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**Rivendell Theatre Ensemble announces casting for
the World Premiere of
The Firebirds Take the Field
by Lynn Rosen
Directed by Jessica Fisch**

**Featuring RTE Members Meighan Gerachis, Rebecca Spence,
RTE Artistic Director Tara Mallen and RTE's newest member Jessica Ervin**

April 15 – May 27, 2017

Chicago, IL—**Rivendell Theatre Ensemble (RTE)**, Chicago's only Equity theatre dedicated to producing new work with women at the core, announces the world premiere of ***The Firebirds Take the Field*** by **Lynn Rosen** and directed by **Jessica Fisch**. *The Firebirds Take the Field* runs **April 15 – May 20, 2017**, at **Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, 5779 N. Ridge Avenue in Chicago**. The press opening is Wednesday, April 26, 2017 at 7:00pm. *The Firebirds Take the Field* is produced with support from the Alfred P. Sloane Foundation and Ensemble Studio Theater and is the second production of RTE's 2017 Season 'Exploring the Mind/Body Connection'.

It's been 25 years since molecular neuroscientist Avery Kahn left Highland Falls, NY. But when 18 local girls, cheerleaders mostly, are stricken with a mysterious ailment, Avery reluctantly returns home to tackle what the locals derisively call the "girl disease." As Avery becomes affected—and infected—by the girls, the case becomes more personal than she ever expected. Based on actual events, *Firebirds* is a fascinating and often hilarious investigation of how women in particular are impacted by the pressures of growing up.

The Firebirds Take the Field was inspired by real events in LeRoy, New York in Fall 2011. Camera crews descended on the small town when over a dozen teenagers from the same high school developed similar mysterious symptoms, including uncontrollable twitching, tics and verbal outbursts.

The Firebirds Take the Field features RTE Members **Meighan Gerachis** (Avery), **Rebecca Spence** (Helen), RTE Artistic Director **Tara Mallen** (Kathy) and RTE's newest member most recently honored with a Jeff nomination for Best Actress for her work in last season's production of *Dry Land*, **Jessica Ervin** (Penelope), **Margaret Kusterman** (Cynthia), **Josh Odor** (Mark), **Aurora Real de Asua** (Lucia), and **Hannah Toriumi** (Agatha).

The Firebirds Take the Field is funded in part by The Ensemble Studio Theatre/ Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science & Technology Project.

"The play takes place in a dying industrial town stunted by years of decay, where going to 'the game' and rooting for victory still mean something and winning gives the town worth and hope," said director **Jessica Fisch**. "Pretty, athletic, smiling, golden girls are responsible for rallying the spirits of their community, but to be seventeen and believe your value is inextricably tied to your looks, youth, and exuberance is a

recipe for destruction. Off the field, the girls are grappling with challenges and instability without the maturity or vocabulary to handle them. The girls bury their concerns and ignore their own grief, trauma, sadness, and hardship, but the weight of their repression proves too much and their bodies begin to rebel. By ignoring those emotions they deny themselves the process of healing. It turns out, the human body will find a way to grieve.”

“I was surprised when researching the real stories of the teens from LeRoy, New York, to learn that their final diagnosis of ‘Conversion Disorder’ was just a new name for ‘female hysteria.’ Women, in particular, who are diagnosed with mental issues are immediately dismissed both from the medical profession and by society as their conditions are not seen as being ‘real,’” comments Artistic Director **Tara Mallen**. “Yet history and myth are filled with stories of girls exhibiting bizarre symptoms around the time of puberty — and doctors have pondered the connection between our mental and physical health for centuries. The cautionary of tale these three girls exemplifies the sometimes devastating results when we disregard this essential connection.”

The creative team includes new RTE ensemble member **Joanna Iwanicka** (scenic design), with **Katherine Scott** (choreography), **Paul Toben** (lighting design), **Stephanie Cluggish** (costume design), **Sarah D. Espinosa** (sound design), and **Blake Leo Burke** (properties). **Tanya Palmer** is the dramaturg. **Sam Mouryesssef** is the Production Manager; **Andra Sturtevant** is the Production Stage Manager; and **Joan Sergay** is the Assistant Director.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Jessica Fisch (Director) Recent credits: *Straight White Men* (Associate Director, Steppenwolf), *Trudy, Carolyn, Martha and Regina Travel to Outer Space* (Actors Theatre of Louisville, Humana Festival), *Fefu and Her Friends* (Goodman Theatre/Rivendell Latina/o Celebration) *Opulent Complex* and *That Thing That Time* (Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Tens), *The Rosenkranz Mysteries: An Evening of Magic* (Royal George Theatre), *Psychodramatic* (A Red Orchid, Incubator Series), *Traces* (Feast Productions/Jackalope Theatre), *Far Away* (SITE Festival), *42 Stories* (Raven Theatre, [Working Title] series), *Machinal*, *Spike Heels* (Northwestern University). Selected New York credits: *The Realm* (The Wild Project), *strive/seek/find* (Abingdon Theatre), the 2009 Playwrights Horizons *Stories on 5 Stories Benefit*, *Personal History* (Ensemble Studio Theatre), *The Redheaded Man* (Barrow Street Theatre/Down Payment Productions/FringeNYC/FringeEncores), *Dressed In Your Dreams* (Public Theater/Emerging Writers Group), an adaptation of the cult 1960’s gothic vampire soap opera *Dark Shadows* (Williamstown Theatre Festival). Jessica was a resident director at Ensemble Studio Theater, the Playwrights Horizons Directing Resident, a member of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, and the founding Artistic Director of Down Payment Productions. MFA: Northwestern University.

