

THE “BARRICADE” INTERVIEW

What follows is a slightly edited and updated reprint of Al Sheahen’s interview with Herbert Kretzmer, published in 1998 in two consecutive issues of The Barricade, in-house magazine of worldwide Les Miserables companies.

By Al Sheahen

VAN NUYS, CALIFORNIA. While the music in Les Miserables is magnificent, many feel Herbert Kretzmer’s lyrics are equally responsible for elevating the show to the classic it has become. But how did he do it? The original production was in French. How did he turn it into English and make it all work? Did he create whole new lyrics in English? The London-based lyricist recently agreed to share his secrets with THE BARRICADE.

SHEAHEN: You were the drama critic of the London Daily Express for 18 years and the TV critic of the London Daily Mail for a further eight years. On the side, you wrote lyrics for the stage and TV. How did you come to write the lyrics for Les Miserables?

KRETZMER: Cameron Mackintosh had liked some lyrics I had written for the Parisian singer/composer Charles Aznavour. These included “Yesterday When I Was Young,” which I’m pleased to say has become something of a standard in the U.S., and “She”, which topped the British charts for four weeks back in 1974.

So when he was preparing Les Miserables, and the rehearsal dates (already delayed a year, I was told) were getting closer every day, and a final approved libretto was still a hope rather than a reality, Cameron felt that urgent action was required and recalled my collaborations with Aznavour and other French writers. He took me to lunch at the Ivy and asked me to join the Les Miserables team, to take responsibility, in short, for the lyrics for the forthcoming London production.

That was late January ‘85. I devoted the next four weeks to reading Victor Hugo’s novel, in English. And speaking everyone involved in the project. Well, almost everyone. By the end of February, I had organized a six months’ leave from the Daily Mail, whose editor, Sir David English, told me that he was ‘far from happy’ about his senior television critic disappearing from his pages for so long a stretch. Nevertheless, I was excited by Cameron’s invitation and went to work on Les Miserables in my flat in Basil Street – less than a block away from Harrods – on March 1, 1985.

SHEAHEN: In the programme notes, you say you were given a tape of the original 1980 Paris production, as well as a word-for-word literal translation of Alain Boublil’s French libretto, plus a new and detailed synopsis of the projected London production. What were you asked to do?

KRETZMER: Initially I was asked to team up, to collaborate, with James Fenton -- English poet, much respected here—who had been working on an English-language libretto of Les Miserables for maybe a year. However, after surveying

the sheer weight of work needed to get the show written and ready for rehearsal within five months, I resolved to follow a wise old rule: he travels fastest who travels alone. So I did not meet James Fenton, and still haven't. Our paths have simply not crossed. The job Cameron asked to do involved writing a significant amount of brand new material, i.e. stuff which had not figured in the original Paris show at all, plus translating and adapting existing lyrics, notes and ideas -- wrestling it all into shape.

SHEAHEN: In the programme note you discuss the "challenge of matching singable English phrases to a decidedly Gallic score ...the French language being so full of emphatic consonants, staccato tricks of rhythm and fading syllables at the end of sentences which have no ready equivalent in English." How did you do it? How did you make it rhyme and make sense?

KRETZMER: I always felt drawn to French songs –even their happy songs had a kind of minor key plaintiveness about them. As a lyricist I have in particular enjoyed a long and fruitful connection with Charles Aznavour, undisputed grand master of the chanson. He is well into his seventies now, still singing as powerfully as ever, already planning an 80th birthday concert series in Paris, a national treasure and a good friend.

I enjoyed working with Aznavour. For one thing, we wrote songs for grown-ups when the market was more and more aimed at "the kids." There was a new Aznavour album in English, it seemed, every couple of years. What's more, other singers – Bing Crosby, Mel Torme, Johnny Mathis and for Aznavour. Indeed, without Aznavour I might have quit songwriting altogether when the Beatles happened and a new breed of songwriters set about changing all the rules. Faced with the 60s youth thing, some of the famous old songwriters went into deep shock for the rest of their lives. They refused to believe what was happening. I met the great Johnny Mercer in his later years and his bitterness and anger at the young was not pleasant to see.

