



Back to [Death of Otto Vass at police hands comes to the stage](#)

Death of Otto Vass at police hands comes to the stage

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Within seconds on Aug. 9, 2000, Liza Balkan went from being a witness to a fatal police struggle with a father of five to being swept up in the controversy that followed the prosecution of the four Toronto officers.

From her apartment window, Balkan saw the officers confront 55-year-old Otto Vass in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven store at College St. and Lansdowne Ave.

Vass died after he was subdued and handcuffed.

Years later, after culling thousands of pages of “shocking and compelling” court transcripts, the theatre professional is bringing the events surrounding Vass’s death to the stage.

The highly charged piece of documentary theatre is called “Out The Window” and opens Saturday at the Theatre Centre at 1087 Queen St. W. at Dovercourt Rd.

“This is very personal for me,” said Balkan, the creator, director and co-producer. “It’s 12 years later. I believe I have enough perspective now to look at it as a work of art, as a piece of theatre and distance myself.”

Balkan has struggled over the years to figure out the best way to tell this story. She decided to use court transcripts and interviews.

“I wanted to be fair and objective and offer an opportunity for the audience to have an exciting ride,” Balkan told the *Star*.

An inquest jury determined Vass died of a rare medical condition called excited delirium, which can occur when psychiatric patients suddenly go off their medication. Other experts supported the view that Vass died from a fat embolism released by blows received from the officers.

The four officers were ultimately found not guilty of manslaughter.

Balkan’s multi-year journey through the court system plays on themes such as police accountability and truth.

“This is part play and part public forum,” Balkan said of the three-act play which runs March 17-20 and again on March 25 at 7 p.m.

The production is stirring interest in police and legal circles and within the Vass family, who will take in one of shows.

Deputy Chief Mike Federico has agreed to participate in a post-show discussion on March 19.

He will be joined by former mayor John Sewell, co-ordinator of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition, and Peter Rosenthal, who was the lawyer for the Vass family.

There will be also be post-performance discussions on March 18 and 20 with stakeholders interested in how police respond to the mentally ill.

The production is also timely, coming on the heels of the Feb. 3 fatal police shooting of Michael Eligon, a 29-year-old mental health patient found wandering on the street, and the renewed attention that case is putting on police training and use of force.

“Clearly it’s not working,” Balkan said. “People are trying to make it work. How do we make it work? People who see this play should go away and argue, but maybe with greater perspective.”

This play, Balkan emphasized, is “not a diatribe” against police.

“Reading the transcripts about what happened as opposed to my experience of it, it shook me and forced me to ask lots of questions about what happened, what I saw, about law, about truth and what is truth and my own truth,” Balkan said.

As a witness, she has a certain perspective about what she saw.



Liza Balkan has created a play based on the case of Otto Vass, who died after a struggle with police in 2000.

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"I'm not pointing fingers, but I am using verbatim court transcripts to say this is what was said, so what do you think?"

Balkan knows that it may be difficult for Vass's widow, Zsuzsanna, to see the play, but so far she has told Balkan she is enthusiastic.

"She said, 'This keeps Otto alive.' "

Tickets are \$20 and \$25 and can be purchased at the door or online at theatrecentre.org.