"THE BISCUIT EATER" (Paramount, 1940) Directed by Stuart Heisler. Produced by Jack Hoss; screenplay by Stuart Anthony and Lillie Hayward from an original story by James Street; Camera, Leo Tover; 8 reels. With Billy Lee, Cordell Hickman, Helen Millard, Richard Lane, Lester Matthews, Snowflake, William Russell, Earl Johnson.

Hollywood has always regarded the boy-dog (or boy-deer) story as a sure-fire staple, and for years we were regaled with endless identical "B"s of the "Shep Comes Home" calibre, and the occasional prestige production a la the Lessie films and "The Yearling", which today seems disappointingly trecply and studio-bound. What a pleasure therefore to find that "The Biscuit Eater" which in 1940 seemed exceptional, but which did have the advantage of preceding all of the standardised doggie programmers of the 40's, is as fresh and moving as ever. Stuart Heisler's in later years remarkably efficient imitator of the styles of others, does turn in - in his first solo assignment - his best directorial work. And the film succeeds superbly in its simplicity, its honest sentiment (always stopping short of bathos), its pleasing use of appropriate but never over-powering locations, and especially in the completely natural performances of the two-boys. Almost single-handedly they make the film the moving work it is. In the face of the cunning of Rooney and Cooper, and the appalling blubbering speciality of Bob Watson, one took Billy Lee too much for granted at the time. Today it seems hard to understand why far more use wasn't made of him. Incidentally, a current and much inferior remake still awaits a New York unveiling.

-- Ten Minute Interruption --


"The Blue Bird" achieved some ill-fame at the time as being not only the first Temple film that lost money, but also one that was a financial disaster. This is especially hard to understand, since one would have thought that the fantastic success of the much inferior "The Wizard of Oz" (a personal opinion that I realise is not shared) would have made such a follow-up an automatic success. Possibly the thought that it was merely a Temple vehicle kept away the very audiences that would have appreciated it the most, while conversely there wasn't enough of the traditional Temple to keep her fans happy. Regardless, it's one of the movies' best fantasies, and while admittedly it's a fragile film, easily destroyed by impudence and bad timing, if, at the time it worked beautifully. Herbert Edward's "Peter Pan" (which we plan to show next season) and Maurice Tourneur's silent version of "The Blue Bird" were certainly superior. But both of those directors were genuine artists, and the silent screen and its pictorial splendour was much kinder to whimsy of this kind. But given its over-produced Hollywoodian framework, this "Blue Bird" is a beauty too. The special effects, notably the fire in the forest, are often quite stunning, and the color and sets beautifully designed. Much of it, the visit to the dead grandparents, the sequence with the unborn children, through the early stages of the unborn children episode does have some rather mawkish and Americanised name-dropping, with Edison, Lincoln and others none-too-subtly suggested. But the climax of this sequence, with the song of the mothers floating in to greet the children, and the vowing of those who will never meet again in life, is beautifully and tastefully done. Given all this production value and art direction, what a film a top director could have made of it. Walter Lang was never much more than a journeyman and adds little to the film that wasn't already there. The early stages of the only unformed film really jarr: the virtually non-stop saving away of a monotonously sugary musical score does real harm, and reduces the impact of those moments when music really matters. One might quibble too at the sexy Goldwyn-Girl of a Good Fairy, but then Hollywood always felt that it had to cater to Daddy as well as Junior in presenting fairies and "good" ghosts, as witness the bosomy Christmas ghost in MGM's "A Christmas Carol". Happily (thanks to European archival protection) this print is fully complete. The standard American version (rarely shown anyway) is minus the entire opening reel, in sentia) and thus is without the entire motivation for the story and makes frequent cross-references inexplicable and Shirley's change from a spoiled brat far too abrupt. --- WM. K. Everson