Besides Charles Aznavour I have occasionally written lyrics for other French-language stars – Gilbert Becaud, Zizi Jeanmaire, Moustaki. I did a couple of Jacques Brel songs. Perhaps that's what Cameron Mackintosh saw. Why he asked me in. The French connection.

SHEAHEN: You were given the literal translation of Boubli's libretto. Did you stick closely to that text? Or was it like writing entirely new lyrics? Can you give examples of the various stages that took you from the original French to your final lyric?

KRETZMER: Here are two examples chosen at random. The first is the opening of Fantine's Act 1 lament "I Dreamed A Dream." Here is a precise literal translation of Alain Boubli's original French lyric.

*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.*

And here is my own interpretation of those same lines:

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...

Another example. Into the mouths of the defiant students Alain put stirring words which literally translate into English as follows:

*At the will of the people
And to the health of progress
Come fill your heart with the wine of rebellion
And tomorrow, faithful friend,
If your heart beats as strongly
As a drum in the distance,
It is because hope still exists for the human race.*

My own take on those lines went like this:

Do You Hear The People Sing
Singing the song of angry men ?
It is the music of a people
Who will not be slaves again
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes !

I offer this advice to any lyricist invited to adapt or translate foreign songs into English. . Do not follow the original text slavishly. Re-invent the lyric in your own words, remembering that there may be better ways of serving a master than trotting behind him on a leash. Working on Les Miserables I did not see myself as a translator, but as a co-writer... an equal among equals.

SHEAHEN: *Was it necessary for you to speak French to do the job ?*

KRETZMER: No. My French is wretched. No other word for it. I can muster a few words in an emergency but I could not long sustain a conversation with a French person. I regret this. French was not taught in my high school in South Africa. Though I lived in Paris for a spell when I was young and hungry, my friends there tended to be English-speaking self-exiles like myself, mainly American. I was able to read Victor Hugo's novel only in translation.

SHEAHEN: *The original Paris production in 1980 was about two hours long, but the London and subsequent worldwide productions were over three hours long. Was the new material added to tell more of the story?*

KRETZMER: Exactly. And to fill out the characters. Trevor Nunn and John Caird, the co-directors, clearly feel that great stories cannot be hurried along. These were the men who, some years earlier, had co-directed a sell-out stage version of Dickens' "Nicholas Nickleby", a dramatisation so comprehensive that it was presented in two halves on separate evenings. Londoners were fighting for tickets.

Trevor and John – and Cameron, too, of course, a very hands-on producer – agreed that the 1980 Paris production of *Les Misérables* required substantial expansion before it could take on the challenge of London. It also needed a popular, by which I mean accessible, style of lyrics, which would tell the story in a lively way and yet reflect the graver tones of Hugo's novel.

Key characters needed to be more fully explained. In particular, the role of Javert, the unbending Police Inspector, required more beef. To stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the dominant figure of Valjean, to be seen as a worthy protagonist, Javert's complex righteousness needed deeper exploration. Javert's Act 1 song "Stars" grew directly out of this re-examination. Its lyrics tell the audience that Javert is a devout man, upright and incorruptible, and that neither the hunter nor the hunted in this story exclusively occupy the moral high ground.

SHEAHEN: *How many new songs were you asked to create for London?*

KRETZMER: Writing words for actual songs was only one part of my assignment. Every word uttered in the show is supported by an accompanying melody. It's all of it lyrics when you come down to it. About half a dozen self-contained songs in the London show had no previous existence in the original French production. The new songs written for London in 1985 included "Bring Him Home", "Stars" and "Empty Chairs At Empty Tables."

Incidentally, the blueprint for what eventually became "Empty Chairs" was initiated up by my predecessor James Fenton, who felt that the show needed a song which would allow the young survivor Marius to express his torturing grief in a deserted café.

Fenton was also involved in mapping out the guidelines of the Prologue, beginning Valjean's release from the chain gang, and ending with him tearing up his parole papers and vowing that "another story must begin." The original Paris production did not include this Prologue at all, opening instead with the scene at the factory gates. ("At The End Of The Day.")

