# When the Spectator Talks Back:
## The Development of Practical Wisdom and an Ethics of Care within the Magdalena Talks Back Network

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In this paper, I wish to discuss an 'ethics of care' that was adopted by spectators and artists in a support network established for women theatre practitioners in Brisbane. My paper is structured around three theoretical positions suggested by the conference title 'BEFORE, DURING, and AFTER.' I begin with a brief view of the support network in Brisbane called Magdalena Talks Back (M.T.B.), a network that has been meeting regularly since the Magdalena Australia Festival in 2003. Because the activities being discussed happened BEFORE this session, I consciously employ a retrospective view to describe observable conditions and ideas that led to the group devising and implementing an ethical framework based on 'care'. The next section continues to examine past events, but I switch from the position of a spectator documenting a practice performed by others and consider some ethical questions I was exploring DURING feedback sessions. From this position, I explain why I wanted to exercise a form of deliberation called practical reasoning and why some philosophers distinguish this approach as an important mode of enquiry. While these two positions acknowledge the distance between you and the practice I studied, the third section of this paper assumes quite a different position by recognising that I am speaking to you now, AFTER my involvement in M.T.B. sessions. From this position, I will invite you to consider whether or not practical reasoning can and should be exercised while deliberating over ideas discussed in this public forum. In order to initiate this form of reasoning, I will outline a few ideas forwarded by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the pragmatic sociologist Luc Boltanski and then ask for volunteers to explore how these arguments might inform the practice we are developing here today. And despite the epic structure these positions suggest, I promise this process will only take a short time.

## PART 1

### BEFORE: A brief history of Magdalena Talks Back

In this first section I want to emphasise my position as an observer of events so I have decided to use a question and answer format to relay data about various features, aims, and people in the Magdalena Talks Back network. While I acknowledge that the data being outlined is selective, I hope the format will invite you to consider whether or not the information being delivered offers an objective view of the events.

**a) What is the history of the M.T.B. network?**

The M.T.B. network was established in response to needs and concerns outlined by participants at an international women's theatre festival produced in Brisbane in 2003 called Magdalena Australia 2003. This festival was instigated and organised by three Brisbane theatre practitioners Dawn Albinger, Julie Robson and Scotia Monkivitch who secured funding and sponsorship from a range of sources and attracted support from many other women theatre practitioners and theatre scholars. The festival in Brisbane was organised and promoted nationally and internationally as an event that would enable women involved in the creation and study of independent theatre in and around Australia to gather together to share and develop the ideas and practices of women working in and across local, interstate and global theatre networks. The festival organisers also aimed to introduce and link Australian women theatre practitioners to the opportunities and activities associated with an international support network called 'The Magdalena Project'.

**b) What is the Magdelena Project?**

The Magdalena Project is an international network of women artists that began in the late 1970s and early 80s when a number of women developing experimental theatre work in the U.K. and Europe started exploring representations of women in theatre practices. Jill Greenhalgh was one of those artists and an active member of the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre. She is also recognised as the founder of the Magdalena Project because it was she who instigated the first international festival of women's theatre in Cardiff, Wales in 1986 called Madgalena '86. That festival was a three week long event with a range of workshops, debates and performances and it laid the foundations for the formation of a network of women theatre practitioners that has continued to support, challenge and encourage women producing theatre in a range of countries around the world. While many different women (and men) have been involved in the many and varied activities associated with the network since the first festival (and differences are respected), a number of aims were written down by core members of the Magdalena Project in 1989 that Chris Fry argues have "remained intact" (2007, 14). These aims are outlined below and now posted on the Magdalena Project's webpage (see list of works cited). They also provide clear directions and foundational values for artists and those producing events affiliated with the Magdalena Project, including the Festival in Brisbane in 2003.

The aims of the Madgalena Project are:

- To increase the awareness of women's contribution to contemporary theatre.
- To enable women to explore new approaches to theatre making that more profoundly reflect their own experience.
- To create the fora that can give voice to the concerns of women working in theatre.
- To encourage women to examine their role in the future of theatre and to question existing structures.

The Project seeks to achieve these aims:

- By providing opportunities for women to work together to create productions and performances.
- By providing opportunities for women to share and develop and pass on their work through pedagogical activities, workshops, collaborations and conferences.
- By adopting a rational approach to documentation and disseminating information.
- By maintaining the flexibility of an organic structure which will serve the expansion of the growing network.

