

pulse **people**

Family, tradition and Gustave Kervern

A French director, producer and actor recounts his life experiences, revealing an interesting journey to success, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

THE interviewer enters the room and realises that the interviewee is already seated. There are no other chairs. Nursing an injured foot, the interviewer does the only thing he feels is logical—to limp over to the interviewee and sit on his lap. “We had the whole interview like that,” recalls Gustave Kervern of the time he interviewed Iggy Pop, that iconic American singer-songwriter, musician, producer and actor.

Mercifully, no such thing is necessary for my chat with French actor, screenwriter, film director and producer Kervern and his translator. We have a plush chair each to use for the duration of the interview in the wood-paneled library of a swanky hotel. It’s the morning after the screening of a film he acts in called *The Fabulous Patars*, which explores the concepts of a non-traditional family (such as “monoparental” and “homoparental”), Tourette’s syndrome and their associated problems.

The movie is part of Alliance Française’s The French Festival 2017. Alliance Française is a non-profit organisation that aims to promote both French language and culture all around the world.

POLARITIES

Before Kervern begins to tell his story, he takes off his jacket, arranges his V-neck T-shirt and jeans and sits on said plush chair. He rests his elbows on his knees, half-hiding the flip-flops on his feet. As he speaks, a perception forms ... that Kervern’s at-ease persona amidst such formal and opulent surroundings somewhat reflects the polarity of his upbringing in two different countries.

Born in Mauritius, Kervern’s family relocated to France when he was still very young. Running his fingers through his mop of unruly hair, he says: “From France, I get the stubborn and strong temperament. From Mauritius, I get the easy-going (part).” Although he now lives in cosmopolitan Paris, he yearns to be near the sea; he takes his family for an annual holiday to the island.

For all the captivating allure of Mauritius, a reunion that happened some 40 years ago

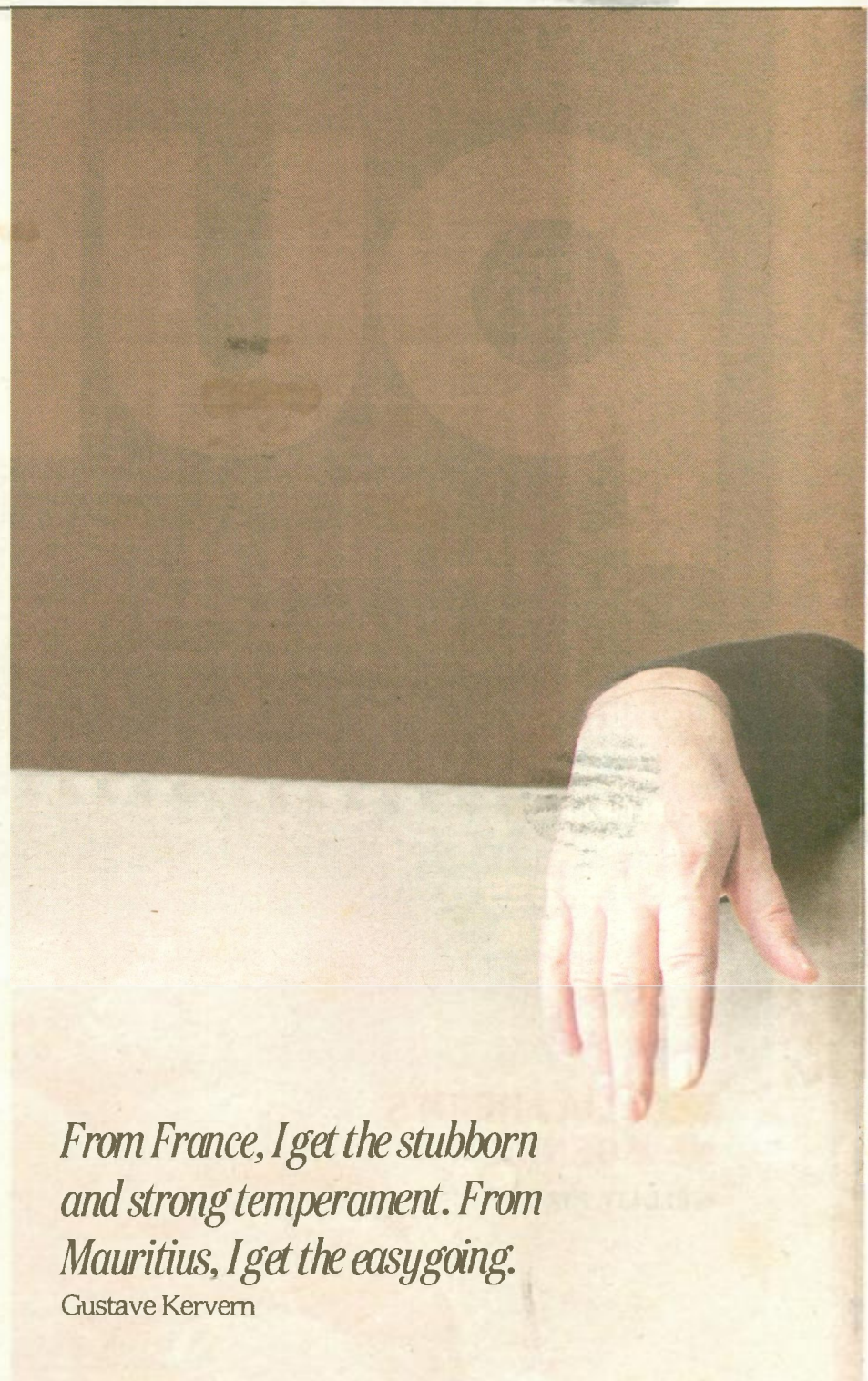
still haunts Kervern. For the first seven years of his life, he had a nanny called Aline. When he returned to the island 10 years later, Aline was delighted to see the young man he’d become. The 17-year-old Kervern however, was indifferent towards her. His voice filled with regret, he says: “I just didn’t care. I wanted to go to the beach.” Shaking his head, he adds: “This person really loved me.”