SHEAHEN: *Did you work closely with Boubilil and Schonberg on the new material?*

KRETZMER: Well, not on a day-to-day basis. I worked alone. Of course, we met fairly regularly to talk about ideas and the purpose of each song. Everything I did

was based on prior discussion and agreement. After all, Alain and Claude-Michel created the show.

SHEAHEN: *Did you write lyrics to fit the new music for the London production, or was the music written after the lyrics ?*

KRETZMER: With one exception, Claude-Michel wrote the music first. The exception was Javert's credo song "Stars." I wrote the lyric first. The music came later.

SHEAHEN: *Did you refer to Hugo's novel during the process ?*

KRETZMER: Photocopies of key pages from the novel were pinned to the walls of rehearsal rooms. The players were urged to acquaint themselves with the range and depth of the author's concerns. Several times, when I was brooding on a passage of lyrics, a return visit to the novel brought fresh insight and suggested ways of solving problems.

SHEAHEN: *You wrote in a programme note that when rehearsals started in August 1985 the second act was still "in the works." Did you ever fear you would not complete the job in time for the October 8 opening ?*

KRETZMER: There were certainly moments of anxiety. For example, when we started rehearsals in August, "On My Own" had not yet been conquered, and I am still not entirely happy with it, "Bring Him Home" had not even been thought of, Javert's suicide song was in a hazy state, and much of the second act was all over the place. Cast members gathering for rehearsals were handed only the script of Act 1. Even during previews we were writing and rewriting scenes and lyrics. As the Duke of Wellington remarked after the Battle of Waterloo, it was a "near-run thing."

SHEAHEN: *What was the most difficult part of the job ? And the easiest ?*

KRETZMER: The most difficult lyric, undoubtedly, was "On My Own." In French it was called something else and was about something else -- 'La Misere', a song of poverty and despair. That idea was soon scrubbed and it became a song in which Eponine lamented her unrequited feelings for Marius. The melody follows the cadences of French speech, especially some line endings which tend to drop away. It was very hard to find English phrases to sit comfortably on those notes. I sought help wherever I could find it. Trevor Nunn and John Caird supplied some lines and suggestions and both are properly credited as co-writers of "On My Own." Things got so desperate I would have asked the usherettes to help out.

I think I had the least trouble with "Master Of The House", "Lovely Ladies" and "The Bargain", the song which has Valjean haggling with the Thenardiers before he takes the child Cosette away to start a new life.

SHEAHEN: *“Bring Him Home” -- Valjean’s song at the barricade --has stopped the show all over the world. You say it was written especially for the London production. Anything you want to add to that ?*

KRETZMER: I wrote the lyric of “Bring Him Home” very quickly – overnight, in fact -- but only after weeks of doubt and near-surrender. I have mentioned the trouble I had with “On My Own.” “Bring Him Home” seemed to pose even more insoluble difficulties.

Here’s the problem in a nutshell. The melody of “Bring Him Home” consists largely of a stately succession of three-note phrases in slow tempo. In other words, I was largely limited to a three syllables per line. I also felt that each line should be more or less separate and self-contained. But what can you say in three-word soundbites ? A lyricist’s nightmare; I couldn’t see any way out.

Then, late one night in my Basil Street flat, John Caird remarked that the melody sounded “like a prayer.” His words opened the door and let in the light. Casting the lyric as a prayer furnished me with any number of 3-syllable lines
God on high...hear my prayer he is young...he is blessed.....bring him
peace...bring him home...let him live...and so on.

Once the code was broken, the words came fast. I presented the lyric, more or less in a completed state, next morning. Alain Boublil translated it into French for the second Paris production at the Mogador Theatre in 1991.

SHEAHEN: *What is your favourite lyric in Les Miserables ?*

KRETZMER: No particular favourite, though I do have a special fondness for “Master Of The House” because it breaks the tension fairly early in the show and makes people laugh and relax.

SHEAHEN: *What is your favourite melody ?*

KRETZMER: Claude-Michel Schonberg’s score fairly races along, unstoppable, full of energy. “At The End” Of The Day is agitated and aggressive.” “Bring Him Home” is the opposite, tender and seeking peace.” “Master Of The House” suggests all kinds of malice and mischief. “Do You Hear The People Sing ?” is an inspiring anthem, full of hope. Again, no particular favourite melody. I admire them all.

