EAST OF BORNEO (Universal, 1951) Produced by Carl Laemmle Jr., Associate Producer: Paul Kohner; Directed by George Melford; written by Dale Van Every; dialogue by Edwin H. Knopf; photographed by George Robinson. 7 reels.


Although "East of Borneo" is the kind of film that might well find its way to an Eastman House schedule, we have no illusions about it being "up to" the "standards" called for by more orthodox archives and by film societies in general. But since the Huff Society has always been devoted to film history per se rather than film art, (not that we have anything against it!) we need make no apologies for showing a film that is neither important nor art, but is merely interesting for the people who made it, for the way it was made, and because it is good fun in the hokey, theatrical, larger-than-life way that movies used to be fun. (A steady diet of such "fun" movies could be both tiresome and dangerous -- but how we miss even a starvation ration of them!)

"East of Borneo" is rather like a mating of "The Indian Tomb" and "The Green Goddess". It lacks the style of Lang and May, and most notably it lacks the personality of an Arliss on which to focus attention -- but it does have good jungle stuff, a marvellous crocodile pool (into which a helpless native is thrown via some ingenious trick work), classic dialogue in the old tradition, a threatened rate-worse-than-death, and a pretty impressive earthquake climax which later saw service in many Universal B 'epics and serials. In addition, some of the sets are surprisingly elaborate, and the camerawork first-class. Apparently it all paid off; since Melford, Kohner and Bickford got together for a follow-up just four years later in the imaginatively titled "East of Java". Melford, an old Kalem veteran who hit his (boxoffice) highpoint with Valentino's "The Sheik" was never much of a director, but he certainly ground out the bread-and-butter fodder in a workmanlike way, and was especially busy in the early and mid-30's. He died just a few months ago. Incidentally, it's rather eerie to find Lupita Tovar (wife of associate producer Paul Kohner) looking in 1931 exactly as her daughter Susan Kohner looks today.

INTERMISSION

SKIPPY (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Norman Taurog; Scenario and dialogue by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Norman McLeod; additional dialogue by Don Marquis, from a story by Percy Crosby and Sam Mintz; photographed by Karl Struss. Nine reels.

With Jackie Cooper, Robert Coogan, Mitzi Green, Jackie Searle, Willard Robertson, Ethel Bennett, Donald Haines, Helen Jerome Eddy, Jack Clifford, Guy Oliver.

"Skippy" won itself quite a reputation in 1931; it won an Academy Award for director Norman Taurog, and placed high on most of the "Ten Best" of the year. In the "Film Daily" poll (based on votes from 346 trade press, newspaper and magazine critics) it placed third, beaten only by "Cimarron" and "Street Scene", and ahead of such blockbusters as "The Front Page" and "City Lights". Paramount of course came out with a sequel right away -- "Sooky" -- also directed by Taurog, with practically the same cast and writing crew.

It holds up extremely well. Not quite as powerful as "The Champ" certainly, but not as poignant as "The Biscuit Eater", it is nevertheless entitled to rank with them as as one of the most honest and affecting portraits of the child's world that Hollywood has given us. Honest in spirit certainly, if not in detail. Some of the writing gives Skippy behaviour that is perhaps a trifle too adult in motive, if not in execution. The climax is too pat and neat. The father is rather too much like Garbo's Mr. Darling for his about-face to ring completely true. And one could wish for a little more depth in the characters of the children: the good kids predominate, and they're all good; the rest are sneak and bullies, and all bad. There is none of the shading that could have been provided by using some of the unwitting pain and cruelty that is so often inflicted by children, good and bad, on their best friends. But one misses these subtleties only because "Skippy" as it stands is so good. One wishes it were better -- but this hardly amounts to a criticism.
The film starts off in an unusually leisurely manner, and although dramatic momentum mounts in the second half, the physical pace hardly changes. It manages to acquire that enviable characteristic enjoyed by the very young, and endured by the very old, of dealing with joys and sorrows, inconveniences and orises, at the same undisturbed tempo. Although this is not an "as seen through the eyes of a child" film (nothing is that stylized) yet it does seem to achieve that effect apart from his house itself, we see so little of the "nice" neighborhood in which Skippy lives that the slum, shantytown dwellings that seem so exciting to him seem rather colorful to us too. And if the dog-catcher seems a little illogically mean, well, most of us can probably recall at least one such meanie from our own childhoods. (In my case, a particularly uncouth movie theatre manager who refused to let me into "adult" programs -- and whose sabotaging of my efforts to see "Quick Millions" leaves a score yet to be settled.)

Photographically, it is naturalistic and unsuay. Nor is there, to my recollection, a note of music throughout the entire picture other than for the credits and end title. Because of this, the slowness of pace is perhaps emphasized, but also because of it, the poignancy in the second half is that much closer to reality, and the more effective thereby. To the occasional sadness of the film must be added, for the audience, the sadness of nostalgia too. This is a child's world that really no longer exists, and, despite the added comforts of the television age, the child is the poorer for it.

Skippy's "treat" of bread smeared with brown sugar was still a real treat in the thirties; how many youngsters today would so regard it?

Jackie Cooper gives a good, incredibly assured performance, hardly putting a foot wrong, yet it is the less polished performance from Robert Coogan that really makes one sit up. Mauriss has always been great in handling children of course, but even he could hardly have instilled into Coogan the wealth of understanding and pain and compassion that comes into his eyes in that brief scene where he begs for his dog. But just as the remarkable Jackie Coogan wound up playing dope pushers and mad doctors, so poor Robert found an outlet for his adult talents limited -- a few years ago he was given low comedy material as Humphrey in Monogram's Joe Palooka series.

Incidentally, if you own a tv set, and, if owning one you also watch it (generally the Huff Society tends to freeze on this), look out for a 1941 Paramount item called "Glamour Boy" with Jackie Cooper. Titled more pleasingly "Hearts in Springtime" in Europe, it features Cooper as the has-been star of "Skippy" returning to movies -- and it includes quite a generous chunk from "Skippy". It's a pleasing and enjoyable little film.

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William K. Everson

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NEXT PROGRAM:

Sunday next, May 20th, New Yorker, 9:30 a.m.
HEARTS OF MEN with Mildred Harris, Cornelius Keefe, Julia Swayne Gordon
FLASH OF LIGHTENING with Leo Maloney; and as many shorts as there is time for.

Tuesday next, May 22nd, Adelphi Hall, rm 10-D, 7:30
A WOMAN'S FAITH (Univ., '25) -- Alma Rubens, Percy Marmont, Jean Hersholt
HAPPINESS (Tncs., 1927) -- Emil Bennett, John Gilbert.

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JULY programs will include a short Horror-Mystery Cycle -- three double bills that will include such items as ISLE OF LOST SOULS, THE GREENE MURDER CASE and Karl Freund's THE MUMMY. The latter has been on tv several times, but it has been several years since a theatrical showing and it's much too good a film to be seen only on television.