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THE THEATRE

Women at Work

THE art of the slow burn hasn't been the same since Jack Benny hung up his violin, but if it ever makes a comeback Lisa Kron will be one of the reasons. Not for her the caffeine jolt that gives other downtown comedians—Reno, most prominently—their kick. Kron has the patience of Penelope: she'll work a gag until the laughter has a chance to build and ebb. In "The Secretaries," the ghoulish, revenge-on-men office romp that she and her colleagues, the Five Lesbian Brothers, have concocted for New York Theatre Workshop, the humor comes in waves, especially late in the play, when Kron gives a textbook demonstration of the slow burn. The setup is simple: she and her co-workers are doing some shakes-only slimming, and Kron's character, Peaches Martin, sneaks a sticky bun. Just as she takes a bite, the telephone rings. Her response is brilliant: the face remains static while the inner woman screams.

In this office—it's at an Oregon lumber mill, and it's presided over by a beautiful, lupine manager (Peg Healey), who imposes a Stepford-like discipline on her employees—the inner woman has plenty of opportunity to scream. The women's chief pastime is to ice male co-workers. The plot, however, does more than rehash "Nine to Five." Female bodily obsession is the darker theme; at one point the manager demands from her minions samples of their menstrual blood. That this rises above mere outrageousness testifies to the play's achievement: "The Secretaries" is a sustained, amusing look at the fine line between aggression and assertiveness.



The Five Lesbian Brothers in "The Secretaries."