SHEAHEN: *Many songs in Les Miserables are reprised with different lyrics. “Lovely Ladies” and “Turning” have the same melody. The melody of “I Dreamed A Dream” is heard several times with different words .And so on. Was this your idea? Or was it done in the same way in the original 1980 Paris production?*

KRETZMER : The trick of reprising key melodies with different lyrics is not new in musicals. But the idea, I believe, has never been used as ambitiously as in Les Miserables.

In Meredith Willson's musical "The Music Man" you've got two songs -- "Seventy Six Trombones" and "Good Night My Someone" -- sharing a common melody, first as a strutting march, later as a romantic ballad. But that was a one-off, a novelty. Les Miserables uses the device repeatedly; it is one of the things that defines the show. Songs and wisps of melody return again and again like a remembered dream.

It is, on this scale, a genuine innovation in musicals. It gives the show its 'spine' and is, I think, one of the reasons for its hold over audiences. All the credit belongs to Schonberg and Boublil who dreamed up the device for their original Paris show. These duplications of melody, incidentally, are not arbitrary; there are always valid reasons for them. "Lovely Ladies" and "Turning" are both sung by a chorus of women and deal in contrasting ways with the fate of women in those times -- and in our times was well.

SHEAHEN : *"And the righteous hurry past, they don't hear the little ones crying, and the winter is coming on fast, ready to kill; one day nearer to dying." Those words sound like they came from your heart, that you agree with Hugo's philosophy. Is that true? Or were you just being the consummate professional ?"*

KRETZMER: I grew up in South Africa, a country that had more of its share of the righteous hurrying past and not seeing what was happening around them. Not that South Africa was, or is, unique in that respect...

SHEAHEN : *In "I Dreamed A Dream" how did you come up with the line "But the tigers come at night..." Does it mean anything other than what it implies ?*

KRETZMER : Late one night, working on the lyrics in Basil Street, the phrase about the tigers leaped into my head and would not be dislodged. It is a mysterious line but it seemed right to me and was instantly accepted by the team without question. The line refers of course to the dark forces, alluring and seductive -- "with their voices soft as thunder" -- which can creep up and destroy the lives of the unprepared. Also, there may be an unconscious reference to William Blake's poem about the tiger "burning bright in the forest of the night."

SHEAHEN: *In the hauntingly beautiful "Castle On A Cloud" a natural rhyme seems to be avoided. "There is a room that's full of toys ; there are a hundred boys and girls." Shouldn't that be "girls and boys" to make it rhyme ?*

KRETZMER: Yes, of course, that's how I wrote it. Trevor Nunn and/or John Caird suggested the switch because the 'boys-toys' rhyme telegraphed itself and lacked surprise and, secondly, the song is sung by the untutored little urchin Cosette who is not expected to be facile of speech. Still, there must be some in the audience at every performance who conclude that the little girl simply fluffed her lines.

Incidentally, speaking of "Castle On A Cloud", Alain's original French lyric took an altogether different line on Cosette's plight. It had the unhappy child

fantasizing about being rescued by a prince. I felt, however, that little girls of that age do not dream of men, even if they *are* princes. I also felt that the saviour-prince idea had been rather too famously done in the old Disney song “Someday My Prince Will Come.” So I took Cosette’s little song in another direction and made it a plea for love and comfort in a safe place.

SHEAHEN: *The lyrics of “Master Of the House” are extraordinary. “Jesus” is hardly an easy name to rhyme, yet you did it six times with “pleases”, “valises”, “geezers”, “pieces”, “increases” and “Croesus.” How did you do it ?*

KRETZMER: The word “Jesus” did not occur in my first draft at all. Trevor asked me to find a strong, sassy “kicker” to boot the last line of each verse along. He was right. The rhymes give the song a lift.