If there is an overall objective it is to create the artistic and economic structures to enable women to

work (http://www.themagdalenaproject.org/project/aims.htm).

**c) How did the M.T.B. sessions grow out of the Brisbane Festival**?
During one of the public forums organized at the Magdalena Australia Festival in Brisbane in 2003, Jill Greenhalgh (who is both greatly respected as the founder of The Magdalena Project, and a little feared due to her often fierce defence of her beliefs), said she believed artists in the Australian network needed to make their work 'better' if they wanted to produce 'good' work. I could see a number of Australian artists physically grimace and bristle at this suggestion and some later told me they believed it was problematic to apply such general and loaded evaluative terms to diverse practices. However, the main organizers of the festival in Australia (Monkovitch, Robson and Albinger) thought it was important to establish a support network to continue talking about such ideas and to offer support for local artists developing new work. As a result, they founded M.T.B. to provide an ongoing forum to discuss ideas and practices from the festival and to offer women from the local branch of the Magdalena network further opportunities to share works in progress, compare evaluative strategies and processes, and obtain feedback on specific productions from others supporting similar ideals.

**d) How do sessions feed back to artists?**
Various activities, discussions, and feedback processes with different artists have characterised M.T.B. sessions because they have evolved according to the interests and practices being explored by participants and members of the network. 'Feedback' sessions can therefore include: reports by artists on working methods or processes of production; group discussions of selected topics or methods of analysis being developed; demonstrations of work; rehearsed readings of drafts of plays; shared analyses of productions members have agreed to attend; and more conventional types of feedback sessions with playwrights, directors, visual artists and/or performers.

**e) Are feedback sessions documented?**
In addition to sessions where attending members of M.T.B. are invited to give immediate feedback on work that has been presented for analysis by the group, written reports on feedback models for specific practitioners have also been produced. Written reports have included summaries of comments, criticisms, points of discussion and new ideas or directions that have been suggested by members who have offered feedback. However, M.T.B. members have collectively agreed that such details cannot be circulated within the group (or published elsewhere) without permission from the artist/s that give and receive the feedback. A number of artists within the M.T.B. network have allowed reports of feedback sessions to be circulated throughout the e-group for further discussion. However, most artists receiving feedback are hesitant about permitting wider circulation of such material as reports usually expose sensitive or raw areas analysed and evaluated during sessions that may not be appropriate for others evaluating a finished product. Not surprisingly, some artists have chosen not to have details about their professional decisions or areas for development circulated for scrutiny by others outside each session. I should therefore also acknowledge that those preparing reports that are not circulated can find the lack of transparency frustrating since time and effort goes into the documentation of sessions and models. Nevertheless, a primary and immediate focus on caring for the particular artist/s receiving feedback continues to supersede any general or scholarly interest that might be stimulated by disseminating material contained in written reports. A focus on caring for those producing theatrical works has therefore remained a basic principle of this network, even when feedback has been organised for artists outside the network. For example, M.T.B. offered a feedback session in conjunction with the University of Queensland's Drama Reading Group for a production of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* mounted by the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble (Q.S.E.). Although debate over the representation of women in the company's gender 'blind' casting was a part of this session very relevant to

ongoing M.T.B. discussions, permission was not granted to circulate reports of the feedback model developed for the Q.S.E.'s production and that decision made by the Company's director continues to be respected.

**e) Have artists receiving feedback found M.T.B. methods useful?**
Yes and no. Methods of planning and delivering feedback have been evolving since the network was first established and some approaches have been deemed more useful than others. I would argue that the models now being implemented are better able to respond to the needs of a range of artists since they have been developed in response to a number of previous challenges. Less fruitful responses were evident in the very first traditional feedback session when three local artists asked to receive feedback on a production in which they had collaborated. Two of these artists were very experienced and comfortable with collecting feedback so they asked to direct the feedback session and negotiated the different responses they encountered. During the session they asked specific questions and, since they primarily directed the session, the facilitator appointed from M.T.B. played little part in the proceedings except to introduce the artists, invite questions and then later echo the gratitude expressed by the artists receiving feedback. However, in a later discussion sometime after the session, the two experienced artists were asked to comment on the quality of the feedback session and both said they were sometimes a little unsure of what was being expressed by others and that some comments were more useful and relevant than others [see next section below for further details]. As a result of their feedback on the session, M.T.B. members decided that the appointment of a gatekeeper would be useful in self-directed sessions who could be informed of artists' interests and called on to intervene if the responses of those giving feedback strayed off topic or lost focus.

