Tonight's two films run somewhat of an unofficial gamut: from the guileless and nostalgic "Skippy" to a film that represents the zenith of elegance and sophistication, both of them little masterpieces of their own particular genres and from the same three-year period of the early talks.

"SKIPPY" (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Norman Taurog; scenario and dialogue by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Norman G. Leed; additional dialogue by Don Harquis, from a story by Percy Crosby and Sam Mintz; photographed by Karl Struss; nine reels.

With Jackie Cooper, Robert Coogan, Fitzi Green, Jackie Searle, Willard Robertson, Enid Bennett, Donald Meek, Helen Jerome Eddy, Jack Clifford, Guy Oliver.

"Skippy" earned itself quite a reputation in 1931; it won an Academy Award for director Taurog, and placed high on most of the "Ten Best" lists 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 virtually the same cast and writing crew.

It holds up extremely well. Not quite as powerful as "The Champ" or as poignant as "The Biscuit Eater," it nevertheless must rank with them 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 a behavior 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 Errie's ir. Darling for his about-face to ring completely true. And one could wish for a little more depth in some of the children; the good kids predominate and they're all good; the rest are sneaks and bullies and all bad. There is none of the shading that could have been provided by using some of the underlying pain and cruelty that is so often inflicted by children, good and bad, on their friends. But one misses these subtleties only because "Skippy" as it stands is so good.

Since its commercial and artistic success must have surprised Paramount, one can hardly criticize such a film for its minor shortcomings when it is already so much better than it probably set out to be!

The film starts off in a 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 crises, at the same undisturbed tempo. Although this is not an "as seen through the eyes of a child" film (nothing in it is that stylized) yet it does seem to achieve that effect; 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 remember small at least one such menace from our own childhoods. (In my case, a particularly uncouth theatre manager who refused to let me in to the "adult" category programs!) Photographically, it is naturalistic and unfussy - as it should be, despite being the work of one of the greatest cinematographers of them all. (Karl Struss of "Sunrise"). Nor, to my recollection, is there a note of music throughout the entire film 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 enhanced. The film is much more effective than most of its occasional sadness of the film must now be added, for the audience, the new sadness of nostalgia. 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. Taurog has always been great in handling children, 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 hears for his dog. But just as the remarkable Jackie Coogan wound up playing dope pushers and mad doctors in grade-D quickies, and feigning erudition of fixed tv quiz shows, so poor Robert found an outlet for his adult talents limited. In the early fifties he was given low comedy material as Humphrey in Honeogram's Joe Palooka series.

Incidentally if, heaven forbid, you are a tv adherent, watch out for a
1941 Paramount item called "Glamour Boy" with Jackie Cooper. Titled more pleasantly "Hearts in Springtime" in Europe, it features Cooper as the has-been star of "Skippy" returning to movies, and includes quite a generous chunk from the original film. It's a pleasing and enjoyable little film, one of the better ones about Hollywood.

Ten Minute Intermission

"BY CANDLELIGHT" (Universal 1933, rel. 1934) Directed by James Whale Screenplay by Hans Kraly, F. Hugh Herbert, Karen de Wolf and Ruth Cummings from a play by Siegfried Geyer; Camera, John Hess Hall; Art Direction, Charles D. Hall; music by Frank Harling; 7 reels With Elissa Landi, Paul Lukas, Mila Astor, Esther Ralston, Dorothy Revier, Lawrence Grant, Warburton Gamble, Lois January.

Despite the fact that his most celebrated films - "The Old Dark House", "Erie of Frankenstein" and "Show Boat" - come from earlier or later years, there seems little doubt that 1933 and 1934 represent the highspot of Whale's sparsely but distinguished career. Over those two years he directed "The Invisible Man", "The Kiss Before the Mirror", "By Candlelight" and "One More River" - a remarkable quartet of stylish, literate, tasteful and thoroughly cinematic works. Lubitsch's "Trouble in Paradise" quite certainly marks the pinnacle of smooth and polished sophistication on the screen (not only for 1932, but for the decades since as well) as does "By Candlelight" with Whale very much in a Lubitsch mood, isn't so far behind. In many ways it is a more remarkable film than "Trouble in Paradise" (which had so much going for it in terms of script, cast etc.) in that Whale literally squeezes the sophistication out of not terribly promising material. Cinderella tales like this were a dime a dozen in the depression years; the dialogue is bright yet never devastatingly funny; Lukas and Asther are polished, but hardly in the same league as such Lubitsch reliables as Chevalier or Herbert Marshall. And yet everything works, moves rapidly and in the brief span of 69 minutes achieves all the elegance and elan of a much more lavish film. It may be imitation Lubitsch in content (and certainly in its opening) but the methods seem to be Whale's own. The virtually non-stop musical score, which goes beyond Mickey-Housing to include deliberate musical jokes, is a case in point. Not only does the sprightly music enhance and reinforce the action, but it constantly reminds one that this is a show, an entertainment, entirely divorced from reality and not for one moment to be taken seriously. It even takes up the slack of the second and third necessary moments when, in order to change pace or location, nothing happens on the screen. At such moments one can be acutely aware of silence and thus of the mechanics of film-making. The score here rarely gives one a time to gain one's breath for such reflections. One suspects too that Whale himself may have had a hand in the scoring since he often reflects his own mordant sense of humor. At one moment when an irate husband arrives to trap an erring wife, the score switches to one of the old-fashioned mysterioso themes familiar through use in horror films and thrillers of the period, and probably never otherwise exposed to the light of day in such an elegant score. Whale seems to exploit his own horror stock-in-trade by mock menace and low-key lighting in sundry closeups of his principals. Even Lukas' slight stiffness is put to work for the film's good in a running gag wherein he (with superbly timed mis-timing) repeats ineffectually the boffo lines aimed at sure-fire seduction uttered earlier by the more practical Mr. Asther. Perhaps it's more an exercise in applied directorial style than a classic comedy and we make no grandiose claims for its laugh content as opposed, for example, to Lubitsch's "Trouble in Paradise" - but it's civilized, gentlemanly, sophisticated and a thoroughly entertaining delight. Does one have the right to ask for anything more?

-- W.K.Everson --

A reminder: due to the long holiday weekend, there will be no program next Friday, and our following program on February 23 (John Ford's THE SEAS BENEATH and THEY WERE EXPENDABLE) will start promptly at 8.00 p.m. without any introductory comments, due to the four-hour length of the program.

Be the replacement for THE LAST "ARMS" (March 16) as announced on last week's notes and discussed in the question and answer period. At short notice it has been impossible to positively confirm a number of films we had considered, such as Lon Chaney's THE MONSTER, and which we'll hope to play later. The most satisfactory substitution, given the pressure of time, seemed to be another Paul Leni directed film of the same period, THE MAN WHO LAUGHED (1928) from the Victor Hugo novel, with Conrad Veidt in a very Chaneyesque role. Apart from one showing in the Lincoln Centre's hard-to-attend retrospective some years back, it has had no recent exposure and is still a remarkable and baroque film.