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Contacts: 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

‘Poignant Guide to Life’
Ethan Hawke’s first documentary introduces ‘magical’ mentor, musician: Seymour Bernstein

Actor Ethan Hawke says, “there is something magical” about Seymour Bernstein, who he met at a dinner party. ETSU Visiting Professor Esther Park met the legendary pianist and teacher on the bench and describes him as a “gentle, generous soul” who helped her obtain her first piano and became a member of her family, as well as a mentor and teacher.

Critics have found Hawke’s new documentary on Bernstein – released March 13 – “soaring and sublime,” “deeply moving, even ecstatic” and “intimate, big-hearted.” ETSU’s Mary B. Martin School of the Arts will present a screening of the Sundance Select film Seymour: An Introduction in Brown Hall Auditorium Friday, April 10, at 7 p.m. Bernstein will attend the screening and lead a Q&A session following the film.

“This film is brand new and has had limited screenings, so we are excited to be one of the venues getting to show it,” says Mary B. Martin School of the Arts Director Anita DeAngelis. “Because of Mr. Bernstein’s connection with Esther Park, he will also be teaching a master class and workshop, and I hear that he is absolutely charming! We are looking forward to this unique experience with a true master of his craft.”

A veteran New Yorker, Bernstein was a child prodigy and virtuoso pianist who gave up a successful concert career to teach young musicians about their craft and about the life of an artist. This documentary film, hailed by Indiewire as a “poignant guide to life,” explores a life well-lived, as well as insightful reflections on angst, art, creativity and the search for fulfillment.

Focusing on Bernstein as he teaches students in his home and prepares for his first concert in 35 years, “There are profound lessons inside Seymour’s piano teachings that are relevant to how we approach our daily lives,” Hawke says. “His simplicity has much to offer.”

Hawke met Bernstein at a dinner hosted by a longtime student of the pianist and says he was instantly captivated. “I never set out to make a documentary,” he says.

Bernstein says he was stunned by Hawke’s interest in documenting his life. Seymour: An Introduction is also an introduction to Hawke and the life of any artist, Bernstein says. “In a sense, it is also a documentary about Ethan,” he says, “since we have probed the deepest areas of why we have devoted ourselves to our art, and how that devotion has influenced our lives.”
“The earnest, curious Hawke makes a few appearances throughout *Seymour: An Introduction*, but this is Bernstein’s show …” says Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post*. “He’s utterly delightful company, whether he’s puttering around his tiny Delft-tiled kitchen, working out a particularly gnarly passage on the keyboard or quietly suggesting that a student lower his shoulders or lighten his touch.”

Bernstein began teaching piano at the age of 15 when his own piano teacher allowed him to supervise some of her younger students. He gave concerts for the soldiers on the front lines while still in his teens and brought music to a wider audience through his concerts and books, such as *With Your Own Two Hands* and *20 Lessons in Keyboard Choreography*. At 50, he gave his farewell performance and has been dedicated to teaching and mentoring from his New York studio since.

One of the most sought-after clinicians in this country and abroad, Bernstein is also a prolific composer, with many works on the best-seller list. His compositions range from teaching material for students of all levels to sophisticated concert pieces. He continues to perform as a guest artist with chamber ensembles and is an adjunct associate professor of music and music education at New York University.

ETSU’s visiting professor of piano, Park, and her sister, Sun-A, were among the beneficiaries of Bernstein’s wisdom, technique and generous spirit when they were children, new to New York after emigrating with their parents from Korea.

“He says, ‘I remember when you were still in your diaper and didn’t know a word of English,’ ” Park says. “We have known him for 15 years. He’s never once charged us for lessons. We are not the only ones he cared for. Just imagine him doing that for so many, 30 years of generous caring.

“I tell everybody, ‘There is no Esther Park without Seymour Bernstein.’ ”

While at ETSU, Bernstein will work his magic with Department of Music students on Saturday, April 11, in two sessions – a master class and a seminar, both of which are open to the public and auditors.

The master class with ETSU piano students will be held in Mathes Hall Room 107 from 10 a.m. to 12:30 a.m., while Bernstein’s “With Your Own Two Hands” seminar will run from 4-7 p.m. in Brown Hall Auditorium, focusing on preparation for performing, concentration, memorization and coping with performance anxiety.

Bernstein is known worldwide for his pedagogy, Park says, and is one of the founding fathers of incorporating choreography and anatomical awareness to prevent injuries in piano artists.

“What he said is totally embedded in me and will be passed on,” Park says, “and his legacy is not done yet. He is probably about 83, 85, but he is still as young as a 50-year-old. He is really young at heart and so energetic … I am so elated. The legend himself is coming.”
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