Alternatively, in a later feedback session organised for an artist who requested feedback on work she had recently devised and performed, the artist realised on the day the feedback session was scheduled that she was still too emotionally involved in the work and not ready to consider critical responses. As a result, she decided not to attend the feedback session and the facilitator of her session asked participants to write down responses that could be opened and read when the artist in question was ready to consider the views of others. Discussion of the work was invited from participants in the session after they had written their responses but it remained unclear when or if the written responses would ever be opened by the artist or if observations made during the discussion would be passed on by the facilitator to the artist. As a result of further evaluation of this process, a number of issues were raised about the benefits of feedback for members involved in giving as well as receiving feedback which have subsequently been addressed within later feedback models.

**f) Do the sessions prompt further ethical questions?**
Ethical questions about the discursive practices being employed by members in feedback sessions were raised in M.T.B. from the very first feedback session when responses indicated that members of the network had diverse interests and values that required further consideration. For example, when participants were asked to offer their feedback on the particular work being discussed in the first session, a few spectators responded by outlining their beliefs about what theatre and performance 'should' be rather than tailoring their responses to reply to the questions and interests being outlined by those that had produced the work being discussed. Alternatively, some spectators identified their own aesthetic preferences and/or the ethical and political values they supported and used to inform their readings of the work in question but then clearly offered comments on aspects of the production or process they thought could be explored or developed further. There were also some respondents that preferred to reinforce or affirm aspects of work they had enjoyed or admired rather than isolating weaknesses and still others that said after the meeting that they did not contribute because they thought that they did

not have any useful comments to add. As a result, this session alerted the founding members of M.T.B. to the fact that some artist-spectators may not be willing to consider, discuss, or utilise evaluative frames, theatrical styles, or feedback models they did not employ (or value). In such cases, it has been recognised that participants in sessions may also need to be offered more opportunities to explore their own experiences, methods, and values in sessions dedicated to supporting the development of their own and other processes.

**g) How did an 'Ethics of Care' develop in sessions?**
Despite the tensions and silences different views and approaches have sometimes generated in M.T.B. sessions, group members have been encouraged to regard the responses of all participants in feedback sessions as valid and valuable processes for each individual. However, various sessions have also raised questions about the general value of feedback processes for artists. A few members have expressed doubts and questions about whether M.T.B. feedback can effectively and practically implement the group's initial aim of offering support for the development of work. Some members have questioned whether feedback is actually inhibitive to creative processes and some have wondered when or if artists can ever really know if they are able to give and receive feedback without challenging or damaging non-rational responses or creative impulses they value. Discussions such as these have continued to raise further questions and arguments about what is useful, valuable and valued in feedback sessions, the wider community, and during the development of new work. As this kind of discussion is now an intrinsic part of M.T.B. sessions, much consideration has been given to determining the different values supported by various practitioners and spectators and when, how and if feedback can be effectively and ethically conveyed.

A clear result of these deliberations was that regular members of the group also decided to experiment with implementing what they called an 'ethics of care' when offering feedback to artists. Essentially, this ethical framework grew out of an understanding that a caring 'ethos' or attitude could be adopted by individuals wishing to discuss the values and interests of others producing work. Instead of imposing a rigid structure or rules, the ethical framework introduced in M.T.B. would suggest the adoption of an ethos of 'care' by inviting other artists to consider needs and interests identified by the person/s receiving and giving feedback. Those facilitating sessions therefore began reminding spectator/participants that the subject/s receiving feedback had outlined needs and aims intended to be the main focus of the deliberation while also reminding artists that divergent values may still be articulated by spectators. In order to be properly prepared to mediate and conduct a variety of responses, a facilitator of a feedback session is expected to identify the needs of the artist/s asking for feedback. They are therefore appointed before the session so that they can arrange to meet and interview the artist/s in order to determine what kind of feedback may be counter-productive or productive for each project/person. During these meetings, facilitators can ask whether those receiving feedback wish to utilise some kind of method, filter, facilitator, or mediation process they believe may produce potentially useful responses or would prefer to direct discussions themselves.