SHEAHEN: *The lyrics to “Turning” are as strong an anti-war statement as any ever written. Yet some say it’s an ode to hopelessness and cynicism.’ They were schoolboys, never held a gun ; fighting for a new world that would rise up with the sun; where’s that new world, now the fighting’s done ?” What is your view on the meaning of this lyric ?*

KRETZMER: “Turning” did not figure in the original French show. Nor was it planned for London until very late in the day. Like many songs in musicals, it owes its existence to practical need. As rehearsals proceeded, the show seemed to be crying out for the sound of women’s voices to soften and balance the all-pervading maleness of the story at this point. The battle scenes, the barricades, the sewers, the empty café are all dominated by male voices. A different tonal colour was needed to provide a cushion between Javert’s suicide and Marius’ song of despair. What’s more, the women in the cast had not been heard from for a long time. All these considerations played a part in the creation of “Turning.”

It is not so much a cynical as an embittered song. In all wars it is the women who weep and wait. It was a point worth making again and the moment was right for it.

SHEAHEN: *What was your inspiration for Grantaire’s lines in “Drink With Me” : “Will the world remember you when you fall ? Could it be your death means nothing at all ? Is your life just one more lie ?”*

KRETZMER: Victor Hugo described his student characters at length and in detail. We had to do it in broad strokes--a line here, a line there. There simply wasn’t time or space for the subtler qualifications of character. Inevitably some of the rebels have lost definition. But it was important to depict Grantaire as different from the others. His feelings about the uprising are not the same as theirs. He is a man who is not sentimental or easily led.

SHEAHEN: *Hugo’s novel makes it clear that Valjean is jealous of Marius ; that Valjean does not want to lose Cosette’s love to another man, especially one so*

young and handsome. The musical ignores this 'darker' side of Valjean's character. Any comment ?

KRETZMER: The decision wished itself on us. In re-shaping the show for London it was planned to have a new song for Valjean at the barricades – we code-named it 'Night Thoughts' – in which the old man would express his anguish at the prospect of losing Cosette to Marius. It was always going to be a tricky lyric for me to write and I was naturally expecting a melody from Schonberg that would contain plenty of short, agitated notes to carry the burden of Valjean's torment.

When Claud-Michel finally presented the song to us he played this dreamy melody that eventually became "Bring Him Home." I was frankly confused. The tune had remarkably few notes and proceeded at a slow, stately pace. How could a lyricist set Valjean's confusion and agitation to music so spare and serene ? I raised questions and complaints, but everyone seemed entranced by the tune. I could see no way out of it until the night John Caird spoke the fateful words "Sounds like a prayer."

And that's how it happened. "Bring him Home" rested so comfortably in its slot – giving Colm Wilkinson's superb voice a chance to soar – that the notion of Valjean's troubled "night thoughts" was quietly dropped, never to be revived.

SHEAHEN: In "Beggar At The Feast" the sleazy Thenardier sings "Here comes a queer...there goes a Jew". In these days of political correctness the words jolt a bit. Comment ?

KRETZMER: The Thenardiers express their prejudices in a crude and graceless way; that's the kind of people they are.

SHEAHEN: "A Heart Full Of Love" is a beautiful song with its three-part harmonies and Eponine's realization that she'll never win Marius. Any comments on your lyrics ?

KRETZMER: The song should be coupled with "In My Life" as the first expression of young love. I reminded myself that Marius and Cosette were, after all, just a couple of breathless teenagers in love for the first time and incapable of expressing themselves in smart or suave words. Thus, the lyrics I gave them tended to be fumbling or exultant ("She has burst like the music of angels," etc). Claude-Michel's well-paced melody for "A Heart Full of Love" provides plenty of air for Eponine's despairing interventions ("He was never mine to lose...etc ") . It is an expert piece of musical writing.

SHEAHEN: Les Miserables has been produced in many countries. Do you know how your lyrics have been translated in other languages?

KRETZMER: The Japanese translator in Toyko told me that rhyming is not considered important in Japan and may even be considered vulgar. The

translator informed me that that it needs approximately three Japanese words to translate a single English word, so that an absolutely faithful translation of Les Miserables, the musical, would stretch it to a nine-hour show, and I am not sure that even the hardy Japanese are equal to the challenge. Les Miserables audiences all over the world have responded to the musical in much the same way. I have seen people from Budapest to Boston laugh aloud or reach for their Kleenex at precisely the same moments in the plot.

