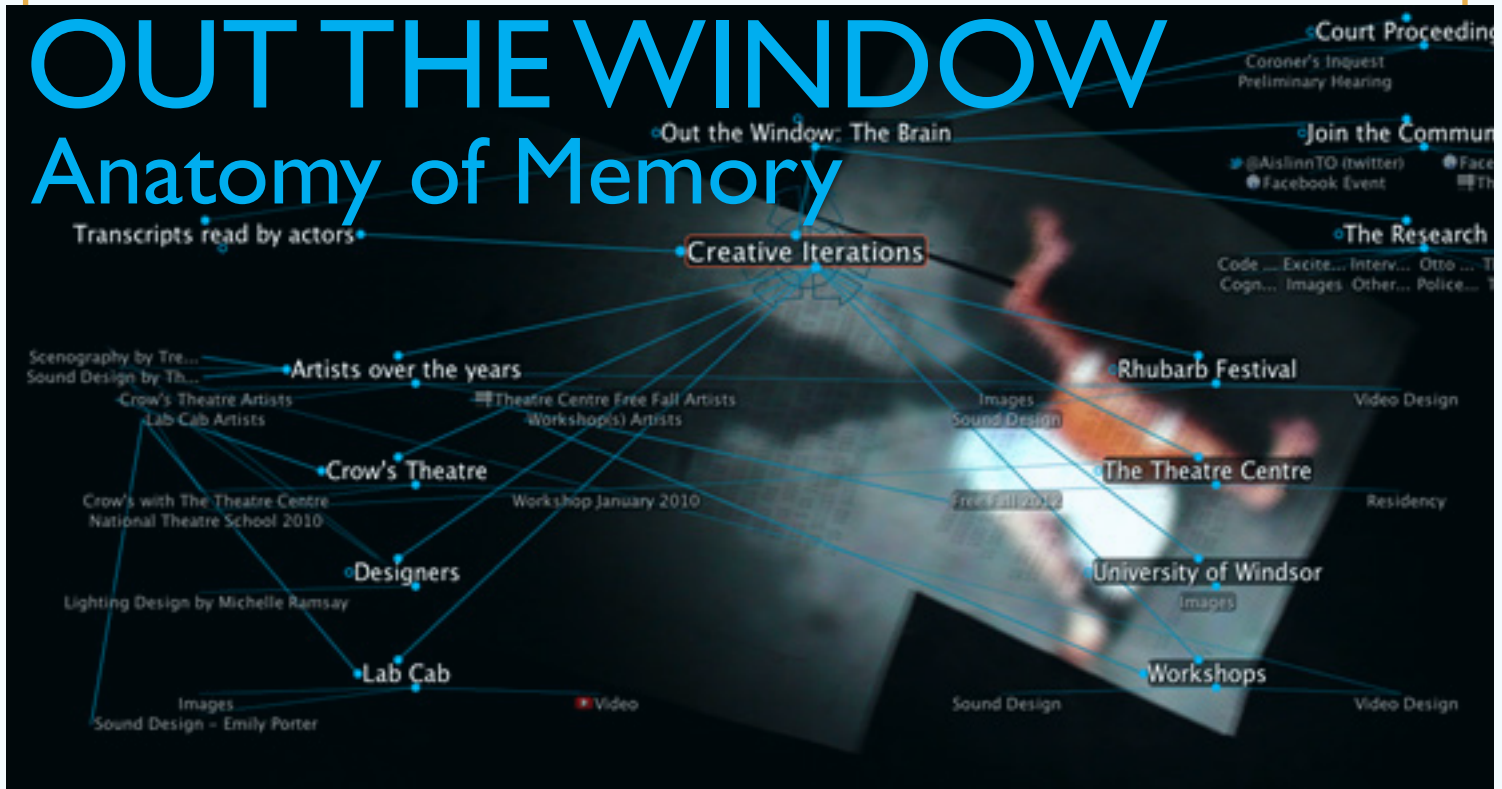


OUT THE WINDOW

Anatomy of Memory



Screenshot of The Brain, Out The Window's online counterpart, developed by Aislinn Rose

Article by Caroline Azar

Every great tale needs a problem, but what makes a performance rich, is the particular attempt made in the solving of that's story's problem. Liza Balkan's *Out the Window*, developed mainly as part of The Theatre Centre's Residency Program succeeds in taking on this task. Balkan's script, packed with textual authenticity, stems from her access to court transcripts, personal interviews and diaries. Some content remains exact while other pieces were edited in helping to best unravel the problem.

