An interview with Gyorgy Kepes

By MICHAEL BOS

This week Institute Professor Emeritus Gyorgy Kepes celebrates his 80th birthday. The leading figure in the arts at MIT for several decades, Kepes was founder and first director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

To mark the occasion, a retrospective exhibition of Kepes’ paintings is on display in the Compton Gallery. The exhibition, organized by the MIT Museum, is open 9-5 weekdays and 10-4 Saturdays, through Oct. 25.

Born and educated in Hungary, Kepes worked in various places in Europe during the 1920s and ’30s. In 1937 he joined his compatriot Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in Chicago to found the New Bauhaus at the Chicago Institute of Design, intended as a successor to the famous German School of Art, Architecture and Design closed by the Nazis.

In 1945 he came to MIT, to set up a program in visual design in the School of Architecture. He has remained there ever since, as an artist, educator, and writer on art. The establishment of MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies as a center for collaboration between artists, scientists and engineers in 1969 was the culmination of his efforts to bring art and science closer to each other.

In an interview for The Tech, Kepes spoke, among other things, about the relationship between science and art, his development as an artist, and the nature of his painting.

“I have tried to be a matchmaker between science and art. When I came to MIT I felt very strongly there were still many things unpublished in this marriage, and we may never see her in another film. She is as dedicated an actress as I have ever seen, and her silent world speaks even to the majority of us who are hearing people. I wish more students could be their only home. And the beauty of the hearing world, a call for both classes and the film to begin.

But more than anything else, he wishes to win the love of Sarah, who refuses abjectly to learn to read.

Marlee Matlin lost in her own silent world.

In other ways, the film moves above the stage presentation. It is easy to speak to a large audience, but harder to sign to them. In the film, we can get closer to the actors, and read their signing more closely. It is a language which is so expressive that it speaks even to the majority of us who are illiterate in sign. No one can express verbally what Malin can do with hands. Thus, although we have lost Sarah’s translated speeches about the eloquence of our language, we are more than compensated by a graphic demonstration of her eloquence.

The setting is much more able than an empty stage to convey the institutional nature of the school which will for many students be their only home. And the beautiful outdoor scenes shot on beaches and ferries, aside from making me want to visit New Brunswick, underscore with all the eloquence the insular nature of the deaf world.

We are quietly reminded of the outside world when Sarah turns to take a stand in front of a magazine-rack, full of missives from outside. In fact, many of the best scenes in the movie are nonvocal: an invitation to read, a greeting, a parting. The film is nearly as accomplished at this form of communication. At one point, when James spots Sarah at a party, we know without words exactly what has transpired.

The film begins silently, with quiet music which plays for a long time before the first word is spoken. Very soon, however, the first sound present in the film is the jarring noise of the hearing world, a call for both classes and the film to begin. James’ students are an uninspired bunch, but unable to face the outside world, the stairs to mop floors. Sarah is a permanently angry character, storming from her seat, emotional outbursts. Her transformation at James’ hands provides Marlin with an opportunity to display an enormous range of emotions.

Surprisingly enough, this is another film which contains some very good music on the soundtrack. James, believe it or not, teaches his class to sing along with rock music which they cannot hear but can feel. The song itself is quite catchy, and was written by James Macdonald, who also wrote the incidental music for the film. The right of deal actors dancing in the film are as well as an amazing take-off on the film that tries to dress in new handsome. It is also, alas, also, a showcase of the talents of bunch that will forever have trouble finding work.

Elizabeth Quinn, who was the first to play the part of Sarah in London, drew attention of the normally uninterested woman whose handicap was only speech. She was on-screen actors are rare, but available. We can only wish Marlee Matlin and her fellow actors the best of luck, and wish to see more of them in the future.