

Misnomer

misnomer dance theater

"A True Original."

Jennifer Dunning, The New York Times



Contact

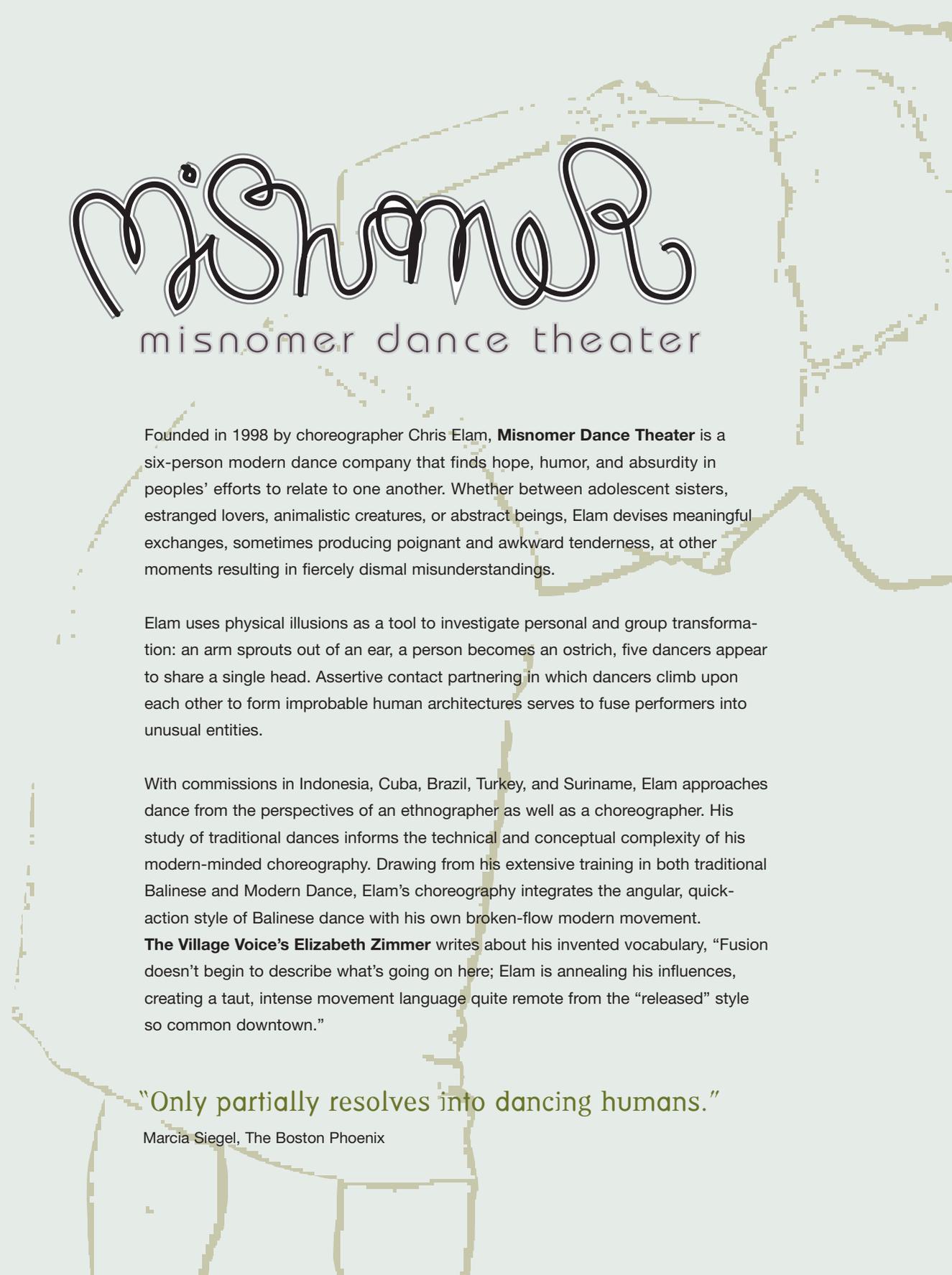
Chris Elam / Misnomer Dance Theater
588 10th Street, Suite 4
Brooklyn, NY 11215
917-602-0478
chris@misnomer.org

Video clips & Info.

www.misnomer.org



pentacle contact / Jared Kaplan
212.278.8111 x 314 • jaredk@pentacle.org
246 West 38 Street, 8th fl, NYC 10018
www.pentacle.org



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Founded in 1998 by choreographer Chris Elam, **Misnomer Dance Theater** is a six-person modern dance company that finds hope, humor, and absurdity in peoples' efforts to relate to one another. Whether between adolescent sisters, estranged lovers, animalistic creatures, or abstract beings, Elam devises meaningful exchanges, sometimes producing poignant and awkward tenderness, at other moments resulting in fiercely dismal misunderstandings.