Lynn Rosen (Playwright) has had works produced or developed with: Actors Theatre of Louisville, TheatreWorks (Silicon Valley), Women’s Project, New Georges, Ensemble Studio Theatre (two EST/Sloan commissions), Centerstage (Baltimore), Studio Theatre, Working Theater, Barrington Stage, The New Group, The Lark, terraNOVA Collective, New Harmony, GEVA, Fault Line Theatre, The Brick Theater, Red Bull Theatre, Todd Mountain Theater Project, The Lark Development Center (Writing Fellow), 52nd Street Project, among others. Lynn was commissioned in 2016 by UCSB for her new play *Bernhard* which was just produced in their acclaimed Launch Pad series. She also co-writes and co-created the award-winning web series *Darwin*, directed by Carrie Preston, with whom she is developing two TV pilots. *Darwin* was named one of the “Top Ten Best Web Series of 2015” by Paste Magazine and season two is currently in production. Her short piece *The Amazing America Auction*, originally commissioned for Centerstage, is included in Hal Hartley’s feature film *My America*. Coming up: *Gurley!* (a musical about Helen Gurley Brown), TheatreWorks Silicon Valley Writers’ Retreat; *I Love You* with Playing On Air; *Washed Up On The Potomac* with The Pool, NYC. Lynn got her B.A. in Theatre Arts from Brandeis University and is currently a Resident Playwright at New Dramatists in NYC.

Meighan Gerachis (Avery) is a founding member at Rivendell and has appeared in their productions of *The Electric Baby*, *Precious Little*, *The Walls*, *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue*, *Indulgences at the Louisville Harem*, *Factory Girls*, *My Simple City*, *Wrens*, and *Ten Tiny Fingers*, *Nine Tiny Toes*. Other credits include *Blue Skies Process* (Goodman), *Domesticated*, *Our Town*, *The House on Mango St.* (Steppenwolf), *Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England* (Theater Wit), *Solstice* (A Red Orchid Theater), *Measure for Measure* (Chicago Shakespeare); *Cloud Nine* (About Face),

Cigarettes and Moby Dick, *Che Che Che* (Latino Chicago), *The Underpants* (Noble Fool); and *The Road to Graceland* (Lifeline Theatre). Her Regional credits include: *Charm* (Mixed Blood Theatre) *Elliot*; *A Soldier's Fugue* (Stageworks/Hudson); and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Contact Theatre, Manchester, UK). Film credits include *Batman v. Superman, At Any Price*, and *Virginia*. Television credits include *Chicago PD*, *Crisis*, *Bobby & Iza* (NBC), *Sirens* (USA), and *Battleground* (Hulu).

Rebecca Spence (Helen) joined Rivendell Theatre Ensemble after appearing in *These Shining Lives* for which she received Equity Jeff Nomination in 2009. Other RTE credits include *Wrens* and *How the World Began* (Equity Jeff Nomination for Best Actress in 2015). Her most recent work was originating the role of Mary Page Marlowe 40/44 at Steppenwolf Theatre Company where her previous credits include: *The Crucible*, *Our Lady of 121st Street* and *Pacific*. Other theatre credits include: *In The Garden* (Lookingglass Theatre Company); *Concerning Strange Devices from the Distant West* (TimeLine Theatre Company); *This* (Theatre Wit); *The Voysey Inheritance*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Remy Bumpo - Equity Jeff Nom.); *Dracula* (Defiant Theatre); *Cyrano* (Milwaukee Repertory Theatre). Film Credits include *Kingfisher*, *Recke*, *Not Welcome*, *Bloomin' Mud Shuffle*, *Man of Steel*, *Fools*, *Tiger Tail in Blue*, *One Small Hitch*, *Contagion*, *The Dilemma*, *Audrey the Trainwreck*, *Earthling*, *Public Enemies*, *Grace is Gone* and *The Break-Up*. Television Credits include *Easy* (Netflix), *Chicago Fire* (NBC), *Crisis* (NBC), *Betrayal* (ABC), *Boss* (STARZ), *The Mob Doctor* (FOX), *Detroit 1-8-7* (ABC), *The Chicago Code* (FOX), *The Beast* (A&E) and *Prison Break* (FOX).

