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THEATER REVIEW

**Critics Pick*

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The Common Air

*Alex Lyras in a one-person play that sets six monologues
amid a security breach at JFK airport.*

By F. Kathleen Foley

Special to The Times

One-person plays are often buoyed as much by personality as by text so specifically geared to a single performer that they would be virtually unplayable by any other actor.

Then there's "The Common Air," now in an extended run at the Asylum after closing at the nearby Lillian Theatre. A series of six monologues set in and around JFK Airport during a terrorist incident, the play, by Alex Lyras and Robert McCaskill, is so plangent and poetic that it could well stand on its own.



That's not to say that McCaskill's staging of Lyras' solo turn, underscored by Ken Rich's haunting original music, isn't an ideal fusion of text and performance. Lyras shows virtuosic breadth in roles as varied as a homosexual art dealer with a grim secret and a white rapper whose ludicrously hip-hop mannerisms just may lead him to stardom.

The narrative form is familiar but serviceable, a circuitous linking of characters through happenstance conversation.

Dana Bauer's simple set suggests the locales of JFK and its environs, but its deliberately monochromatic look turns blazing in an instant in Kimberly Negrete's integral lighting design. Rich's sound, a blend of muted chatter and P.A. announcements, perfectly captures the ambience of an urban airport.

The action opens with Lyras as an Iraqi cabbie, full of high spirits at the grand American experiment. Proclaiming "In this country . . . you create your own reality," he dances through gridlocked streets like a dervish, undismayed by rumors of mayhem. Bookmarked on the other end of the play is his antithesis, a bitter American-raised Iraqi whose sudden, shattering re-immersion in Islam triggers regrettable radicalism.

The solipsistic theme of self-created reality is echoed in every monologue, each time with a different shade of meaning. It's weighty stuff that is never overstated by Lyras, a muscular and compact steel spring of a performer who coils himself around his characters with tensile energy and unflinching skill in this well-crafted, must-see show.