Jim Fletcher, oleft, as Jackson Pollock and Michelle Stern as Lee Krasner in Fabrice Melquié's "Pollock," Friday through Sunday in PS21 Performance Spaces for the 21st Century's Black Box Theatre in Chatham, N.Y.
COMPAGNIE DE LA VALLEE/LHELIOTROPE - PROVIDED BY PS 21

A tangled landscape of relationship and creativity erupts onstage at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y.
By Sharon Smullen, Eagle correspondent

CHATHAM, N.Y. — Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner were artists before they were lovers. From their 1941 New York gallery meeting until his death just 15 years later in 1956 at age 44, they informed each other's work, commingling creativity as their art converged and diverged.

At home in Long Island, he dripped paint onto canvases in a studio barn, building tangled landscapes of lines and splatter. In an upstairs bedroom, she ripped his rejects for collages and crammed color into artworks she titled "Little Images."

Friday through Sunday at PS21 Performance Spaces for the 21st Century's Black Box Theater, French director Paul Desveaux brings this tumultuous pairing to Chatham in an English translation of "Pollock," the two-person play created with renowned French author Fabrice Melquiot for Desveaux' Compagnie de La Vallee/L'heliotrope.

Wooster Group experimental theater alums Jim Fletcher and Michelle Stern are the complex, combative couple, inhabiting a dream world and experiencing the passionate, painful consequences of their relationship and creativity birthed in its wake.


Awed by the scale and how Pollock "danced around the canvas on the
floor," Desveaux said from Paris by phone, the exhibit took his breath away. When his wife gave him the artist's biography, "I understood that if we know Pollock, it's because he met Lee Krasner."

Among the most important artists of their time, following Pollock's death it took Krasner many years to be fully recognized in the art world. A recent London retrospective firmly secured her standing. "She worked with Jackson on what contemporary art means," Desveaux explained, helping to create "a new definition for contemporary art. It's not just a canvas, we need to understand the process too."

Bringing the story to stage, Desveaux wasn't interested in a biodrama.

"I wanted to find a real poet to work on this subject, [making] something about intimacy, art and creation."
Playwright Melquiot gathered stories of the artists' lives from biographies and critiques.

"It's a very free interpretation," Desveaux said, "impressionistic like a painter."

A recent Normandy tour in English was enthusiastically received in towns large and small.
With the actors constantly onstage, "Pollock" deconstructs the artist's mythology through his relationship, painting and drinking that caused his fatal car crash.

"Pollock" introduces an American play trilogy that includes Janis Joplin and Diane Arbus.
"I was attracted by this period because I love jazz," Desveaux said. Post-World War II America "was like a revolution, a window of freedom and example for all the world."
Vincent Artaud`s hard-bop score for the play "[lies] somewhere between [Charlie] Parker and Miles [Davis]."

Long enamored with American culture, Desveaux filmed Kerouac-style Super-8 road documentaries during previous visits. "For a French guy, it's like a fantasy to work with American actors. In [them] you can see the country and history."
"Pollock" marks the presentation debut of PS21 executive director Elena Siyanko, who recently succeeded beloved late PS21 founder Judy Grunberg. The Ukrainian Russian previously worked at Bard College and Clark Art Institute.

"Imaginative strong programming is the backbone of the health of any art institution," Siyanko said over coffee, fresh from a Spanish cultural festival.

The production carries an international sensibility, she said, noting the director worked in South America and Europe in theater, opera and film.

"You rarely see contemporary plays in translation," she added. "Melquiot has published 40 plays and we hardly know him in America."

American actors, she said, identify with the daring creative spirit of Pollock and Krasner. "They both broke new ground in their practice, working at a time of political turmoil and change."
Fletcher has worked with Richard Maxwell's New York City Players for 15 years and headlined Elevator Repair Service's epic "Gatz" around the world. Stern recently toured internationally with Taylor Mac's Pulitzer-nominated "24 Decade History of Popular Music."
With such strong directing and actors, the play is nuanced with many layers and the temperament changes, Siyanko said.
"Very few institutions have a state of the art theater [like PS21]," she added.

Siyanko plans to fully utilize the open-sided stage, Black Box Theater and rambling grounds, blending performing arts such as opera, dance and circus — just as "Pollock" integrates art and theater.
"It's more exciting to create a conversation," she said.