With the benefit of time, the 54-year-old Kervern of today accepts that his actions then were also that of a shy young man. He is aware how full of guilt and anxiety parenting can be. In fact, his son, 14-year-old Victor, has accompanied him to Malaysia and Kervern hopes that time alone with the boy will result in “meaningful conversations” between them. Nothing whatsoever has happened because as Kervern complains: “It doesn’t help that he sleeps for 12 hours. He’s not curious enough. He is interested in nothing.”

Rubbing his cheeks with both hands, Kervern candidly admits that although his instinct is to protect his 11-year-old daughter, Yona, and Victor from harm, he is cautious about telling them not to make mistakes. He wonders if they’ll listen to him, especially since the mistakes he alludes to are the same ones he once made in defiance of parental strictures.

Kervern switches to a lighter note, explaining that in time-honoured tradition, Victor was named after one of his ancestors. Indeed, “Victor” also appears in his full name, which is Gustave Marie Victor Philip Bruno Kervern.

“It’s a nightmare,” he hollers, throwing his hands in the air when a known trivia about his surname is mentioned. The word “Kervern” should be spelt as K/Vern, in the style of Brittany, his family’s place of origin. Leaning forward, he explains that computers at government departments do not recognise the oblique sign which once resulted in his driver’s licence being suspended. It took a good two years and a friend in authority to help sort out the mess. With a cheeky smile and a twinkle in his eyes, he adds that his surname only serves



