misérables*, Mackintosh remembered that snatch of conversation between the sofa to the door. In those 15 yards, my life totally changed.”

Kretzmer was 61 when *Les Mis* became a word-of-mouth hit. His marriage was coming to an end. At a New York party to celebrate the success of the show, he met his American wife, Sybil. "I call it my late-life stroke of luck." He continued with his newspaper job for a year, not daring to believe the evidence of his bank account. "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."

Les Misérables has made him an immensely wealthy man, but not a satisfied one. "I am waiting for the great comfort that wise men say comes with age," he says. "It is taking a long time getting here. My anxieties remain in place."

What can he possibly be anxious about? "Perceptions."

But surely his reputation is secure? "No, no. Never enough."

'Snapshots: Encounters With Twentieth Century Legends' by Herbert Kretzmer (Biteback, £25) is available to order from Telegraph Books at £22.50 + £1.95 p&p. Call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk