

I wrote the lyrics to Les Miserables while working as the Mail's TV critic - and it changed my life

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When we didn't win the Award for Best Song, I thought my chance of enjoying a moment of personal Golden Globe glory had probably gone.

In fact, I'd suspected as much from the minute we arrived at the Beverly Hills Hilton last Sunday and discovered that our table, although having a clear view of the stage, was an awfully long way back.

I sat down, quietly relieved that I wouldn't have to be making a speech, to enjoy the extraordinary — and very long — spectacle that is a Hollywood awards evening.

And then Les Miserables won the Golden Globe for Best Musical or Comedy, as I hoped it would, and I realised to my pleasure and surprise I was expected to join director Tom Hooper, the film's several producers and stars Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway — both of whom had already won individual Golden Globes — on the now worryingly distant stage.

I'm in pretty good nick for 87 but by my calculations it was going to take me about half an hour to get there. But adrenalin and applause are potent drugs and, along with Claude-Michel Schonberg, the French composer who wrote the score, and Alain Boublil, who first conceived the idea for a musical version of Victor Hugo's novel and wrote the original French lyrics, I positively cantered to the stage to join the rest of the team.

It was there, amid the blinding television lights and the gratifying cheers and whoops of the audience, that something rather special happened.

As I stood there, trying both to catch my breath and to savour what I knew was a very special moment — a moment of almost infectious joy, if you like — I felt someone gently slip their arm through mine.

I didn't look round at first to see who had made this simple, small but much appreciated gesture of support and comfort.

But when I finally did, I discovered it was the beautiful, talented and just terribly nice Anne Hathaway. Almost 30 years ago, I wrote a lyric — I Dreamed A Dream — Ms Hathaway sings so beautifully in the film that it can break even the stoniest of hearts.

But, as I sat in my Knightsbridge flat all those years ago, agonising over whether the line about 'but the tigers come at night' would work or not, I never dreamed of what Les Miserables would become. Like Hugo's novel, it's one part chase story, one part moral fable and one part love story,

but when you put those elements together the result has proved irresistible.

The musical has run in London's West End for 27 years and has been seen by more than 60 million people in 42 countries. And that's just the stage production: now Tom Hooper's riotously successful film version, which is No 1 at the UK cinema box office, is introducing a new audience to the show.

But stage or movie, there is absolutely no doubt that *Les Misérables* has completely changed my life.

It all started in January, 1985, with me picking up the phone to hear five life-transforming words: 'Hello, Herbert, it's Cameron Mackintosh.'

At the time, I was television critic of the *Daily Mail* and Cameron (now Sir Cameron) was the rising star of musical theatre production, still basking in the afterglow of the phenomenal success of *Cats*.

Put like that, you'd think we'd have little in common and certainly nothing worth a personal phone call, but Cameron knew I had another string to my professional bow.

Ever since I'd settled in London from South Africa in 1954, my career had followed two parallel paths. My day job was as a journalist working for the likes of the *Daily Sketch*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Daily Express* and now the *Daily Mail*.

But my passion, born out of childhood trips to the cinema in my home town of Kroonstad in the Free State, was for song-writing — and lyric-writing, in particular.

This was the Golden Age of the American musical and my heroes were the likes of George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. I vividly recall watching films such as *Gold Diggers Of 1935* and thinking: 'I can do that.'

So I did. I wrote some songs at school and for a couple of revue-style shows in South Africa. But it was when I came to London, and discovered that the streets were positively awash with composers far more talented than I, that I decided to concentrate on lyric-writing.

By day, as a journalist, I interviewed some of the world's best known writers, fighters and film stars — John Steinbeck, Truman Capote, Groucho Marx, Sugar Ray Robinson, Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich, to name but a few — but by night I wrote songs for anyone who would buy my wares. I wrote the comedy hit *Goodness Gracious Me* for Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren, *Kinky Boots* for Honor Blackman and Patrick Macnee and all sorts of songs for the satirical, late night TV revue, *That Was The Week That Was*, and its star, Millicent Martin.

In 1964, Millicent starred, alongside Kenneth More, in a musical I'd written, *Our Man Crichton*, based on J.M. Barrie's play, *The Admirable Crichton*, which ran for a not entirely disgraceful eight-and-a-half months. Twenty years later, it was my hope of reviving that musical that first led me to Cameron Mackintosh's door.

Hit: *Les Misérables* have proved a huge success, not just in the cinema but also at the theatre. Was he interested in backing such a revival? He sat on one of his many sofas (Cameron famously didn't believe in desks, back then), gave it some thought and duly pronounced: 'No.'

So I was surprised, six months later, to find him on the end of the phone and apparently keen to meet up. He had suddenly remembered that I had also written some songs for the great French singer, Charles Aznavour.

I'd written the lyrics of *Yesterday, When I Was Young* for him and, in 1974, at the behest of London Weekend Television, which was looking for a theme tune for a drama series called *Seven Faces of Women*, I wrote *She*, a song which went on to become a Top Ten hit and virtually introduced Aznavour to the English speaking world.

This was what might be termed my French connection.

When Cameron rang me, he had a problem. Committed to staging an English language version of what had so far been a modestly successful French musical called *Les Misérables*, he already had a theatre, the Barbican, two Royal Shakespeare Company directors (Trevor Nunn and John Caird) and Boublil and Schonberg's invigorating score.

But with opening night barely seven months away he had no English libretto.