Tara Mallen (Kathy) is an actor, director, producer and the Artistic Director at Rivendell Theatre Ensemble. She was most recently on stage in RTE's production of *Grizzly Mama* and the world premiere production of Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* at Arena Stage. Prior to that she was in RTE's Jeff Nominated, world premiere productions of *Look, we are breathing* and *Rasheeda Speaking*. Tara appeared in the Steppenwolf Theatre Company production of *How Long Will I Cry: Stories of Youth Violence* written by Chicago Journalist Miles Harvey. She was part of the ensemble in Rivendell's World Premiere, Jeff nominated production of *The Walls* and played Jolene Palmer (inspired by the true-life story of Aileen Wuornos) in Rivendell's award winning production of *Self Defense, or the Death of Some Salesmen --* both productions part of Steppenwolf Theatre Company's Visiting Theater Initiative. For Rivendell, Tara has both produced and acted in over thirty productions. She received a Joseph Jefferson award for "Supporting Actress" for her portrayal of *Gwenyth* in *WRENS* as part of that production's Jeff-winning ensemble. She was nominated the following year for "Actress in a Principal Role" for her work in *My Simple City*. Screen credits include Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion*, *Boss* (STARZ), *Chicago Fire* (NBC), *Chicago P.D.* (NBC), *Sense8* (Netflix), indie feature *FOOLS* and the CBS/Sony Pictures pilot *Doubt*.

Jessica Ervin (Penelope), one of RTE's newest members returns to Rivendell where she was last seen in *Dry Land* (Ester) and also understudies their touring production of *Women at War*. Other Chicago theatre credits include touring artist with *Erasing the Distance*, *Herculaneum* (Blue Goose Theatre Ensemble), Summer in the Parks production of *The Wild* (Walkabout Theater Company), *12 Ways to Play Festival* (The Public House Theatre), and Collaboracion's final *Sketchbook Festival*. She can also be seen in the upcoming feature film *Princess Cyd*. Jessica is a graduate of Ball State University with a B.F.A. in Acting, and is represented by Gray Talent Group.

Margaret Kusterman (Cynthia) has appeared at Next Theatre where she appeared in *The Luck of the Irish* and *Great God Pan*. She understudied the role of Patricia in *The Herd* at Steppenwolf, where she was also in the Ensemble of *No Place Like Home*. At Seanachai she was part of the Jeff-nominated ensemble of *The Big Picture*. She was in *Tartuffe* at Remy Bumpo and *Uncle Vanya* at Strawdog. After understudying the role of Meg in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* at Steppenwolf, she played the role at Northern Stage in Vermont. Margaret has worked with Jackalope, The Gift, Defiant, Livebait, Lifeline and Center Theatre. She holds a Masters Degree in Theatre from Northwestern University.

Josh Odor (Mark) most recently performed in Griffin's *Winterset*, The Hypocrites' *You on the Moors Now*, Haven Theater's *The Distance* and *The Time of Your Life* with the Artistic Home. Josh has also worked at Steppenwolf, The Goodman, TimeLine, Steep, Teatro Vista, The Inconvenience, The House, The New Colony, Collaboracion, LiveWire, Buffalo Ensemble and as a member of Pine Box. Josh's television work includes *Chicago PD*, *Chicago Fire*, *Betrayal* and *Boss*.

Aurora Real de Asua (Lucia) is working with the Rivendell Ensemble for the first time. Past Chicago credits include *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Metropolis), *You On the Moors Now* (u/s Hypocrites), *Twelfth Night* (u/s Chicago Shakespeare in the Park), as well as work with the Goodman Theatre and American Myth Project. She recently graduated from Northwestern University.

Hannah Toriumi (Agatha) has performed with such theaters as The Gift, Goodman Theatre, Silk Road Rising, Step Up Productions, and TOTC. She has also made appearances in commercials, film, and television. Hannah is represented by Paonessa Talent, is a graduate of The School at Steppenwolf Class of 2015 and holds a BA in Theatre Performance from North Central College.

Title: *The Firebirds Take the Field*
Written by: Lynn Rosen
Directed by: Jessica Fisch

Featuring: RTE members **Meighan Gerachis** (Avery) and **Rebecca Spence** (Helen), RTE Artistic Director **Tara Mallen** (Kathy), **Jessica Ervin** (Penelope); and **Margaret Kusterman** (Cynthia), **Josh Odor** (Mark), **Aurora Real de Asua** (Lucia), and **Hannah Toriumi** (Agatha).