The aims developed for each session can differ dramatically according to the interests and involvement of those receiving feedback. Artists can decide to be present or absent when feedback is offered. Some have expressed a desire to receive general feedback on specific aspects of plays being written or performances being developed. Other artists have invited general responses to various written or performed texts while still others have expressed an interest in receiving feedback from a specific person within the network with a special expertise or relevant skills, knowledge or experience. While feedback models have differed, those seeking feedback have often noted during pre-session or after-session interviews how much they appreciate the opportunity to discuss their work with fellow practitioners.

However, some artists have been unclear about the kinds of responses they were willing and able to consider so facilitators have also had to list and discuss a range of options available to help develop a session plan for the artist/s that ensures their specific needs and interests are identified.

While no formal interview system for facilitators has been developed to date, the initial interview process has consistently produced aims to explore during sessions. Facilitators are central to this process as they are expected to determine what elements are needed to produce the best results for those receiving and giving feedback and to outline the structure artists wish to explore with the group. They are then expected to monitor and invite responses within the session before asking for further comments prior to closing the session. Within all these stages, the facilitator is now also expected to implement an ethics of care for all participants during sessions and to find ways to help respondents care about connecting with the queries or interests outlined by the artist in question before the session.

### f) Have the M.T.B. ethos and feedback models been successful & do they offer anything new or useful?

While this process has been gradually developed and adapted during M.T.B. sessions, many of you will probably also recognise similarities with other feedback methods used by dramaturges in theatre companies or organisations such as the National Playwrights' Association. M.T.B. is a little different in that it has consciously left room for the identification of contributors' interests in feedback sessions as individuals that are part of a community developing different abilities and values. In this sense, I believe a broad aim of the Magdalena Project has been achieved by this group in that M.T.B. sessions have developed a network [albeit small] and a method that members believe ethically supports the development of diverse aesthetic, ethical, and political aims within a community with particular artistic and social aims. As the group has not attracted enthusiastic support from more artists, the future of the network looks a little bleak until more artists become involved. Nevertheless, if the network is sustained, I believe members may further enhance their chances of enjoying success if they keep exercising a form of practical reasoning that explores what individuals in specific communities regard as good.

### PART 2

### DURING: Develop the 'virtue' of practical wisdom through practical reasoning

I am now shifting the focus of this paper to offer you a view of my own motivations and experiences during MTB sessions. Although the following information was not always discussed during M.T.B. sessions, I offer it here to help you understand why I believe the development of practical reasoning. can be a useful tool for support networks such as M.T.B..

While consciously observing and documenting activities in M.T.B. sessions, I have also been participating in discussions since the group's inception and helping to contribute to the development of the ethics of care promoted within the group. Although I have been the only member of the group with a stated interest in testing a particular theory rather than developing particular theatrical practices or works, regular group members have encouraged me to pursue my interests within the network. So, during the first session and some sessions thereafter, I explained my interests in 'virtue theory' along with my desire to explore how this theory relates to practices being developed by the group. I then continued to explore and experiment with this theory as I assumed various roles and points of view as a spectator, a presenter, a facilitator and member of a community that supports the aims of the Magdalena project. However, while looking for ways to apply and test various elements of virtue theory, I have also often found myself exercising and developing a form of deliberation that virtue theorists call 'practical reasoning'.

Practical reasoning is an intellectual ability that has been discussed since antiquity and philosophers such as Aristotle have argued that it can be developed by deliberating about what actions may be good for various practices. Aristotle also argued that those able to make decisions about what actions are good for all concerned in a practice have developed an intellectual 'virtue' or excellence he called phrënsis or practical wisdom.[1] Stan van Hooft's succinct explanation of Aristotle's defence of this virtue clearly outlines aspects of his arguments relevant to distinctions between 'process' and 'product' in performance analysis:

> Aristotle's concept of prudence (*phronësis*) is central to his whole ethical philosophy. To understand it we need to consider Aristotle's concepts of 'action' and 'production.' Production is typified my making something. As such its goal is that which is made. If I make a violin, then the goal of my activity is the production of that violin. My activity is completed, fulfilled or 'perfected' by the violin that is the outcome of the production process. In contrast, an 'action', in Aristotle's special sense of that term is an activity for which the goal is the excellent doing of the activity itself. Suppose I play the violin and suppose further that I do so without an audience. What, then, is the objective of my activity? It is the making of beautiful music. But what is the making of beautiful music if not simply the excellent playing of the violin? Music is not a product (unless it is recorded or heard by an audience). It is gone the moment it is produced. The point of my activity is to play well rather than to make anything in the way of a definite product. So here the activity is its own reward, as it were. It has no goal except its own excellence in performance [. . . ]. The intellectual skill or virtue that is particular to action understood in this way is prudence or practical wisdom (*phronësis*). Normally (even in the ancient Greek it would seem) prudence is understood as the ability to make decisions that are to your own benefit. You act prudently when you do something that turns out well for yourself and for others for whom you might be concerned. But Aristotle builds a new level of meaning into this sense of the word. The violin player is benefiting himself, not in the way a busker who collects money for playing well might, but by simply playing well. The better I play the violin in my bedroom the better I will feel about it and the more rewarding it will be for me [. . . ]. Whenever I do something that takes some concentration, skill or commitment on my part, my doing it well will be a source of a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment for me. It will be a self-betterment in an ethical sense (though not it a moral sense; there is no direct question here of right or wrong or of moral enhancement or corruption). So the point of performing actions of this kind is to achieve this kind of self-fulfilment (van Hooft 2006, 66-67).

As van Hooft notes, Aristotle argued that the evaluative processes and deliberations involved in the performance of actions believed to be good are extremely relevant to the development of practical wisdom and can be considered quite distinct from the goals and aims associated with the production of goods. This view has been developed and discussed by many classical, early Christian, and medieval scholars, artists, and philosophers and their definitions of the virtue of practical wisdom, *phronësis* or *prudentia* (the Latin version)—one of the four 'cardinal' virtues identified by classical Christian philosophers and theologians—have been further examined and extended in different practices over the many centuries since then. Indeed, contemporary philosophers continue to analyse and argue about the particular form of reasoning Aristotle identified with phronësis. Some believe the complex and subtle distinctions he attributed to this ability should continue to be identified in discussions of practical wisdom: David Depew, for example, insists that any discussion of practical wisdom and/ or prudence should also recognise that Aristotle introduced the idea that "phronesis" is primarily "a *cognitive* act [my emphasis]" (2004, 169). While acts can obviously produce various results and

orientations, Depew explains that Aristotle distinguished the cognitive act he associated with phronesis in the following way:

> It is supposed to be intellectual insight (and not mere opinion [. . .]) into what course of action should be chosen in a particular, usually vexing, situation if the best interests of the self and those who are extensions of the self (family, friends, fellow citizens) are to be preserved [. . .] [However,] It differs from *sunesis*, which is insight into what others should do; advising is not deliberating. (2004, 169).

As you can see here, Depew explains that those supporting Aristotle's views today still argue there is a form of reasoning that is not the act of offering an opinion and it not the act of advising but is something that develops in an individual via deliberation over what course of action to choose in challenging and 'vexing' situations. While Depew distinguishes aspects of Aristotle's view of *phronësis* by contrasting what it is with what it is not, he goes on to examine more details of Aristotle's views of emotion and how they relate to the development of this virtue. I will not outline these distinctions here, or introduce objections that might be made to these views. I simply wish to note that Depew is not alone and that many other contemporary philosophers have investigated, promoted and/or challenged Aristotle's arguments about the virtue of phronësis or practical wisdom, including Martha Nussbaum.

Nussbaum is perhaps the best known contemporary virtue theorist today and she is a great admirer of Aristotle's work. While she regards herself as an Aristotelian to some extent, she has also repeatedly stated she does not agree with a number of his views (see Nussbaum 2000a). One clear point of departure is that she has argued that 'practical reason' should be viewed as a 'capability' that can be developed in various ways. I think her revision of the term is really important because she has separated value-laden abstract arguments about what makes practical wisdom 'excellent' (and therefore a virtue) and identified a particular intellectual faculty that can be engaged, exercised, or disengaged in deliberations about what is best to do in specific practices. In a similar way to Depew's mode of reasoning, Nussbaum also explains what practical reason is by drawing attention to what it is not:

> Where practical reason is concerned, we can more easily imagine the absence of the relevant function: an adult, having learned to think about the planning of a life, decides that he or she simply doesn't want to do that any longer, and joins some authoritarian society (whether a religious cult or the military) that will from now on do her thinking for her. Now of course such a person still functions in accordance with practical reason in small ways, deciding how to brush her teeth and how much to eat at the table. But most of the major choices of life are taken out of her hands (2000b, 92).