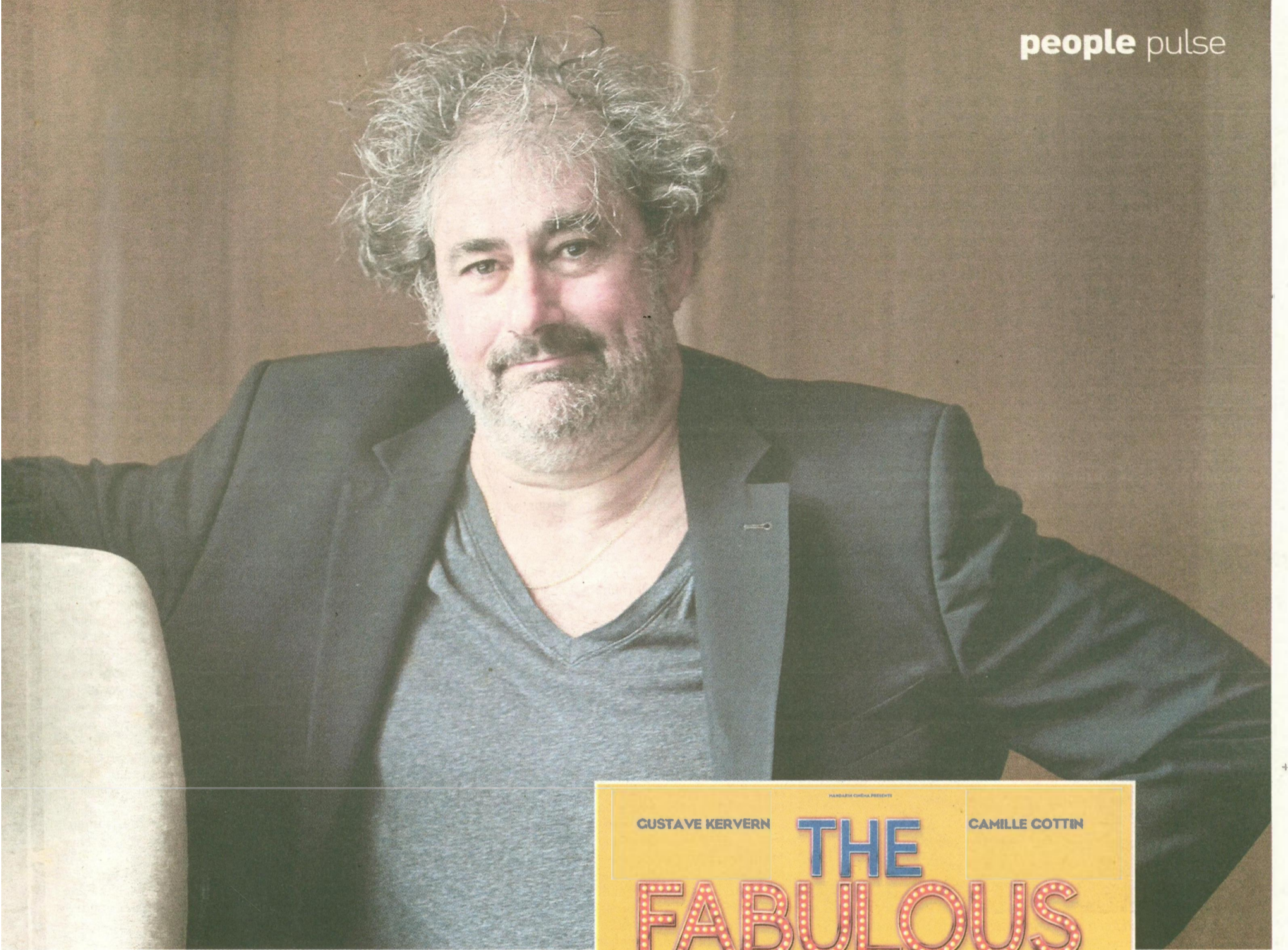
From France, I get the stubborn and strong temperament. From Mauritius, I get the easygoing.

Gustave Kervern



Gustave (left) in a scene from *The Fabulous Patars*.

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to drive his wife Stephanie, crazy.

LIBERTIES

Long before his career in the entertainment industry, Kervern studied at Kedge Business School in Marseilles. In his first job after he graduated, he says that he was "responsible for the books" at the company. Shuddering at the drudgery of his work, he admits: "I knew what was coming. So I ran away before they [his bosses] realised that I was absolute rubbish."

Relocating to Paris, he worked in a recording company, then moved to television. Of all the work he's done in these two media, he speaks most fondly of one role — he played an alcoholic journalist in the heart of a fictional place called Groland. This programme is described as a "vague parody of France and of the European microstates". There have been times his work has been deemed politically incorrect, upsetting some in authority. Still, Kervern is adamant that he retains some liberty. "Our job is to criticise and look at the unlovable truths. It's a little like sociology. And we use black humour."

