ROWLAND BROWN

"HELL'S HIGHWAY" (RKO Radio, 1932) Written & directed by Rowland Brown
Executive Producer: David O. Selznick; Camera: Edward Cronjager;

Rowland Brown was an "idea man" who graduated to writing ("Doorway to Hell") and thence to writing-directing, with an obvious aptitude for crime and underworld themes. But his directing period spanned but two years and three pictures, two of which — "Quick Millions!" and "Blood Money" — would seem to be permanently lost. His Hollywood directorial career came to a close when he hooked a producer, and in 1936 he was replaced by Harold Young as the director of "The Scarlet Pimpernel".

For the rest of the 30's and early 40's he reverted to being solely a writer, continuing to specialise in such crime stories as "Johnny Apollo" and "Angels With Dirty Faces". Curiously, despite his record, his only surviving film "Hell's Highway" would suggest that he was a better director than writer. Its novelistic story-line prevents it ever becoming as important a treatment of the chain-gang theme as I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang", yet its purpose is simple enough. Occasionally there are incidents of surprising poignancy - the death of the deaf-mute who does not hear the order to surrender - and the imagery throughout is stark and dramatic, often formalised and reminiscent of the Russian school in such films as "The Ghost That Never Returns". The film hardly establishes Brown as a giant of cinema, but it does suggest that had it not been for the intangibles that wrecked his career, he might have matched the best of Wellman or LeRoy, or at the very least have become, like Robert Florey, one of those perennially inventive makers of above-average minor films whose careers are often more productive and worthy of study than those of the established "prestige" directors.

CECIL B. DeMILLE

"THIS DAY AND AGE" (Paramount 1933) Directed by Cecil B. DeMille
Screenplay: Anne Bauchens; Camera: Florence Harkey

Preceded by excerpts from the Biblical sections of DeMille's silent "The Ten Commandments" (1923)

It is all too easy (unfair) to dismiss DeMille as a good showman but a mediocre director, though this often seems justified if one judges him by the films considered here. As a director of spectacle, he was vastly superior to Griffith, coming up more often with a larger parade of pageantry than genuine spectacle. And in case, the big action sequences in these films were usually the work of Arthur Rosson or some other 2nd Unit Director. As for the big sex dramas and comedies of the early 20's, most of these now seem not only dull and unintentionally amusing in content, but quite primitive in their direction. Too often DeMille seems to have been seduced by big themes, big budgets and big stars -- but one finds that when he is on his own with small and otherwise unimportant properties, he can often be surprisingly creative. Some of his early pre-20's features, and especially "The Cheat" & "The Whispering Chorus", fall into this category; so too do his "modern" films of the late 20's and early 30's - "Dynamite", "The Goddess Girl", "Nadine Satan" and "This Day and Age" - made between his silent and sound spectacle periods. "This Day and Age" is one of those curiously Fascistic and often McCarthyist pictures that abounded in Hollywood for a few years between 1929 and 1934, and of which Hollywood has since been somewhat shamefaced about. DeMille's "The Goddess Girl" Wellman's "The President Vanishes" and "The Star Witness" and LaCava's "Gabriel Over the White House" are comparable films in this brief melodramatic cycle. Their excesses are probably due more to Hollywood zeal and thinking that national temperment of the times, for while they do to an extent reflect national trends of thought, they are far more representative of West Coast thinking, for California has always been, and still is, far more of a police state than any other in the Union.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---