Creative Team: **Katherine Scott** (choreography), **Joanna Iwanicka** (scenic design), **Paul Toben** (lighting design), **Stephanie Cluggish** (costume design), **Sarah D. Espinosa** (sound design), **Blake Leo Burke** (properties), **Sam Mouryessef** (production manager), **Andra Sturtevant** (production stage manager), and **Joan Sergay** (assistant director)

Previews: **April 18 – 22, 2017**
Tuesday, April 18 at 8:00pm
Thursday, April 20 at 8:00pm
Friday, April 21 at 8:00pm
Saturday, April 22 at 8:00pm

VIP opening: **Sunday, April 23, 2017 at 6:00pm**
Press Opening: **Wednesday, April 26, 2017 at 7:00pm**
Regular run: **April 27 – May 27, 2017**

Schedule: **Thursdays-Saturdays at 8:00pm**
Saturdays at 4:00pm (no Saturday performance Saturday May 27)
Town Hall Discussions will follow the Saturday matinees 4/6; 4/13; 4/20

Location: **Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, 5779 N. Ridge Avenue in Chicago**
Tickets: **General Admission**

Previews: \$25
Regular: \$38

Student, Senior, Active Military, Veteran
Previews: \$15
Regular: \$28

Pay What You Can: Five seats (10% of the house) are available for each performance. Reservations are made on a first come first served basis.

Box Office: (773) 334-7728 or www.RivendellTheatre.org

Parking and Transportation: Free parking is available in the Senn High School parking lot (located a block and a half from the theatre behind the school off Thorndale Avenue). There is limited paid and free street parking in the area and the theatre is easily accessible via the Clark (#22) or Broadway (#36) bus and is a short walk from the Bryn Mawr Red Line El station.

Notes of Interest

- This marks the World Premiere of *The Firebirds Take the Field* by **Lynn Rosen**. The play was inspired by real events in LeRoy, New York in Fall 2011 when over a dozen teenagers from the

same high school developed similar mysterious symptoms including uncontrollable twitching, tics and verbal outbursts.

- The symptoms led to a series of national interviews, and a collection of television features can be seen in [this video](#). A piece on the topic is available in this link to the [NY Times Magazine article](#).
- *The Firebirds Take the Field* was commissioned by Ensemble Studio Theater through support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Grant. Founded in 1934 by industrialist Alfred P. Sloan Jr., the Foundation is a not-for-profit grantmaking institution that supports high quality, impartial scientific research; fosters a robust, diverse scientific workforce; strengthens public understanding and engagement with science; and promotes the health of the institutions of scientific endeavor.
- Playwright Lynn Rosen will be attending rehearsals at Rivendell on March 26-28 and April 19-24.
- Among the cast are four RTE Members, including **Meighan Gerachis**, **Rebecca Spence**, RTE Artistic Director **Tara Mallen** and RTE's newest ensemble member, Jessica Ervin, most recently honored with a Jeff nomination for Best Actress for her work in last season's production of *Dry Land*.
- The dramaturg is **Tanya Palmer**, the Goodman's Director of New Play Development.
- Rivendell fills an important role in the Chicago region as the only Equity theater dedicated to producing artistically challenging and original plays created by and about women.

About Rivendell Theatre Ensemble

Founded in 1994, Rivendell Theatre Ensemble advances women's lives through the power of theatre. Rivendell cultivates the talents of women artists -- writers, actors, directors, designers and technicians -- by seeking out innovative plays that explore unique female experiences and producing them in intimate, salon environments.

Rivendell fills an important role in the Chicago region as the *only* Equity theatre dedicated to producing artistically challenging and original plays created by and about women. After years of being an itinerant company, we moved into our own theater space in 2010 in Edgewater. As new members of the neighborhood, we are focused on becoming an integral community partner and serving as a catalyst to engage our audiences in a discussion of local social issues.

For more information about Rivendell Theater Ensemble, <http://rivendelltheatre.org>. Follow RTE on Facebook at [Facebook.com/rivendelltheatre](https://www.facebook.com/rivendelltheatre) and on Twitter [@RivendellThtr](https://twitter.com/RivendellThtr).

Rivendell Theatre Ensemble is supported by generous grants from Allstate Insurance Company; The Lester and Hope Abelson Fund; The Alphawood Foundation; The Arts Work Fund for Organizational Development; The Chicago Community Trust; The Chicago Foundation for Women; The Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation; The Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; The MacArthur Funds for Arts and Culture at The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation; The Reva and David Logan Foundation; The Elizabeth Morse Charitable Trust; SIF Fund at The Chicago Community Trust; The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation; The University of Illinois at Chicago Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement; Cultural Outreach Program Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events; and the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

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