

THE COMMON AIR

Reviewed by Steven Stanley

One superb actor. Six fascinating characters. Ninety minutes of thought-provoking drama. This is *The Common Air*, sure to be remembered at year's end as one of the finest solo performances of 2008.

Alex Lyras embodies a) an Iraqi cab, a gay art gallery owner, a manic attorney, a hip-hop DJ, a Texas philosophy professor and an Iraqi American just back from a life-altering stay in Karbala, where he spent the first seven years of his life.

Lyras' and director Robert McCaskill's script is a *La Ronde* for one, with the cab driver first conversing with the gallery owner, who then talks to the attorney, etc., coming full circle as the Iraqi American ends up telling his story to the cab driver who began "la ronde."

These stories take place amidst the backdrop of a rumored terrorist conspiracy, the nature of which changes as the play moves from character to character. Is it a hijacker? Bomb in a checkered bag? "Some kind of whammy embedded to the bottom of a seat?"

Since we first meet Lyras as a bearded, swarthy, loquacious cabdriver, it comes as a shock when, a brief costume change later, he reappears as a well-dressed, sophisticated gay man, so convincing at both that it seems almost impossible that it is the same actor, an impression which only grows when Lyras sheds all trace of gayness transforming himself into a macho lawyer. Especially noteworthy about Lyras' work is that not only his costumes, voice, and body language change as he moves from one character to another, even his face seems to morph ever so subtly. Take a photo of each character and you'd almost swear they were six different actors.



The words "acting tour de force" are bandied a bit too often, but there *is* no better term to describe Lyras in *The Common Air*. You could meet any of the characters he creates, in an office or on the street, and not doubt for an instant that you are talking with the real deal. Voice, face, body-- every element of his characterizations is authentic. Acting teachers would do well to bring their students.

Since the script is a collaboration between Lyras and McCaskill (two years in the making), this is even more than usual a collaboration between actor and director, and one would be hard pressed to say where the work of one ends and the other's work begins.

In addition, *The Common Air* features one of the most detailed and evocative sound designs in recent memory, by Ken Rich, who also wrote the score. The techno-jazzy, Bollywood influenced opening track, the understated pads of traffic as the cabbie cruise the Van Wyck Expressway, announcements on the airport's PA and pernicious text message tones of the lawyer's cell, and most memorable of all, the gradual layering of track upon track as the DJ recalls creating the music whose originality is now being called into question.

The Common Air has been extended. Make plans and be mesmerized ASAP.