The distinguished poet James Fenton had been working on it for a year-and-a-half but without showing any sign of actually completing a usable script. The phone call to me was Cameron pressing the panic button. Apparently he'd woken up that morning, sat bolt upright in bed and instantly thought of me.

Another meeting at his desk-free office was swiftly followed by lunch at the fashionable Ivy restaurant and, in due course, by me walking into my editor's office at the Mail to ask for five months off.

'Why?' barked my old and much lamented friend, David English. 'To write a musical.'

He looked unhappy. 'I can't lose my television critic for five months.'

Fortunately, he relented and when, some years later, our paths crossed in New York, I asked him why he had caved in.

'I could see in your eyes you were going to do it whatever I said.' And he was right. So on March 1, 1985, the most extraordinary period of my life began. My flat (once owned by John Cleese) became the place where I worked, slept occasionally and lived in the land of my imagination.

We all knew our English version of *Les Misérables* would be one third longer than the French original — British audiences weren't familiar enough with Hugo's story for the curtailed two-hour Paris version to make sense — which meant my writing a new prologue, half a dozen new songs and 'reconstructing' those that survived from the original.

I don't believe a song can be translated: it is what is and means what it means in the language it was written in. But you can reconstruct it for a new culture and that's what I did with *Les Misérables*.

I barely speak French so had been provided with a literal translation of the French songs, but far more important to me was Hugo's original novel and listening to Claude-Michel Schonberg's score.

What did the story need to say at that particular point? How was the music inviting me to say it? Sometimes I retained a word or two of the original. A rebel anthem, for instance, called *At The Will Of The People* duly became *Do You Hear The People Sing?* I am a lyricist, not a translator.

With rehearsals drawing nearer, I was working at an insane pitch, often through the night. Bring

Him Home, which had given me more trouble than any other song, finally came to me in a three-hour creative burst that began at two o'clock in the morning.

Trevor Nunn and John Caird had been round to my flat to discuss the problems I'd been having with this one particular song, whose stately melody seemed totally at odds with the agitated emotions that the song was trying to convey. As John Caird left, well after midnight, he turned to me and said, almost as an aside: 'Sounds to me like a prayer.'

I realised he was right. As a prayer suddenly everything fell into place. 'God... on... high, hear... my... prayer, ... in... my... need, you have always been there'

I took Bring Him Home into rehearsals the next morning and hearing Colm Wilkinson, our original Jean Valjean, sing it for the very first time, I knew we had discovered something special and thrilling.

It's a popular myth that all the critics panned *Les Miserables*, but that's not altogether true. There were bad reviews certainly, including, sadly, one from my friend and colleague, Jack Tinker, with whom I'd shared a nest of desks at the Mail. Our friendship did survive — eventually — but only just.

He referred to the show as *The Glums*, apparently unaware that our cast had already bestowed the same nick-name on the show.

I took comfort from knowing that Hugo's novel was similarly ill-treated by critics when it was published in 1862. But for every bad notice we received, there was a good one.

So while Michael Radcliffe in the *Observer* wrinkled his nose as if he'd just smelled a rotten fish, John Peter in the *Sunday Times* described our show as 'blazingly theatrical'.

American papers drowned us in praise and eight Tony awards. *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* raved. So did the all-important *New York Times*.

In the 19 years that the show ran at the Palace Theatre before transferring down the road to its current home, *The Queen's*, I went to see it only two or three times.

But I did fly to first nights in distant places — Tokyo, Cape Town, Budapest... Seeing Tom Hooper's film version a month ago, brought all the excitement rushing back. I loved his brave innovation of having the actors sing live in every take.

Hugh Jackman later told me it was like being 'set free' to find a 'heightened reality'. And, most gratifyingly of all, at least from a lyricist's point of view, you can hear and understand every word, including those to *Suddenly*, the one new song we wrote for the film and which now has an Oscar nomination to go with the one for a Golden Globe.

And yes, that does mean that in about a month's time we will be heading back to Los Angeles for the Oscar ceremony, a prospect that, in my current jet-lagged state, fills me with equal measures of anticipation and dread.

But whatever the outcome, I'm gratified to learn that people all over the world are coming out of cinemas, drying their tears and singing our songs.

The film has been out only a week in this country and already I've met someone who's seen it six times. Mind you, they'll have to go some to beat the apple-cheeked Canadian chaplain I met in

New York who'd seen the Broadway stage show 87 times.

Les Miserables changed a lot of things for me, although I did return to my job at the Mail for a year before I realised the show was clearly set to run and run, and that I really could, at the age of 61, finally consider giving up the day job.

As a man who'd arrived in this country with only £150 in his pocket (which, by the way, I immediately lent to someone and never saw again) I marvel at the transformation in my fortunes. But I didn't stop writing songs. Since Les Miserables, I've worked with Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, of Abba fame, on a musical called Kristina and teamed up again with Boublil and Schonberg to create a show named Marguerite, this time with the music written by Michel Legrand.

And next year, I'm hoping, finally, to revive the musical that first put me in touch with Sir Cameron Mackintosh. Yes, 50 years after its first run, I'm hoping we can bring Our Man Crichton back to the London stage, this time with a harder satirical edge.

'Do you hear the people sing?' asks the chorus of Les Miserables. As long as the answer is 'yes', I'll keep writing the songs.

Snapshots, an anthology of Herbert Kretzmer's showbusiness journalism, featuring interviews with Cary Grant, Marlene Dietrich and many more, will be published later this year by Bank House Books

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2264848/I-wrote-lyrics-Les-Miserables-working-Mails-TV-critic--changed-life.html#ixzz2b6wzA9PG>

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