Elam uses physical illusions as a tool to investigate personal and group transformation: an arm sprouts out of an ear, a person becomes an ostrich, five dancers appear to share a single head. Assertive contact partnering in which dancers climb upon each other to form improbable human architectures serves to fuse performers into unusual entities.

With commissions in Indonesia, Cuba, Brazil, Turkey, and Suriname, Elam approaches dance from the perspectives of an ethnographer as well as a choreographer. His study of traditional dances informs the technical and conceptual complexity of his modern-minded choreography. Drawing from his extensive training in both traditional Balinese and Modern Dance, Elam's choreography integrates the angular, quick-action style of Balinese dance with his own broken-flow modern movement.

The Village Voice's Elizabeth Zimmer writes about his invented vocabulary, "Fusion doesn't begin to describe what's going on here; Elam is annealing his influences, creating a taut, intense movement language quite remote from the "released" style so common downtown."

"Only partially resolves into dancing humans."

Marcia Siegel, *The Boston Phoenix*

“Christopher Elam’s
Misnomer Dance Theater
hit town with a force I haven’t
seen since the early days of
Mark Morris.” Elizabeth Zimmer, The Village Voice

“The dancers’ bodies served as a play environment.”

Jody Sperling, Dance Magazine

“Elam’s skill and clarity of vision delight the soul.”

Deborah Jowitt, The Village Voice



Misnomer Dance Theater

Artistic Director

Chris Elam graduated *magna cum laude* from Brown University in 1998 and in 2001 received his MFA in Dance from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He is an adjunct professor at Brown University.

Company History

Founded in 1998, the company has performed throughout the **United States** (CA, CT, FL, MA, ME, NC, NY, RI, VA), **Cuba, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey**, and has been produced at numerous New York City venues, including **Performance Space 122, Symphony Space, Danspace Project, Joyce SoHo, Chashama Theater, and University Settlement**. In addition to performances, *Misnomer* regularly conducts international projects that encompass training in traditional dance forms and creating new choreography.

Misnomer produces a guest artist series in which choreographers are invited to present a work alongside Elam's repertory during company seasons. Past artists have included **Ann Carlson, Sean Curran, Yoshiko Chuma, Heidi Latsky, and Thoth**, the subject of the 2002 Academy Award-winning documentary "Thoth." With the support of Meet The Composer, the Bates Dance Festival, and New York University, *Misnomer* has also collaborated with renowned composers **Andy Teirstein, Scott Killian, Mike Vargas, Jesse Manno, Malina Rausenfels, and The Talujon Percussion Ensemble**.

Misnomer received critical acclaim in the form of a three-page feature article in *Dance Magazine*, interviews by *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, and reviews in *The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Village Voice, Back Stage, On & Off Magazine, The Dance Insider, The Boston Phoenix, The Boston Herald*, and numerous other publications.

"Terrifically weird."