This argument also seems designed to exercise practical reasoning since it places two ideas together and asks the reader to consider their relationship and practical value; i.e. think about the adult in a religious cult choosing not to think then consider how conscious you are of deliberating about the actions and consequences of actions you perform each day. As this view implies, Nussbaum suggests that deliberations about what may be best for each of us *and* for others we care about involve active rational engagement of the capacity she calls practical reasoning.

While Nussbaum argues that this form of deliberation is particularly important to develop in environments that value democratic processes and social interaction, her arguments also suggest that practical reasoning requires people to consider whether they are willing and able to exercise this capability.[2] While she recognises that new theories, knowledge, information, or skills also offer valuable contributions to an individual's education, she also notes that such information does not necessarily engage the

form of reasoning that is exercised by deliberating about what is good for specific practices. In short, while skills, knowledge etc can enhance practical reasoning, they cannot replace such reasoning. This point is probably obvious to many here but it was something that only really became apparent to me when I began facilitating feedback sessions in M.T.B..

As a person developing a 'theory' or 'way of seeing', I was more inclined to assume the position of a disinterested observer watching ideas and actions and then asking questions or documenting details according to the theoretical frame I was attempting to employ. However, being a participant and facilitator in sessions also required me to engage in discussions aiming to evaluate and determine the best ways to accommodate the interests and differences of various people in each group. Being a facilitator using an ethics of care was by far the most difficult role to assume as I had to be mindful of allowing others to explore their views but also had to find ways to encourage others to explore often divergent values of those that had requested feedback. In order to pursue my own interests, I also had to find ways to articulate and sometimes defend my own evaluative distinctions when they were challenged while still trying to establish a win-win situation for everyone rather than a win-lose situation based on most persuasive arguments. During this process, I started to discover how the theoretical frame I believed was useful for studying various activities could be used to develop practices. As this process also required me to *perform* the theory I was defending, I also started realising that my ability to employ practical reasoning was very underdeveloped!

As I had primarily observed participants during the Festival, I had supposed my role in the M.T.B. group would also be to consider whether the components of reasoning identified by Nussbaum and others are evident during deliberations over what is good in specific practices. However, what has surprised me during my involvement with M.T.B. is the degree to which practical reasoning has to develop when one tries to discover the best way to develop one's own interests as well as the interests of others in specific communities and practices trying to develop policies and processes (rather than simply offering an opinion). While theoretical frames sometimes encourage individuals to take a step back and assume a general view of similarities and differences within practices, discussions in M.T.B. sessions have illustrated how generalisations of practices can also ignore the values and the challenges of individuals in specific practices that may only become apparent via discussion. The M.T.B. sessions have therefore led me to realise that deliberating with others about the specific values they may or may not wish to use to support their practices requires the exploration of complex values, hidden aims and histories specific to each practice. While I make no claims to be expert at this reasoning, I want to consider how to engage this form of deliberation with you here today.

## PART 3

### AFTER: Inviting spectators to deliberate in this practice

The first part of this paper outlined a view of M.T.B. that positioned me as a disinterested observer studying an 'object'; a position often adopted when trying to define 'objective' knowledge. The second section assumed a more 'subjective' position that detailed my own interests and experiences in M.T.B.; this position is sometimes recognised as a hermeneutic position that conveys information that may allow others to understand more about a project. In virtue theory, these two positions are identified as forms of reasoning associated with the development of knowledge and understanding; however, they do not necessarily engage practical reasoning. While the development of knowledge often requires observation of how and why others decide to act, virtue theorists like Nussbaum argue that you have to engage practical reasoning if you want to make an informed decision about what is 'good' in a specific practice like this one. Various forms of knowledge and skills can and usually are employed to support such reasoning, but those engaging in practical reasoning also need to consider how various elements are

best utilised in specific circumstances and what conceptions of the good are supported.[3] I acknowledge that the aim of discovering what is good may not always be a recognisable motivation. However, I am hoping that at least a few people will agree to deliberate about what is good in this practice.