The leap to filmmaking happened in 2003 when Gustave teamed up with another writer, Benoit Delepine. Their first project together was called *Aaltra*. It's about two warring neighbours who make a roadtrip to Finland to find the company that made an agriculture bucket. This bucket falls on them, causing them to lose the use of their

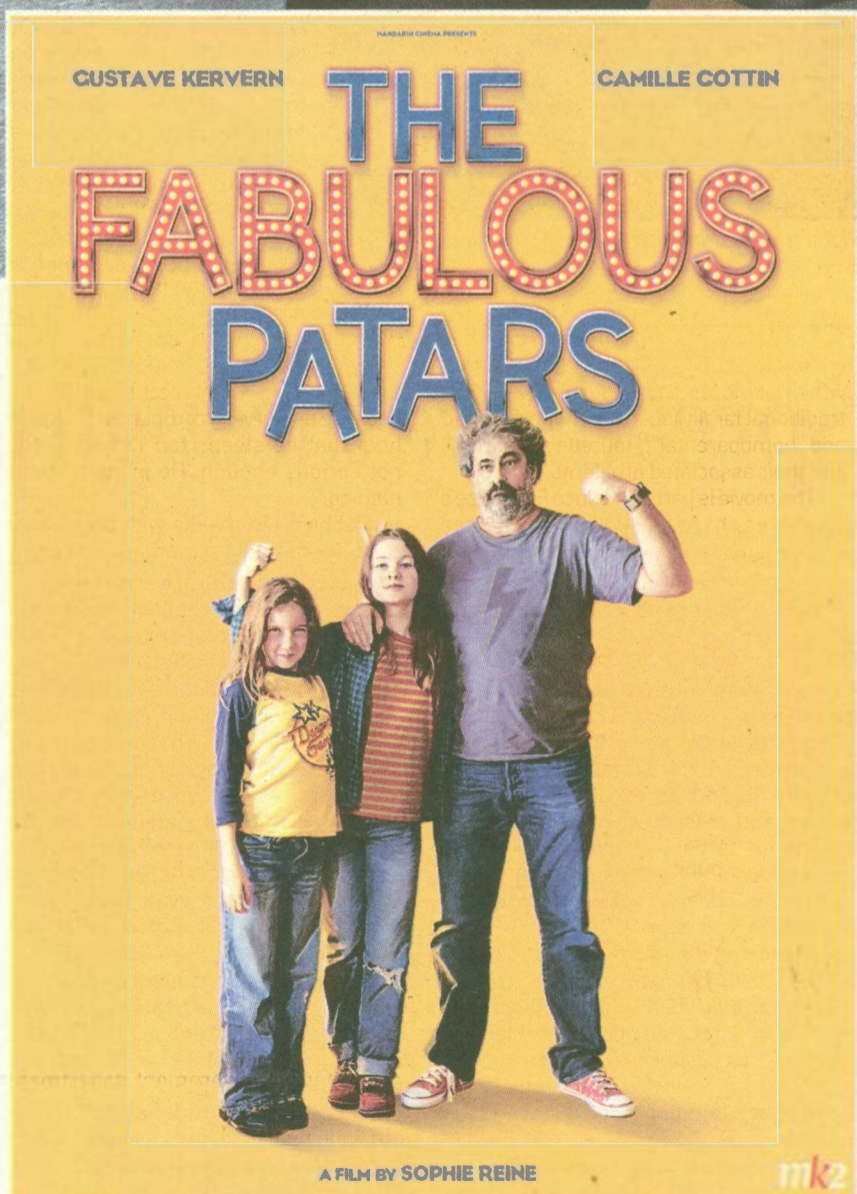
legs. Smiling, he recounts the making of this movie. Indeed, the reason he was producer, director and actor was quite simple — there was very little money. There were no more than 10 people (including technicians) for this project.

Proud of the fact that the movie was released to critical acclaim, Kervern confides that their entire marketing plan for *Aaltra* consisted of one idea — having two A's in its title. "It'll show up first in every reference material," he explains.

In the aftermath of *Aaltra*, the sense of having "lived something extraordinary" stayed with Kervern. "It was so great that we wished to do it day by day," he adds. Thus began a successful filmmaking journey, the thought of which makes him exhale contentedly and lean back.

Today, Kervern tries to inject a social message when working on a film. With a leaning towards "left wing" issues, some of the problems he's tackled include the fiscal bubbles that the French faced, inequality and consumerism.

Concluding our chat, Kervern confides that he has no fixed plan for the future. For now, he's aware that he's struck the balance between polarities where, on the one hand, he analyses and explores challenging and serious issues that plague society and on the other, it's all conveyed in a relatively light-hearted manner. Of paramount importance to this Frenchman is that any movie he makes must have depth to it.



The Fabulous Patars explores the concepts of a non-traditional family.