Lisa Jo Sagolla, Back Stage



Advisory Board

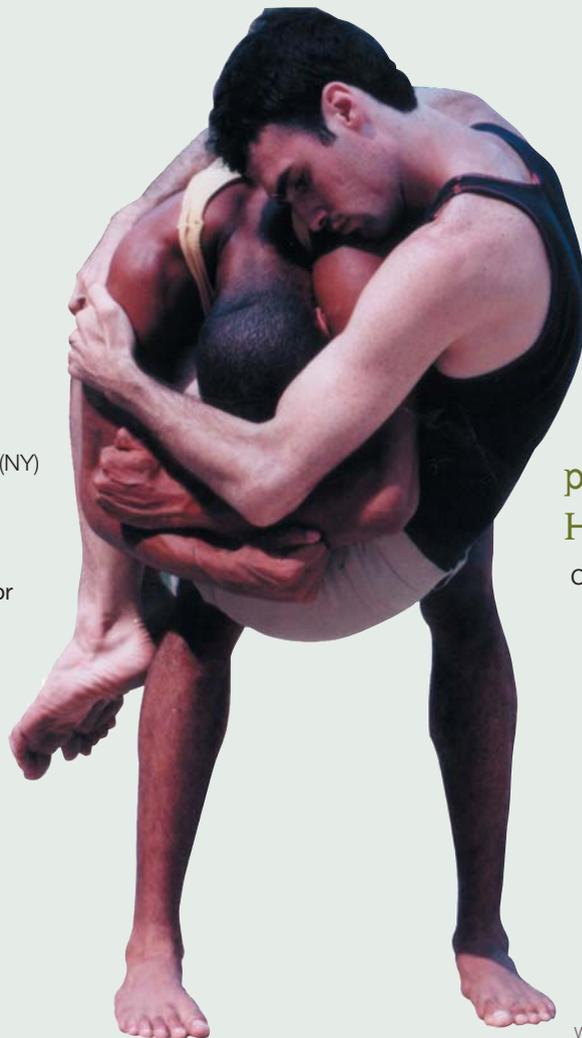
George Bardwil, CEO of Bardwil Industrials; **Hugh Blumenfeld**, Development Specialist; **Sean Curran**, AD of Sean Curran Dance; **Peter Clare**, Angel Investor; **David Dorfman**, AD of David Dorfman Dance; **Joy Kellman**, Choreographer and faculty at NYU, Tisch; **Martha Myers**, Dean Emeritus of the American Dance Festival; **Amanda Smith**, *Dance Magazine* and New York State Council of the Arts.

Lectures, Workshops, & Residencies

Bates Dance Festival (ME)
Brown University (RI)
Baruch University (NY)
BAK Palm Spring Middle School for the Arts (FL)
Broward Community College (FL)
Cambridge School of Weston (MA)
Central Elementary School (NY)
Concord Summer Stages (MA)
The Concord Academy (MA)
The Dalton School (NY)
DanzAbierta (Cuba)
Encontro Internacional De Danca Do Para (Brazil)
Fieldston High School (NY)
Harvard University (MA)
Hobart and William Smith College (NY)
Hofstra University (NY)
Mamaroneck High School (NY)
Mimar Sinan State Conservatory for the Arts (Turkey)
Portland Center for New Dance Development (ME)
Roger Williams Middle School (RI)
Roger Williams University (RI)
STSI (Indonesia)

Commissions & Awards

Brooklyn Arts Exchange (NY)
Dragon's Egg (CT)
Jerome Foundation and NYSCA through Performance Space 122 Commissioning Initiatives (NY)
Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (NY)
Meet The Composer Fund (NY)
Martha Myers Award, American Dance Festival (NC)
New York International Fringe Festival Award for Overall Excellence (NY)
New York University (NY)
O.R.T. (NY)
Union Street Dance (NY)
Weston Award for Choreography (RI)
92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Program (NY)



“Elam, who is more impossibly elongated than an El Greco Christ, frequently looks like a praying mantis or a goofy Hanuman.”

Chris Dohse, *The Dance Insider*

Touring Repertory

Misnomer creates short dances of ten to thirty minutes that can be performed individually, and in half or full-length evenings. The works are thematically connected, exploring facets of intimacy and transformation through a modern dance vocabulary with an international perspective. Misnomer draws on a fourteen-piece repertory to work with presenters, tailoring a program unique to their needs.

Below are selected works from our active repertory.

Looking Long in the Stampede

Time: 13 min **Dancers:** 3

Music: Konger-ol Ondar, Paul Pena, B.J. Thomas

Merging Balinese technique with inventive modern partnering, and juxtaposing Tuvian throat singing with the song “Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head”, this piece tries to make sense of the heartless ways in which people looking for love can treat each other. Performed in gray sweater vests with green painted fingers.

Inabable

Time: 11 min **Dancers:** 5

Music: Tom Waits

Five creatures in wild pinkish-purple and lime-green leotard “skins” perform detailed rituals with a quick-action movement style influenced by Balinese technique. The New York Times says this piece “looks like a gathering of five newly gleeful Bosch hellions.” Funny and highly energetic.

Cast-Iron Crutches

Time: 7 min **Dancers:** 1

Music: John Williams

Working to find freedom from the bonds of his body, Elam slowly transforms from a hunched-over sculptural form into an erect human. In this signature solo, clothed only in a dance belt, every step is exactly chiseled, and a single spot light from downstage casts choreographed Modigliani-like shadows on the back wall.

