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Lyras breathes life into “The Common Air”

By Barbara Banerjee

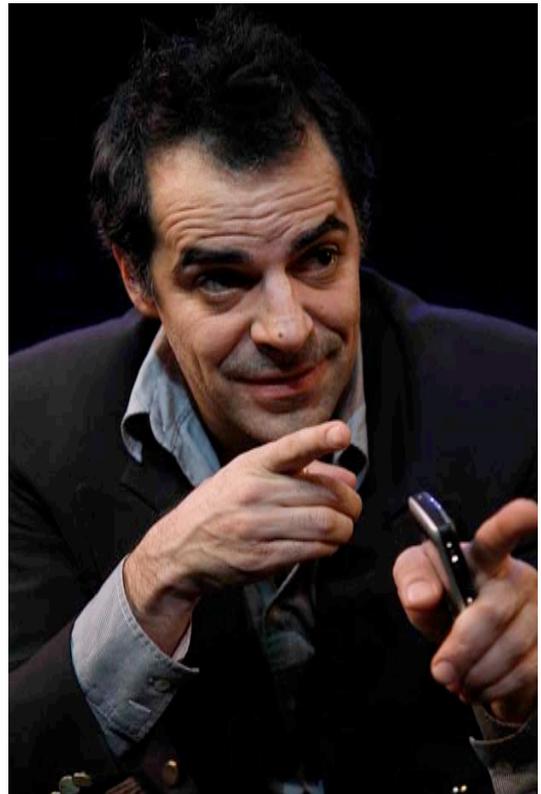
Recent airport security breaches in the news make “The Common Air,” a one-man play written by Alex Lyras and Robert McCaskill, and starring Lyras, as chilling as it is timely. “The Common Air” is about six characters whose lives are connected through chance encounters at JFK airport during some kind of terrorist activity. The friendly skies are long gone. Post 9/11 there’s only the chaos of mass delays and cancellations at the airport in a security lockdown. Bound by circumstance and caught in the netherworld “between destinations,” the characters in “The Common Air” bare their souls to their fellow travelers.

“The Common Air,” in an extended run through February at the Bleecker Street Theatre, on the Lower East Side, played for five months in 2007 in Los Angeles. It was nominated for L.A.’s Ovation Award for excellence in theater for playwriting and sound design in 2008. Ken Rich’s evocative original music for “The Common Air” won the Ovation Award for sound design.

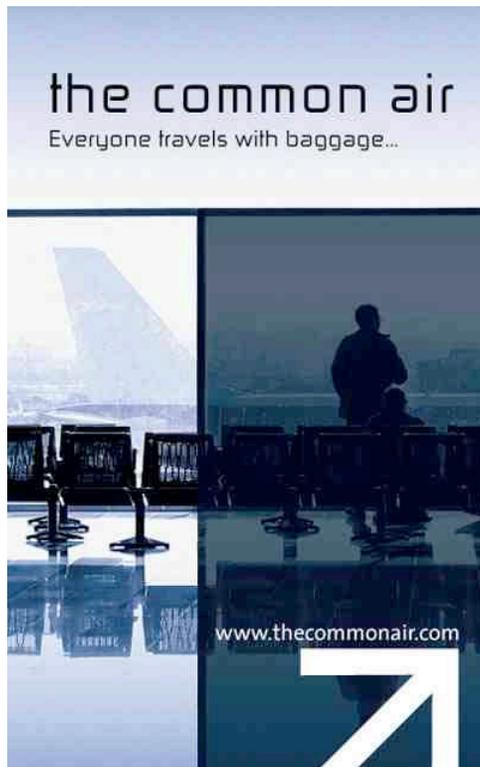
Lyras, a 1988 Scarsdale High School grad, brings to life six memorable characters in this very intelligent comedy/drama. He is intense on stage. The pace is quick, the monologue demanding and Lyras flexes his muscles and is ripped for both the physical and the verbal. For an hour and a half, Lyras keep the energy up, defining each character with distinct mannerisms and accents.

The set is a simple monochromatic one, the back wall, like the large glass windows at the airport, on which messages are screened. During the character switches, Lyras changes clothes on stage as the audience hears the canned airline messages.....Attention passengers, do not leave your bags unattended....and the mind numbing reports of TV commentators who do not really know what’s happening at the airport, but clog the airwaves with chatter.

The play starts with Lyras as an Iraqi cab driver with grand dreams, telling his passenger on the way to the airport, a gallery owner, about how his life would make a great reality show. “In this country you create your own reality,” the cab driver says. Lyras has the character down, with all the driver’s tics and nose blowing and talk of the “abundancy” of America.



The next character, the art dealer, says, “It’s healthy baring all to strangers in the airport.” He has reinvented himself after he left a boyfriend who was beaten in a gay-bashing incident. Heroes are people who don’t know they’re in danger, he says. The play gets lyrical in the character’s tale of a trip to Mykonos and discovering ancient cave paintings.



The third character, a fast-talking, BlackBerry-addicted lawyer trying to pick up a cocktail waitress in the lounge (good enough for Tiger Woods, he winks), talks to PJ the DJ, the fourth character, about “marketing you own reality.” Rules are for children. “Insert a new set of rules,” he tells PJ, who is being sued over using discarded music he found in the trash in his own recordings. Lyras has a great handle on the character and all his distractions, and punctuates his staccato speech with harsh explosions of exaggerated laughter, unnervingly timed.

Lyras has perfected the swagger for PJ, who is faced with the charge of theft of intellectual property. He is a homie with a high IQ. He walks around with a thesaurus and incorporates words like “pedagogy” and “transmogrify” into his rap songs.

The fifth character is a college professor from Texas traveling back from Paris with his young son. The son is playing with a video game. “He can’t tell what’s simulated and what’s real,” the professor says. The first simulation is language, says the professor. “It’s an alternate reality. Words are signifiers.”

The play comes full circle when the last character, an Iraqi-American man, is headed back home to Detroit and tells his frightening tale to the Iraqi cab driver. He worked for a catering company serving the military in Iraq. While there he looked for his mother, whom his father left behind long ago when we went to America. The man falls in with a seductive mullah and is brainwashed into becoming a terrorist.

“The Common Air” has well-delineated characters and thought-provoking subject matter. The play’s frenetic pace and barrage of existentialist ideas underscore its message about the disconnect in our fragmented “digital” society, but at the same time, the message doesn’t have a chance to register.