Before outlining the arguments we will explore, I first want to thank the panel—Ed Scheer and Helena Grehan in particular—for introducing me to Luc Boltanski's work. I had not heard of this theorist before and was delighted to discover another continental thinker promoting further reflection upon the connections between practical reasoning, theatrical practices, and philosophical analysis. As Boltanski observes, ethics and politics are closely related fields of study. I would argue that ethical systems are usually developed to help or give guidance to people wanting to live a good life (in various circumstances) while political systems are usually developed in order to enable people in a society to live a good life and develop their full potential (in various ways and ratios). However, in his text *Distant Suffering* Boltanski offers a very detailed analysis of the differences between deliberations about different ethical actions and beliefs developed and supported in small collectives and communities, and deliberations in the domain of the public sphere. In the latter domain, he notes that political systems are developed and maintained according to an "ideal of an aperspectival objectivity [like the one I adopted in section one] which favours the publicity of matters of debate" (1999, 32).

Boltanski is arguing that representations of suffering and debates about suffering of others in the public sphere have increasingly positioned onlookers as passive spectators rather than participants in a large community. Rather than accepting such passivity, Boltanski is exploring and advocating a range of responses available to spectators who wish to resist such construction and enact change. As Peter Wagner notes,

> [. . .] such responses include the observation of situated actions, where situations are always in need of interpretation [. . .] the analysis of the registers of justification and evaluation which are mobilized in the situation but transcends it, and the study of the elaboration of devices both material and cognitive, that are meant to stabilize situations and can potentially create widely extended and relatively durable social phenomena (1999, 346).

Ilana Friedrich Silber also notes that Boltanski's project is part of a field that emerged in the 1990s called "pragmatic sociology" and she explains that this field of analysis,

> [. . .] quickly focused its attention on one, very specific category of 'practical reasoning', namely, the range of arguments and principles of evaluation which individuals deploy in the process of trying to define what may be the most proper or legitimate action or standard of action, and whereby they grope for or re-establish social agreement. Intrinsic to such 'regimes of justification' [. . .] is the tendency to articulate principles of a broad, generalizing nature, of the kind apt to carry across and beyond shifting concrete situations and contexts (2003, 429).

These interests are clearly related to my own investigations of practical reasoning and support Nussbaum's advocacy for the development of practical reasoning. As I have only read one text by Boltanski, I make no claim to being expert and suggest you raise any questions about the details of these views with Ed. However, I do know something of Nussbaum's views of activities in the public sphere and can say they appear to be very similar to Boltanski's in many ways. Nevertheless, she has also continued to promote the development of a political objectivity within liberal democracies and makes the following point:

> [t]he account of political objectivity begins from a simple insight. It is that if we are to live

with others politically on terms of mutual respect and seek reasonable terms of coopera tion with them, we must be able to distinguish between simply putting forward our own opinion and recommending principles that are reasonable for all. We must believe that the principles that undergird our political order are the result of a reasoned search for a reasonable basis of a mutually respectful political life, and that, in their status and their content, they express respect for the reason of all citizens (2001, 894-5).

In order to do this she also argues that we need to establish the following five elements that will enable a necessary and sufficient conception of political objectivity:

a public framework of judgment, an account of correctness in judgment, a ranking or ordering of reasons, a distinction between the merely local or personal and the politi- cally objective, and, finally, an account of reasoning toward agreement [. . . ]. These five elements in place, we are able to distinguish mistaken from correct political claims; to distinguish sincere but misguided recommendations from genuinely reasonable recom- mendations, and so forth. Without these elements [. . .] we have trouble distinguishing one person's sincerely held conviction from what may be reasonably recommended as a norm for all citizens. But any liberal political order must be able to make such a distinc- tion, holding that its principles concerning basic rights and liberties are not merely this or that person's doctrine, but are reasonable principles to regulate public life for all, in the light of the recognition of a reasonable plurality of comprehensive doctrines (Nussbaum 2001, 895-6).

While I raise these ideas for your consideration, I am certainly NOT offering any conclusions about such matters in this paper. However, I would now like to hand back the floor to our chair and invite all spectators here in this session to exercise their practical reasoning by deliberating over the following questions:

Do you think it is 'good' for performers or performance scholars to consider the political and ethical aims outlined above?

Is there such a thing as a 'good' aesthetic judgement and how might artists and scholars evaluate and justify such judgements?

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**Notes**

1. These arguments are evident in a number of texts but primarily explored through his ethical treatise, *Nichomachean Ethics*. See online reference below.