Dreams of your Acceptance

Time: 12 min **Dancers:** 2

Music: Jean Ashworth Bartle, Kevin Jones

One of Elam’s most abstract pieces, this dance explores the hard and playful physical work of a lifelong friendship. Two women go on an adventurous journey, at times seeming like 8 year old sisters, other times more like an 80 year old couple.

Misnomer

Time: 8 min **Dancers:** 4

Music: David Darling

A minimalist sculptural piece in the Pilobolous/Momix tradition. Dressed all in black, two unison duets mix physical illusions with wry humor.

Match Making

Time: 9 min **Dancers:** 2

Music: Andy Teirstein

A tender and humorous duet in which a woman “builds” her long-limbed lover, who begins the dance as an immobile pile of flesh on the floor. As he develops anatomy, and autonomy, they do fall in love, but nothing turns out as anticipated.

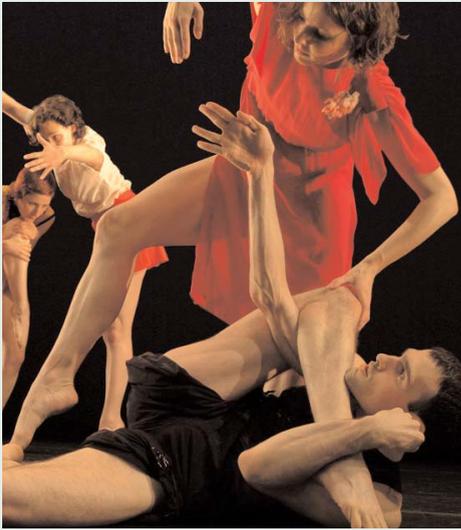
Breakfast with You

Time: 11 min **Dancers:** 2

Music: Leonard Cohen, Judy Collins

A duet between a mid-aged couple stuck in a cycle of attempts to re-activate an old love. Traversing each others’ bodies with inventive contact partnering and climbing, they are both sexual and endearing in their ongoing efforts towards reconciliation.





“Mr. Elam has a way of managing, somehow, to be simultaneously inarticulate and eloquent.”

Jennifer Dunning, The New York Times

Workshops

Elam is guided by an artistic philosophy that every individual is a powerful creative source. Through coaching performance skills, improvisation, choreography, contact climbing and partnering, Elam imparts skills and perspectives that encourage students to be inventive in the creation and execution of their movement and choreography.

Improbable Partnering

Elam combines the teaching of improvisation, choreographic and performance skills, and the physics of contact to develop both heightened body awareness and to encourage new types of creativity in movement invention. Based on the process he uses with his own company to develop improbable situations, Elam teaches skills and ways of thinking and then focuses on how students can apply these ideas directly to their own work. Students create original climbing combinations and ask each other “What sort of relationships and ideas does this combination seem to suggest?” The workshop is physically intense, and Elam poses personal challenges to each student. Frequently, Elam’s dancers participate in these workshops, including a studio or stage performance that becomes content for discussion with the students.

Trust & Thought Through Movement

Focused on group development, this workshop is for dancers and non-dancers interested in building camaraderie through the use of contact and trust activities. It has been taught to a range of groups (professional dancers, peer counsels, elementary and middle school students, and leadership training organizations). In the workshop participants familiarize themselves with certain physical movement tools and use these to create improvisations based on themes that are important to the particular group.

Balinese-Modern Technique

Elam’s technique incorporates his extensive training in Balinese and Modern dance. A warm-up involving modern dance, yoga, and imagery leads to phrase-work in which dancers send sculptures through space, transform taut, angular movements into liquid actions, and execute complex balances.

Elam also teaches Repertory and creates New Works. All workshops are available as one-time masterclasses or extended residencies. Inquire for references.



Reviews



Choreography by a Genuine Original

By Elizabeth Zimmer, July 2002

Christopher Elam's *Misnomer Dance Theater* hit town last month with a force I haven't seen since the early days of Mark Morris. Elam, who resembles an undernourished yogi, has been studying in Bali and Turkey, and his dances drip with figures referencing Asian demons, even as they're accompanied by the likes of Leonard Cohen, Judy Collins, Tom Waits, and Andy Teirstein. Fusion doesn't begin to describe what's going on here; Elam is annealing his influences, creating a taut, intense movement language quite remote from the "released" style so common downtown. In an evening of eight short works, a dozen dancers gave themselves permission to look weird and work hard; the results were stunning and grotesque.

