FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Oct. 22, 2014
Contact: Anita DeAngelis, Mary B. Martin School of the Arts director, 423-439-5673
        deangeli@etsu.edu
Lise Cutshaw, MBMSOTA marketing coordinator, 423-773-5410, cutshaw@etsu.edu

Going On
World's foremost Beckett interpreter to read, talk at ETSU

Barry McGovern played the king’s adviser in Braveheart, the luggage salesman in Joe Versus the Volcano, McGuire in Far and Away and a dying man on Game of Thrones. On stage, he portrayed Frank Hardy in Brian Friel's Faith Healer, Walter Franz in Arthur Miller’s The Price, George Aaranow in Glengarry Glen Ross and has given public readings of the works of James Joyce. He has directed numerous stage productions and even written musicals.

Yet despite McGovern’s diverse stage and screen credits, he will be forever connected with the works of fellow Irishman Samuel Beckett – with due reason. “One of Ireland’s finest actors,” McGovern first performed Endgame in college in Dublin and before long, had played Lucky, Estragon and Vladimir in differing productions of Waiting for Godot. He now has portrayed the role of Vladimir more than any other living actor. In addition, in 1985, McGovern collaborated to create a one-man show, I’ll Go On, based on three Beckett novels, and he has performed that and his newer one-man Beckett show, Watt, at venues the world-round. He has also played in Endgame professionally in four different productions, and in Happy Days and Krapp's Last Tape.

On Monday, Nov. 3, “the foremost lecturer and interpreter” of Beckett’s work will bring his expertise and experience to ETSU for a reading of the Nobel Prize winner’s poetry and prose. The reading and talk will begin at 7 p.m. in ETSU’s Ball Hall Auditorium, room 127, with refreshments to follow in Slocumb Galleries. Earlier in the day, McGovern will share his insights on Beckett with ETSU Literature and Language and Theatre and Dance students.

Known for his dark humor, abstractions and stream of consciousness to express the human condition, Beckett’s plays, especially Waiting for Godot, became prime examples of absurdist theater and the “absurd” determination to survive in a hopeless world.

“Beckett's a unique writer, and not everyone's cup of tea, to be sure,” McGovern said in a Huffington Post interview. “There are those who love him, and those who hate him. I look forward to bringing his work to those who have misconceptions about him. It's a great thrill.”

McGovern’s selections for the ETSU reading were made, he said, to show the variety of Beckett’s writing – which includes plays, novels, poetry, one film, television scripts and scores of letters – “and hopefully to entertain people.”
Beckett is Dr. Katherine Weiss’ cup of tea and McGovern’s visit, her project. Weiss, now chair of ETSU’s Department of Literature and Language, focused her doctoral work on Beckett, and while in Europe researching the prolific 20th century writer, she saw McGovern perform.

“I first saw Barry McGovern perform at the Gate Theatre in Dublin while I was studying there … and he was cast as Vladimir in Waiting for Godot,” Weiss says. “It was a magnificent production. Since then – that was 1996, I believe – I’ve seen him perform live. I’ve seen videos of him. I’ve known of his work for a long time and I’ve admired his work for a long time.”

The consummate Irish actor’s performances, especially of Beckett works and his Beckett-based one-man shows, have been ebullient, dubbing his portrayals “electrifying,” “mesmerizing” and “genius.”

His renowned one-man show, I’ll Go On, first performed in 1985 at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, has been praised on both continents. “McGovern has been performing this show for almost 30 years, but it seems lived at each performance, not merely acted, and that's why it still feels fresh and raw and bloody,” said reviewer Lyn Garner in The Guardian in 2013. “It's a grueling 90 minutes for him and us, but there is something hypnotic about it, too, as McGovern illuminates Beckett's dark vision.”

So, when Lois More Overbeck, one of the editors of the three volumes of The Letters of Samuel Beckett contacted Weiss, asking if ETSU would be interested in hosting a Beckett reading by McGovern, the Beckett scholar gave a resounding, “Yes!” With the sponsorship of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, ETSU will be on a circuit tour of readings and talks, along with Emory University, Georgia State University, University of Georgia and the South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference.

While the impression people have about Beckett is that he is very depressing, Weiss says, “When I have had students look at Beckett’s manuscripts and his letters, they are all so surprised at how earthy his humor is in terms of the scatological jokes and sometimes toilet humor. They think of this man as being on a pedestal, as this great thinker, but then they see his jokes which they might have said to a friend …”

It’s also a privilege to have “a master” of theater on campus, says Division of Theatre & Dance Head Pat Cronin, a stage, screen and TV actor himself. “Not only is he a first-rate, world-class actor, but he is first and foremost a master of acting Beckett,” Cronin says. “It is an amazing opportunity to have him here with us and to have him share his gifts with our students.”

“There is a darkness in Beckett’s world but artists such as McGovern are the light-bringers, and it will be a joy for him to be with and work with our students in both English and in Theatre/Dance.”

Life is sometimes discouraging, McGovern says, but Beckett offers humor and glimmer of hope in the darkest times. “The subject matter may be depressing and dark, as is the world we live in (open a newspaper or turn on the television), but the way Beckett writes is beautiful,” the actor says. “It's not the ‘what,’ it's the ‘how’ that matters.”
Beckett’s writing, he says, is also timeless. “He’s talking about the great things of existence …” McGovern said in an interview for the 2013 Edinburgh International Festival. “He’s a universal writer for all times. He’s one of the greats, like Dante and Shakespeare. He will last forever.”

McGovern’s visit to the U.S. is with the support of the Consulate General of Ireland in Atlanta.

For information about the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin. Please “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.