2. For example, she recognises that totalitarian regimes may not encourage the development of this capability and that a decision not to deliberate over what is best may be a wise strategy in some cases.

3. I also believe this form of reasoning is engaged in various plays that seem to invite audiences to compare events and conditions on stage with events and conditions offstage (e.g,. Shakespeare, Ibsen, Mayakovsky, Brecht).

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**Appendix: About the M.T.B. network**

**1) Who has been involved in sessions?**
All contributions to M.T.B. sessions have been voluntary and the group has remained open to participants who were not involved in the Magdalena Australia Festival. However, all participants have been informed that the group is organized by artists from the Festival who support similar aims to those outlined in the international Magdalena Project [see aims listed above]. Some of the theatre practitioners, scholars, and companies who have been involved in sessions to date include the founders, Scotia, Dawn and Julie as well as Sue Rider, Donna Cameron, Anna Yen, Leah Mercer, Katrina Devry, Flloyd Kennedy, Kathryn Kelly, Caroline Heim, Stace Callaghan, and some core members of the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble. Additional artists and students have also been invited to support various works in progress, such as rehearsed readings of Donna Cameron's play Voltaire's Seed (subsequently changed to *Rousseau's Seed* after feedback)

**2) Where have sessions been located?**
M.T.B. meetings are usually held at easily accessible central locations in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley as some participants have to travel from far-flung areas in Brisbane as well as the North and South Coasts (for example, the playwright Donna Cameron has ferried over from her home on an island in Moreton Bay). More formal meetings with facilitators or presenters have been convened in offices or spaces provided for free by organizations such as Playlab, the Judith Wright Performing Arts Centre, and the University of Queensland while less formally structured discussion sessions have been convened in centrally located cafes. M.T.B. also has some presence on the net via links to the Magdalena Project and an e-group that Scotia Monkovitch maintains; Monkivitch regularly circulates notices and reminders of upcoming sessions.

**3) When have sessions occurred?**
For two years after the Magdalena Australia Festival, sessions were very regular events held once a month on Monday nights. However, these meetings have been less regularly scheduled over the last year and a half.

**4) How many attend the sessions?**
Numbers at sessions have always been small and attendance has ranged from between 3-15 participants per meeting. While numbers have always fluctuated in accordance with people's availability or interest in topics being explored, the network has also constantly struggled to secure and/or maintain members' commitment to attend sessions. There was also been a distinct lack of participation in sessions offered this year. In late 2007, sessions have been relaunched by Scotia Monkivitch and have had a range of women aged 19-60 attending. The last session in September 2007 had about 15 participants, and plans are being made to secure funding for another local event to showcase and develop women's work early 2008.

**5) Why the fluctuating interest and/or decline in attendance numbers?**
I can only really speculate here. The fluctuating numbers supporting M.T.B. sessions have been an ongoing problem for M.T.B. since its inception. Some meetings have been dedicated to developing strategies to attract further interest or improve attendance over the years since the Festival but the strategies have not produced much difference. Sometimes attendance has increased when theatre-makers with recognized levels of influence and industry experience have agreed to participate or run a session [eg. Sue Rider or Anna Yen]. The slightly higher numbers in attendance at these sessions therefore may suggest that members want to access a network of people that have proved they can enhance work or opportunities to get work or that they *may* be less interested in discussing ideas, interests, or work with people they believe are unlikely or unable to enhance or develop their work.. However, these views are, as I say, purely speculative and founded only on my interpretation of slight increases in numbers and relevant responses in the group as I have not surveyed less regular members or checked their reasons for attending meetings

One point I can note with certainty is that the network has been maintained primarily through the joint efforts of Scotia, Julie and Dawn. Since Julie and Dawn moved away from Brisbane last year, Scotia has been trying to maintain the group without any extra support or time. As a result, she has, very understandably, decided to stop convening regular sessions at this point but still maintains contact with people from the network through email when possible, resulting in the recommencement of sessions as of August 2007.

**Postscript**

The Magdalena Talks Back Network was reformulated as the Magdalena Brisbane network in 2008. This network organized a Magdalena Gathering over Easter 08 for local artists and scholars and with internet links between artists in Magdalena networks in Perth, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand. For further information, click on link to documentation of this event at: http://magdalenagathering.blogspot.com/

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