Tied Up in Knots

By Deborah Jowitz, January 2004

Chris Elam has fashioned a distinctive, engagingly bizarre choreographic style out of a propensity for tying bodies in knots and intensive studies of Balinese dance. In his solo *Tin Man*, he treats his body as if it were one of those puzzles involving interlocking rings. If this part slips through here, can this then move there? He seems to stand forever on one leg figuring out strategies. In duets, any erotic implications of body parts in close conjunction are subordinate to images of clumsy tenderness, as two people use each other as seats, ladders, cradles, and mazes. Elam has casually acknowledged an aesthetic kinship with Pilobolus and Momix, but his work is odder and more intimately human.

The Balinese influence crops up in, say, a lunge or spraddle-legged walk, topped by lifted shoulders and outspread arms. It's particularly evident in *Ten Feet*, in which five dancers in shaggy brown costumes and headpieces with manes prance into curious relationships; someone's foot may get temporarily stuck on someone else's back.

In *Hush Fire*, set to original music by Andy

Teirstein, Laura Pocius and Jason Somma's living knots (whether perverse or inevitable) bespeak affectionate curiosity. In *Dreams of Your Acceptance*, Abbey Dehnert and Amber Sloan are more playful (at one point Sloan grabs her breasts and makes them "speak" to Sloan). In the duet that opens *Our Town*, Pocius and Dehnert vie for dominance. But this fascinating dance also involves rambunctious Jennifer Harmer, who inserts herself into their entanglements, at one point trying to keep her head grafted onto Pocius. Eliza Littrell, a puzzled loner, further complicates intersections that suggest not just ingenious designs but road maps of a community. In *Maggie and George*, to Teirstein's music for Jew's harp and a sweet old song ("When You and I Were Young, Maggie"), Elam and Dehnert's touching adventures with two window frames call to mind the jungle in all of us, but also a long, happy life together.

It's a question how far Elam can take his stylistic choices or how he'll develop, but right now his skill and clarity of vision delight the soul.



By Jody Sperling, January 2003

Chris Elam's *Misnomer Dance Theater* fuses an odd mix of sensibilities. His partnering style had some of the sculptural plastique of the MOMIX-Pilobolous school – at times the dancers' body parts get confused, so that you have to blink and ask yourself "Whose head is whose?" or "Are those waving appendages legs, or are they arms?" But Elam's work isn't limited to this genre of gimmickry. Having studied in Indonesia and Turkey, his movement brings out smaller-scale articulations for the fingers, wrists, and shoulders. From Bali, he seems to have picked up a multi-directional quality. And perhaps from yoga, or more likely from an innate lack of ligaments, he has acquired the flexibility of a contortionist. All this makes Elam a unique mover and contributes to the originality of his choreography.



Orneriness Deserves Its Laureate As Well

By Jennifer Dunning, June 2002

It took some time to get used to the world Chris Elam and his *Misnomer Dance Theater* created on Friday night at Joyce SoHo. Mr. Elam, a modern dancer trained in Indonesian traditional dance, sets inarticulate bodies adrift in unknowable situations and places. Eventually the un-self-conscious inarticulation of Mr. Elam's choreographic voice began to seem logical, even funny and poignant. His program notes speak of the "rich histories" bodies carry within them. Those histories began to push through after the evening's first two mystifying pieces, danced by Mr. Elam, Jocelyn Frost Tobias, Sarah Galender and the spunky, vivid Jennifer Harmer.

Playful affection flows from the two bumping creatures—half heifers, half preadolescent girls—of *Dreams of Your Acceptance* (Abbey Dehnert and Amber Sloan). Two more clearly human types skirt the edges of desire and romance in the lingering *I'm Staying a Little Longer...* (Mr. Elam and Andros Zins-Browne) and the charmingly pragmatic *Match Making*, in which Mr. Elam is joined by Maria Mavridou, another irresistibly vivid performer.

Inabable (Julian Barnett, Adam Dulin, Ms. Harmer, Ms. Reed and Ms. Tobias), set to perfect lumbering music by Tom Waits, looks like a gathering of five newly gleeful Bosch hellions.

Relatively anonymous bodies grasp and spread through sequences of unlikely shapes in *Misnomer* (Ms. Dehnert, Nick Goldsmith, Ms. Reed and Ms. Sloan), a signature work in which no move can be even remotely anticipated.

The evening's other signature piece was *Cast-Iron Crutches*, a solo through which Mr. Elam moves slowly, contorted into a cramped globe of flesh and bones atop two legs.

Mr. Elam has a way of managing, somehow, to be simultaneously inarticulate and eloquent.