SHEAHEN: Some lyrics were added or changed when the show reached its 10th anniversary on Broadway. There were also some scene changes, some barely noticeable. Why ?

KRETZMER: After a decade in New York Cameron wanted to shake things up, to keep the show on its toes. There were substantial cast changes. Lighting and sound were updated. Some lyrics were re-examined. A crucial scene change showed for the first time the meeting of Valjean and the child Cosette in the woods at night. It had always been planned to include this scene -- a key one in the novel -- but I guess there just hadn't time to work it in. Ten years later we were able to amend. Although the new scene lasts only for a minute or so, it was felt that a core image of the story-- Cosette carrying the bucket of water, being helped by a kind stranger in the woods --had been rescued and restored.

SHEAHEN: In 1987 Les Miserables received eight Tony Awards, including one for best score, which you shared equally with Boublil and Schonberg, Were you in New York to receive the award ?

KRETZMER: Yes. Jerry Herman opened the envelope and even got my name right.

SHEAHEN: How many times have you seen Les Miserables ? Do you ever go down to the Palace Theatre to catch it?

KRETZMER: No. I have not seen the London show, or the New York show, in years, though I have been present at some far-flung premieres ---Japan, Hungary, Germany, South Africa, Belgium, and so on.

SHEAHEN: When you were writing for newspapers did you consider writing lyrics full-time ?

KRETZMER: No. I enjoyed journalism and always considered myself a newspaperman first. It was my "day job". Even after Les Miserables opened in 1985 I stayed on with the London Daily Mail for another couple of years.

SHEAHEN: Some of the most poignant lyrics of all time are the ones you wrote for Charles Aznavour. "Yesterday, When I Was Young" is a powerful lyric that has

helped to guide the lives of thousands of people. How did you come to write such a beautiful piece ?

KRETZMER: I thank you for the compliment. In the 60's a London music publisher named David Platz asked me to go to France to spend a weekend with Aznavour, with the idea of adapting some of his songs for the English-speaking market. Charles and I spent two days at his home outside Paris going over his recordings. I selected about a dozen songs which particularly appealed to me, and Aznavour gave me a rough English translation of each. One of the songs was called "Hier Encore", which I called "Only Yesterday", a title I later changed to "Yesterday When I Was Young." My lyric is not a literal translation, more a re-invention, though naturally I remained faithful to the mood and sense of the original. Translation does not interest me; I don't even like the word. The song was submitted to many singers including Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Johnny Mathis, Andy Williams...the usual suspects. At first nobody wanted to touch it. We couldn't give it away. A New York publisher explained that the title "Yesterday When I as Young" had probably discouraged all these guys, since nobody in the youth-obsessed U.S.A wanted to be considered as no longer young.

Then Roy Clark, a popular American country singer, recorded the song and it took off right away and became a U.S. best-seller. It was subsequently recorded by dozens of other singers, including Mathis and Andy Williams. It does not seem to work as a woman's song, though I admire Dusty Springfield's version of it.

SHEAHEN : Where did you get your musical background.? Do you play a musical instrument?

KRETZMER: I wrote words and music for college shows in South Africa, but when I settled in London in 1954 to follow twin careers as journalist and lyricist, I dropped all pretensions to composing music. Lyric writing and journalism are compatible professions. Both entail writing words within restricted or controlled limits. I play the piano "by ear". i.e. not well.

SHEAHEN: Did you train to be a journalist ?

KRETZMER: No, you learn the game by doing it. There must be hundreds of schools of journalism but I never met a journalist who went to one.

SHEAHEN: What are you doing now ?

KRETZMER: I am involved in a musical project with Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus , the ABBA men.

SHEAHEN: Are you still living on Basil Street ?

KRETZMER: It was a great apartment. The previous owner was John Cleese. For years American college students telephoned me in the middle of the night, mistakenly believing I was John Cleese, and hoping I would make them laugh. I was forced to disappoint them.

I moved out of the apartment when I married for the second and final time - she's American, by the way, raised in California...Beverly Hills High . We were married in 1988 in the hills above Malibu. Thanks to my first marriage I have two small and delightful grandsons, Benjamin and Joseph. I am pleased to report that they are both fans of Les Miserables

End of "Barricade" Interview.