



# Interview with Phil Soltanoff & Steven Wendt

Interview by **Peter Avondo** for the **théâtre Garonne**  
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# How would you describe your collaborative work ?

**Phil Soltanoff** - Our work is about play-serious play. We apply all of our imagination and will to the act of investigating something without knowing ahead of time what will be the result. We share a reckless disregard for the possibility of failure. We find things as we go.

**Steven Wendt** - Phil and I have a sort of purposeful aimlessness when we work. We get together and explore things that we're curious about.

## Could you present *THIS & THAT* in a few words ?

**S. W.** – It is about the birth of the universe with some stories of the people within that universe. Each audience member will have a personal experience and connection to the show. This show started by us digging through a storage unit to see if any of the old equipment from Phil's past shows would turn on. If it did, we would play with it. With the old cameras, we discovered that the era they were designed for has very much passed, but when we use them in a "wrong" way, they are priceless artifacts.

**P. S.** – *THIS & THAT* is told only through light, shadow and sound. There are no words. *THAT* explores our video equipment to create abstract puppetry, painting with light and music, thanks to video feedback. *THIS* investigates the intimacy of hand shadows: a puppeteer and his figures explore loss, love, alienation.

## The writing of the show is based on two elements : the staging and the stories it allows to be told. Is that how your art is created ?

**P. S.** – Let me answer this question through a metaphor. Let's say you have a child's coloring book in front of you. You take your crayons or markers and color in the black lines to make a finished image. Developing a piece of theater can be a lot like that. You already have a clear narrative in mind and now seek engaging and effective methods to communicate it. We work differently. We start with the colors, the crayons if you will, and don't have any idea what we're going to do with them. We just find interesting colors. Late in the process, very late, we discover the "black lines" that go around these interesting "colors." It takes faith and courage to work this way. As well as a great deal of patience. But it's exciting.

**S. W.** – Phil has a real gift for arrangement and arc. His eye was essential in

choreographing the visual events that lead to telling a clear story. With the hand shadows, we had to work within limitations because I have only two hands and 10 fingers. But we really pushed that boundary. Most of the hand shadows I created at home, at night and I would come in excited to show Phil the next day what I discovered I could do. He'd also challenge me to find more. We would entertain each other.

You combine ancestral practices with technical innovation. What does this balance allow you? What are you looking for with it ?

**P. S. –** I remember back in the early days of this project we were looking at photographs of cave art. Why were these prehistoric cave dwellers making art ? And here we were in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century painting on walls in a different yet somehow similar way. Maybe our impulse to create was propelled by the same thing ? There's a wonderful simplicity to the art of the cave dweller—a wall, some charcoal, an artist. And we're doing the same thing with the technology that's available to us. We deliberately use simple, lo-fi technologies. Why ? It puts the human being back in charge of the art. We're not allowing technology to run the show—human beings are. That makes for a symmetry with the cave dweller. We use technology, it doesn't use us.

**S. W. –** By investigating the potential in these outdated cameras, we were cracking open a nut in order to find the morsel of humanity inside. As we grappled with them, they ultimately became a complex paintbrush, projecting a cycle of their own output as their input. That's what video feedback is. It's an infinite loop a bit like what you see when two mirrors are facing each other. Obviously they were designed to film the world around them but when they film their own inner world it's a glimpse into something profound. In terms of the hand shadow puppetry, I love being able to use my hands to grab my characters out of thin air. I love that the audience and myself find an agreement that a shadow looks like a figure. It's an act of peace, fun, and serious play.

You value truthfulness and transparency. Is revealing the inner workings of the show as important as the show itself ?

**P. S. –** Absolutely. I want the audience to have an honest relationship to what happens in the space. We're not trying to fool anyone. We're presenting what I call "Facts"—the phenomena of the space that we're all sharing. I assemble those facts and let the audience's curiosity about them guide their imagination. The more the audience can see us working and creating images, the better.

**S. W.** – I like it when the audience understands how video feedback works and why. But we agree that it's not necessary for everyone to understand. What's important is that it's an incredibly difficult task and they see that concentration. Hand shadows are more obvious : I'm standing there, you see the light and my hands and you see the shadows. In that way, the hand shadows are much more transparent than the video feedback.

For you, "useless art is very useful." Is it in this uselessness that poetry finds its way ?

**S. W.** – Yes, we didn't start this show with any use... but it might put your imagination to use !

**P. S.** – The experience of the performance is its meaning. The performance isn't trying to get you to buy something or be a better person. In that way, it's perfectly useless. It's only useful the same way a poem is. Or a beautiful sunset. Or a great bottle of wine. Or the sound of a French horn...

Your art is already the result of an encounter. What interests you about collaborating with other artists ?

**P. S.** – One of my favorite things to do is to collaborate with another artist. But not just any artist. I want to work with people who can do things I can't do. One of the great collaborations in my life was with Aurelien Bory. He came to New York City with a model for a performance. The idea was thrilling. Impossible and thrilling. It was a model for a big wall that could be moved from angles up to 80 degrees. I had no idea what to do with this idea. But previous to our meeting I had been thinking about staging a performance in an impossible space. And here was that impossible space ! I never could have imagined that solution on my own. That is the sort of collaboration I love.

**S. W.** – Coming to France will be quite the encounter. I have been dreaming of this day for years. Meeting other artists that love *THIS & THAT* as much as I do is a real joy. One example is Stephane Dardé, who was with us at The Barbican and will work with us again in Toulouse. He gets it and there's an effortlessness working with him.

During your visit to the théâtre Garonne for the SCENO festival, you will also be in residence for a future project with Aurélien Bory and Stéphane Dardé. What can you tell about that ?

**P. S.** – I've been thinking about a simple idea which is a starting point for this new project. I want to take some machines-everyday and business machines. I want machines that make sound when you use them, but are not specifically designed to make any sound. I want to put contact microphones on these machines, and see what it produces theatrically speaking. That's all I know for now. But I have three very interesting collaborators who are sure to develop very interesting ideas. I can't wait !

**S. W.** – We're going to workshop some new ideas and continue "playing seriously."