Text not only plays its usual theatrical task as the map of the story, as the play is directly about "the text." Text here is also an actual presence looming physically and viscerally. We see boxes of proof: transcripts surrounding the set and players. The text truly is the blood pumping throughout this agit-prop and/or verbatim play. This highly emotional ride is not a work of fiction.

Back in 2000, Liza Balkan was coming home to her apartment from a party and noticed mayhem nearby. She glanced out her window, not unlike James Stewart in Hitchcock's "Rear Window." A harrowing moment observed: an inner city strip mall setting, where a group of police officers were seen beating a man by the name of Otto Vass. Mr. Vass died soon after. It is important to note that the victim had a history of poor physical health, mental instability, and past criminal negligence.

The timeliness of the subject is daunting. The public at large, questions the system, which is ceasing to correct gaps in public service. Otto Vass, Rodney King and now Trayvon Martin along with countless others stay buried in closed and/or inactive files. These men become more than victims... they become symbols of civic inactivity.

Moreover, one might assume this is another story of the Public vs. the Police. There is a twist: You the audience decide heroic outcomes. Balkan supports all sides to best represent their reasoning. Out the Window is reliably descriptive instead of prescriptive.

The playwright allows the audience to decide who is their hero, their villain and so forth. This is why we need to further question hysterical docu-dramatists like Michael Moore and Fox News.



Left to right: Matt Murray, Jason Siks, Brett Donahue, Zahir Gilani and R.H.Thomson
Photographer: Abhishek Chandra.

This performance-rich piece was in the making for over a decade, from experience to inception to development to production. The work is provocative and vulnerable, in expressing the scope of the divergent sides involved in public inquests and criminal trials. Balkan has you wondering: If you were to see something this frightening, would you, make the choice to become a documented witness?

As a key witness, are you prepared for how this might affect your private life? In creating a work of art, how does the artist paint the organized chaos of red tape within the justice system?

...Minus any clichéd left-wing didacticism.

The story also alerts us of the 2-pronged role when risking involvement with the authorities:

- 1) How we recount the witnessing of a crime.
- 2) How we are perceived when recounting the crime. (Based on who we are and our personal and professional context.)

The Artist, not unlike the Criminal, has often been assumed as unreliable on the legal stage. As we work in the world of artifice, bureaucracies often implicate us as natural born exaggerators 24-7. Countless hearings and courtroom dalliances saw creative figures like Mae West to Charles Chaplin, Elia Kazan, and Arthur Miller ridiculed.

The approach taken here is an offering of performance as public service. The Artist is inciting us the audience to discuss what is going on in our neighborhoods, through story, learning, and of course entertainment.



Left to right: Zahir Gilani, Jason Siks, Julie Tepperman, Brett Donahue
Photographer: Abhishek Chandra.

OUT THE WINDOW:

A Verbatim play addresses:

- 1) What is the essence behind the recording of an event?
- 2) Is memory always pure or in time, laced with agenda?
- 3) How does an Artist neutrally objectify a true event?
- 4) Information as a Virus: A meme (/mēm; meem)[1] is "an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture." [2] A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes in that they self-replicate mutate and respond to selective pressures. What is memory? An account of fact or emotion?
- 5) Is there an active meme present in authoritative cultures? If so, how can this meme move from retarding social evolution to supporting the individuation of self?
- 6) Is there an active meme present in performance culture? Is there a left wing bias? How can this be addressed as fairly and objectively as possible?

Out the Window is an operatic chef d'oeuvre in concert with Meta messaging. The drama here lies inside a monstrous aspect of the Zeitgeist, recounting the spirit of this time. Glaring are the variables present: The global community has now become habitual to peaceful protest. They want answers, action, and responsible leadership. Conversely, authoritative culture, trickling down, craves understanding, while requiring reliable resources to best perform their roles. This play makes you feel the tension inside the gap.



Left to right: R.H.Thomson and Julie Tepperman
Photographer: Abhishek Chandra.

The opportunity in welcoming Balkan's work globally would be a tool for the many sides to engage in public discussion. Any community here on the planet dealing with strife around authoritarian misstep, could benefit experiencing this performance as a springboard to thereafter discuss their local and civic concerns.

Mediation as performance-appendage becomes a lively interactive point here. For the World premiere of *Out the Window*, The Theatre Centre, along with Liza Balkan, invited the likes of Former Mayor John Sewell (now Coordinator of Toronto Police Accountability Coalition), Community Activist Anna Willats, Deputy Chief of Police Mike Federico, and Activist, Lawyer and Mathematician Peter Rosenthal, amongst others, in post-play discussion with each other and the audience. This was a brave and effective epilogue after the actual performance(s).

One of Balkan's prime messages here is that we can use theatre and legal text in a new way, as a platform for re-investigating truths. Let's use creative tools to mind the gap between "us" and "them."

