



## The Thugs

Soho Rep. By Adam Bock. Dir. Anne Kauffman. With ensemble cast.



SCISSORS SISTER Saidah Arrika Ekulona, right, cuts Shultz down to size.

Photograph: Monique Carboni

Drabness has rarely been so thoroughly exquisite as in Anne Kauffman's production of *The Thugs* at Soho Rep. Adam Bock's deceptively slight 55-minute play—a distinctive amalgam of workplace comedy and elliptical suspense drama—is set on the ninth floor of an office building, where seven temps are dutifully marking reams of legal documents with colored highlighters and sticky notes. Every physical detail onstage is perfectly rendered: David Korins's hilariously realistic set, Michelle R. Phillips's astute costumes, the varying aggression of Ben Stanton's lighting. And Kauffman's cast is remarkably good at navigating the subtle currents of office politics—and occasional eddies of resentment, suspicion and paranoia—that Bock sets out for them.

The delicious Mary Shultz has a marvelously unusual presence—equal measures Amy Sedaris and Betty White—as Mercedes, the office oddball, and Carmen M. Herlihy is amusingly officious as Diane, the group’s supervisor. The inventive Brad Heberlee is utterly persuasive as the gay, antsy Bart; newcomer Keira Keeley has a movingly inchoate quality as his deskmate, Daphne. Watching this superb ensemble in action, it almost seems beside the point to wonder what, if anything, is eventually going to happen in *The Thugs*. Yet as rain beats down on the windows and the temps trade rumors of suspicious deaths in the building, a sense of danger seeps into the atmosphere. The craft of Bock’s thoughtful, Pinteresque play involves questioning where we choose to focus our fear, and its apparent diffuseness is a ruse to that end. Bock starts you off giggling, but leaves you with a chill.

*Adam Feldman*