

CITATION FOR HERBERT KRETZMER

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By Professor Paul Maylam

When the English version of the classic French musical, *Les Miserables*, opened in London in 1985, one or two critics wrote it off, expecting it to be dropped in no time. Over 25 years later it is still showing in London's West End – the longest-running musical in history. The songs for this English production were written by Herbert Kretzmer – songs which firmly established his reputation as a lyricist – so much so that his songs have become stage staples in the UK.

Where were the foundations laid for this illustrious song-writing career? Perhaps as a small child growing up in Kroonstad, where he was born, the son of Lithuanian immigrant parents – hearing the family's domestic worker singing as she laboured – he has a powerful memory of her “sweet African song” ringing in his ears; and remembers, too, the songs of black convict workers digging up part of a street with pick-axes.

Or perhaps the foundations were laid here at Rhodes where he studied for a while in the mid-1940s. A little research has revealed that here was a budding talent. Early in May 1945 Herbert produced songs for a campus production – a composition called “Moonlight in Hindustan” earned good reviews, while another song, “James James”, rapidly became a Rhodes classic. This was just a few days before World War Two finally ended. Rhodes had its own V-E Day celebrations, which did indeed go on through the night and next day – Herbert one of the main providers of music for the occasion.

Study in the humanities at Rhodes did not, though, prepare him for a career in music or song-writing – this was just a hobby – but rather in journalism – and this was long before Rhodes had

a journalism department. After leaving university he wrote scripts for documentary films and the commentary for a weekly cinema newsreel (a major source of visual news footage in the years before South Africa first introduced tv in the mid-1970s). Then it was on to the *Sunday Express* in Johannesburg, working as a reporter and feature-writer.

This career in journalism became firmly established in London, where he settled in 1954, writing first for the *Daily Sketch*, followed by an eighteen-year stint with the *Daily Express*, then eight years with the *Daily Mail*. His journalism centred on the arts: as the senior drama critic for the *Express*, covering about 3000 first night performances; also interviewing and writing profiles of prominent cultural figures of the time – among them, John Steinbeck, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Louis Armstrong, Henry Miller, Duke Ellington.

Journalism and song-writing might appear an odd combination. Not so, says Herbert, who sees them as “compatible professions”, as “both depend upon the manipulation of the English language under very compressed conditions” – one has to seek “freedom in both song-writing and journalism within a tight system which will not yield”.

“The bar in the music”, he goes on to say, “is well named: you are behind bars”. But do not be misled by this metaphor of imprisonment. For Herbert music has to be hugely liberating, vital to life. To use his own words again, “music, song and drama...are crucial to...society’s health and identity”. The act of singing proclaims “a deeper longing for symmetry and harmony and order – in other words, a yearning for what is beautiful. We sing, we respond to song, because we are spiritual beings”.

A key figure in this song-writing career has been the famed French singer, Charles Aznavour – the two have enjoyed a working relationship and personal friendship for over 40 years – Herbert writing the lyrics for the song “Yesterday when I was

young” – one of the earliest - and later for the song, “She”, which rose to number one in the charts. Before that, in the early 1960s, Herbert had contributed songs to the British satirical tv show, *That Was the Week that Was*, the show that set David Frost on the road to fame.

The output of songs has continued unabated: the lyrics for a musical called *Marguerite*, set in Nazi-occupied Paris, premiering in London in 2008. More recently the lyrics for another musical, *Kristina*, about nineteenth-century Swedish immigrants to the US – this opened in New York in 2009.

Although achieving renown as a lyricist, Herbert, by his own admission has never belonged to the song-writing establishment, supposing that he was perhaps never political enough, nor pushy, not trying to sell himself to publishers. He was into song-writing, but not the song-writing business.

There have, though, been plenty of accolades: an Ivor Novello Award for his song, “Goodness Gracious Me”, written in 1960 for Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren; two national press awards, including that of Television Critic of the Year while working for the *Daily Mail* in the 1980s; Tony and Grammy awards for the *Les Miserables* lyrics; in 1988 elected a Chevalier de L’Ordre Des Arts et Des Lettres in France (a knight of the order of arts and letters); and most recently, in the Queen’s New Year honours list of this year, awarded an OBE, the Order of the British Empire.

Tonight we honour Herbert Kretzmer and welcome him back to Rhodes University for the first time since he was last here as a student 66 years ago. An active philanthropist – a patron and benefactor of several libraries and art galleries; a distinguished journalist and cultural critic; and a superb lyricist whose songs, in the words of one observer, “reveal a profound range and depth of understanding of cultural and emotional issues”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Herbert Kretzmer the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.