The performance has an ancillary feature in *The Brain*, created by Praxis Theatre's Aislinn Rose to provide multifaceted online information about *Out the Window*. outthewindowcollective.com

March 17-20 2012, *Out the Window* by Liza Balkan had its World Premiere at The Theatre Centre, Toronto, Canada. Presented as part of Theatre Centre's Residency Program. Also featured in Theatre Centre's Free Fall Festival 2012 curated alongside other performance initiatives.

OUT THE WINDOW project began in 2007 as an installation at Factory Theatre's Lab Cab, following The Theatre Centre's residency in 2008/2009, plus a residency with Crows' Theatre and Director Chris Abraham in 2009/2010.

Created, Written and Directed by Liza Balkan.
Dramaturg/Associate Director - Shari Hollett.
Dramaturg/The Brain Creator – Aislinn Rose.
With: R.H. Thompson, David Ferry and Julie Tepperman, Brett Donahue, Andrew Ferguson, Zahir Gilani, Nadir Umar Khitab, Matt Murray and Jason Siks.
Scenography: Trevor Schwellnus.
Lighting Design: Michelle Ramsey.
Sound Design: Thomas Ryder Payne.
Stage Management: Billy Wolf.
Production Management: Peter Eaton.
Costume Consultant: Bojana Stancic.
Assistant Video Designer: Rebecca Vandervelde.



Left to right: Left to right: Jason Siks, Brett Donahue, Matt Murray
Photographer: Abhishek Chandra.

The Residency program at The Theatre Centre

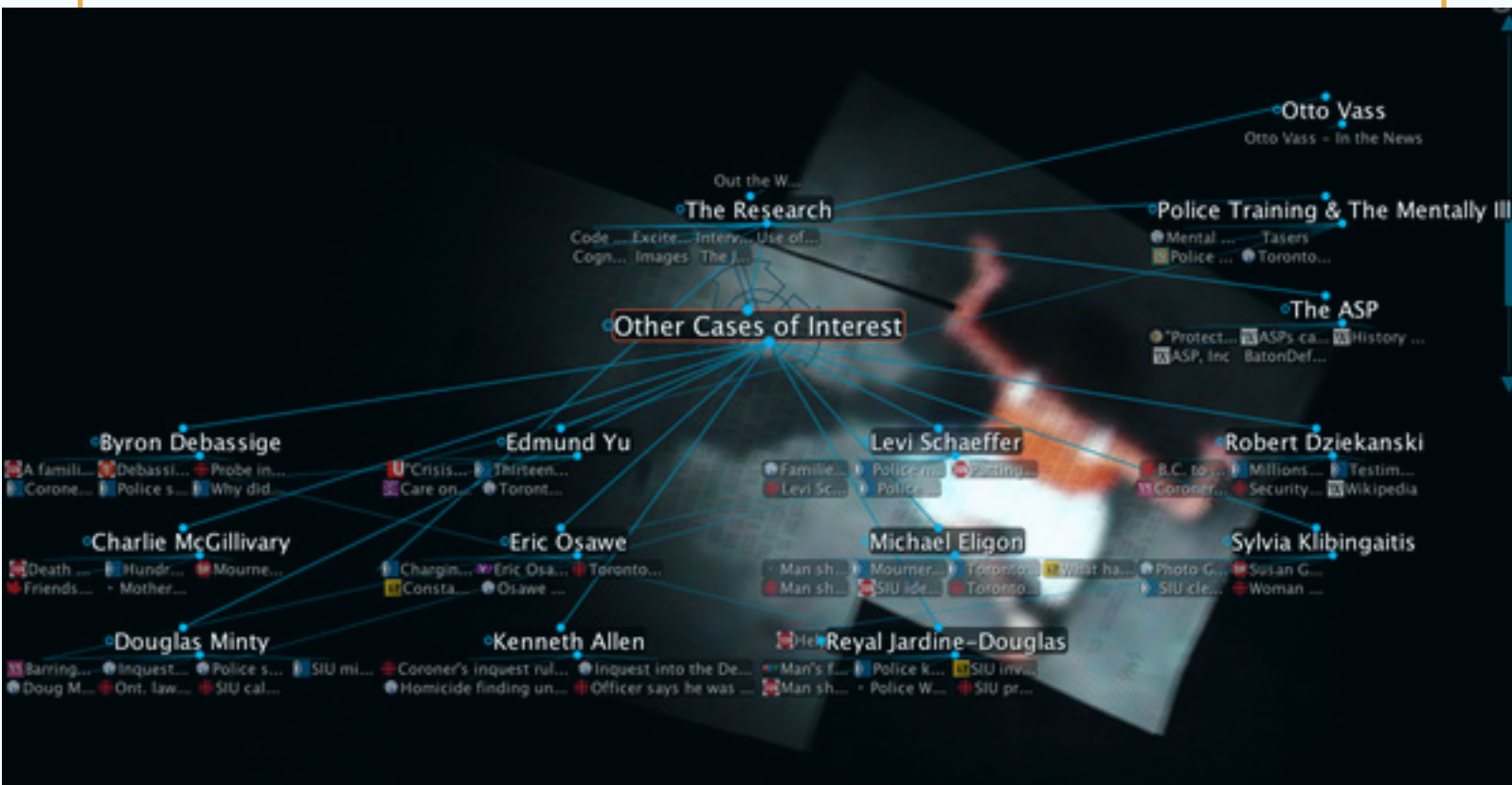
This initiative conducts a robust approach to building, dissecting, and reconstructing performance relevant to public forum.

