

'The Common Air' Examines A Lengthy Flight Delay

JENNIFER FARRAR, *Associated Press Writer*

NEW YORK (AP) — A major shutdown at Kennedy Airport caused by a mysterious security breach results in an extremely long travel delay. This common, modern-day inconvenience is thoughtfully enacted with a twist by Alex Lyras, who deftly portrays six characters stuck in traffic or airport limbo in the dark comedy "The Common Air."

Written by Lyras and Robert McCaskill and directed by McCaskill, this unsettling, compelling play opened Wednesday at off-Broadway's 45 Bleecker Street Theatre. Although grounded in our contemporary anxieties, "The Common Air" takes wing for nearly 90 intense minutes.



Six different men try to cope with their travel delays by striking up conversations with strangers to pass the time. Each character in turn tells a personal story to the next one.

A genial, immigrant Iraqi cab driver careens through New York City traffic on his way to the airport while discussing his idea for a reality show with an invisible passenger. "In this country, you can create your own reality" is his oft-repeated mantra, and this theme of self-reinvention recurs throughout the play.

The Iraqi driver is so vividly drawn by Lyras that when the final scene features another

character, an American contractor who recently returned from Baghdad, getting into the taxi and launching into his own story, we can almost picture the original driver onstage with him.

The vignettes are initially played for laughs, with a shameful betrayal emerging at one point, although the perpetrator wears his shame rather lightly.

Lyras convincingly embodies each distinct personality, including a gay art dealer, a drunk, an unethical lawyer who fancies himself a ladies' man, a hotheaded Texas professor embroiled in a nasty divorce and a young, urban disc jockey who steals other people's work.

As the delay extends, and more and more flights are canceled, intensity builds and things become increasingly discordant. Dark undertones are signified by ironic projections of useless reassurances from newscasters and "the authorities."

Ken Rich's lively sound design, Casey Smith's compact set and lighting design by Perchik Kreiman-Miller contribute to the claustrophobic feeling of being frozen in time that can overcome travelers stuck at an airport.

Finally, a shocking political message emerges from a personal tragedy as the audience is suddenly transported from the relative security of the airport to the middle of a war zone in embattled Iraq. The jarring ending feels somehow fitting, after the subtly nightmarish environment created by Lyras and McCaskill and their production team.