

REVIEW: The Common Air

By [Robert Weinstein](#) · November 13, 2009



There are several themes at play in *The Common Air*, and the majority of them are presented in the first five minutes by the Iraqi cab driver—billed as "The Immigrant"—who opens the show. *Waste* is one of them: "It is obscene wasta-ful-ness. An uttarh disregard of abundancy, and it is my favorite tink about America." So is *Choice*: "We have in this country, the most choices. So many, we trow some to the garbazz! But no regrets! Forgive yourself sir. It is easy." The biggest and most recurring theme though comes from the best-selling book-turned-movie (or movie-turned-best-selling book), *The Secret*: "Our thoughts have Bowers! Keeb the good. The bad trow to the garbazz," The Immigrant says, laughing. "I know The Secret! 'You create your own reality'."

Writers Alex Lyras and Robert McCaskill get great mileage out of this idea, illustrating the ways their characters negotiate the areas between the perceptions and realities of their lives.

The action takes place in or around Kennedy airport over the course of 18 hours during a delay caused by a terrorist threat. While stranded in the airport, six strangers speak to one another, sharing stories about where they're going and where they've been while expanding upon how they've arrived at their own unique points of view.

It is a series of monologues. One actor plays six characters and the show moves forward by utilizing a pretty nifty conceit: each characters speaks to an unseen person and when the actor changes—in the dark, at the back of the stage—he becomes the person the previous character was talking to at a later time. Most of the play's fun comes from watching the actor, Alex Lyras, morph from one character to the next. By varying clothes, accents, mannerisms, and rhythms, he creates six distinct, believable characters. It is a fascinating performance.

The Immigrant, for example—who opines on the amount of chicken Americans throw away every day—is driving The Dealer, who we meet six hours later at the gate of his delayed flight. An erudite art gallery owner possessed of an attitude I'll generously describe as bitchy, The Dealer impatiently waits for the flight that will reunite him with his estranged lover of seven years. He bought the ticket and looks forward to seeing this man, but two martinis and a six-hour delay reveal a fissure in his decision: Does he really want to leave his life behind? His elegant storytelling and rationalizations mask a war between the part of his soul that knows he should be good and the drive that affords him a very enviable lifestyle. His behavior is both funny and abominable and his ultimate decision is a clever example of empathetic narcissism.

My favorite character in the show is The Signifier, a college philosophy professor with a Southern accent who is on his way home from teaching a course in Post-Structuralism at Ecole Normale Superior in Paris. The Spinner is charming. His relaxed approach to conversation is engaging. He delivers what amounts to a lecture on Post-Structuralism that is funny and intelligent: "...words are not the things they stand for. They're signifiers. Placeholders...And it goes beyond words...This whole airport's a simulation: the checkpoints, the X-rays, the National Guard...they don't really stop anybody. They're...a gracious response to our fear of attack. Not unlike my marriage."

Such lucidity makes it seem as though he has controlled the chaos but events prove the opposite. He admonishes the unseen Tyler for paying more attention to his PlayStation Portable than the life going on around him and descends into yelling matches with an ex-wife arguing custody rights via cell phone. By exposing The Spinner's own placeholders (wit, charm, intelligence) to the realities of his life (failed relationship, distracted son), Lyras and McCaskill have created a wonderfully compelling character.

My only misgivings come from the lack of context in the setup of the story. The situations are too vague to justify the depth of the characters' confessions. This is probably a matter of taste though, as the packed audience gave Lyras a standing ovation.