Artistic Director Franco Boni works with a number of teams and individuals, in the Theatre Centre's Residency program, coaxing concepts in closing the gap between audience and performance. To let that audience in on all ideologies, as they are part of the trick. Authenticity here is key.

Words for Stage can no longer simply be a narcissistic reflection of a Playwright's poetic skill or philosophy, but a mirror, discussing the spirit of the day. Audiences want to see their selves inside a portrait that is socially relevant, whether severe or light, all in service to audience consciousness.

Therefore, yes, a playwright's literary agenda requires investigation. One then has to ask: Does this mean we dismiss tradition? Certainly not. For history is compelling in its place and context, reminding us of our lessons, patterns, wins and losses.

By example, when an audience becomes agitated with the brand of artifice displayed, might Crators address what is really going on, upon that stage? If it is false, is the creator aware and what they doing about it? Stanislavski, the master of "realness" had once directed an over-the-top bouffant farce, because the artifice did not pretend to be anything but what it was, which still made it serviceable to that particular time, audience and notion of authenticity.



Screenshot of The Brain, - Other Cases, OutThe Window's online counterpart, developed by Aislinn Rose

Theatre practitioners are better off in surrendering to the fact that an audience knows more than they let on. Without academics, an audience can feel and identify what feels genuine when they know the play is about and for them. Theatre now has the opportunity to find a niche in serving a purpose where other mediums cannot.

The stage is a live courtroom, where the audience is an interactive witness inside the trick that is the play.

FREE FALL 2012 – THEATRE CENTRE, TORONTO, CANADA.

Coined as “performance without a net”- most spectators would agree that this genuinely smart, heartfelt and fluid mandate is a lovely break from the usual suspect of Theatre creation. FREE FALL's curatorial mandate is one found to be challenging yet accepting, inclusive and exclusive, in supporting timely dialogues with an audience willing.

Regretfully, I was only able to see two shows. Yet lucky for me, they were Canadian works. Both shows offered much promise to the progressive fortification of modern performance.

Even better, Jim Morrison's lyrics replayed in my head... “The west is the best...” Both shows hailed from Vancouver.

Theatre Replacement from Vancouver, Canada tours a caravanesque tickle-trunk full of raw and bawdy humour in a live adventure: WEE TUBE 5400. The performers re-create stagy premises using the idiot humanity found in the you tube commentary. The charming duo of James Long and Maiko Bae Yamamoto transform the causal profanity into theatrical text n'plays. In-the-moment internets-mayhem have audiences yelling out and screeching clapter. The prime showcase here is the delightful presence coming off the creators/performers: Long and Yamamoto. Not to be missed. www.theatrerplacement.org/

Rough House Productions, again from Vancouver, Canada, architect a multimedia performance illustrating the modern relationship saga in A LAST RESORT. This tightly staged presentation redefines the modern notion of star-crossed lovers, who must address minutiae such as: Immigration, Economics and Cultural artifacts that can envelop, seduce as well as retard a promising romance. It was 2004 when video artist Candelario Andrade left his home in Mexico and set off in search of a new life, crossing paths with playwright Camille Gingras returning to Canada as a last resort. A far cry from what we know as the traditional century-old lovers' strife. A bittersweet exploration about the lengths two people will go for that perfect life just beyond the horizon.

FREE FALL 2012 THEATRE CENTRE, TORONTO, WAS CO-CURATED BY FRANCO BONI & MICHAEL WHEELER.

Caroline Azar is a Dramaturge, Story Editor and Director who runs the Archival Repertory Workshop (www.carolineazar.com). Recently featured in the documentary film about the post punk performance group FIFTH COLUMN in the world premiere of SHE SAID BOOM: THE FIFTH COLUMN STORY.