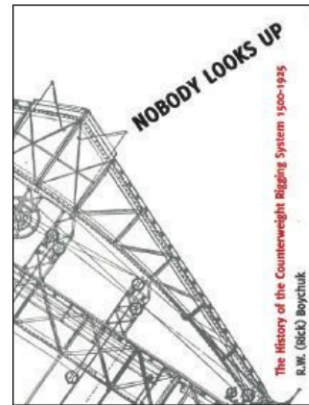


Nobody Looks Up:

The History of the Counterweight Rigging

System: 1500 – 1925 REVIEWED BY KARL G. RULING



NOBODY LOOKS UP is a labor of love, written for people who love counterweight rigging systems. If you love counterweight rigging systems half as much as author Rick Boychuk does, want to know more about how they came to be what they are, and like a good debunking of old TDs' tales, this is a book for you.

Nobody Looks Up started out as a presentation on the history of counterweight rigging for the CITT conference in Ottawa in August 2014. Boychuk thought he'd simply find a book at the library about the history of counterweight systems, and all would be made known. However, he quickly discovered that no such book exists, although bits of the story had been published here and there. He dove into doing some serious research, and put together a successful presentation. The reception of his talk was such that by mid-September he'd decided he really needed to expand his talk into a book. *Nobody Looks Up: The History of the Counterweight Rigging System: 1500 – 1925*, published less than seven months after his presentation, is that book.

It's a remarkable lot of work for such a short writing time. Boychuk had to assemble his rigging history from more than 32 sources, supplemented with his own visits to buildings with fly lofts across the United States and Canada. Besides the texts *Protocol* readers might have in their libraries, such as books by Oscar Brockett, Jay Glerum, Richard Leacroft, and Oren Parker, his sources include Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Sachs and Woodrow's *Modern Opera Houses and Theatres* from 1887, journal articles, post-graduate

dissertations, and rigging equipment catalogs. Boychuk does not simply create a time-line for rigging system. He synthesizes a story from his close reading of texts, analysis of the pictures, consideration how the mechanical system works, and what problems they might have been designed to solve, plus thoughts about how these systems were used in theatres and Masonic temples. He has concluded through his research that most of our old TD's tales about what developed from what and who did the development are wrong.

First of all, hemp rigging did not develop from any nautical tradition, and early flymen were not sailors. About the only thing borrowed from sailing ships was the belaying pin, which Boychuk considers a clear improvement over fixed cleats. Furthermore, mortality data for sailors suggests that very few, if any, retired from the sea to settle into semi-retirement working lines in theatres. We have a little bit of nautical language in our theatre vocabulary, but not nearly enough to suggest strong nautical influences. That is, we have "prompt" and "off-prompt," "stage right" and "stage left," but not "starboard" and "port."

Second, counterweight rigging systems did not evolve from hemp rigging systems. The adoption of the technologies in Europe and North America simply does not fit a simple chronological development. Hemp systems in North America were popular before counterweight systems, but the reverse order is what Boychuk finds in Europe. Furthermore, a counterweight system doesn't have much in common mechanically with a hemp system. A hemp

system has one combined load/operating path. A counterweight system has separate load and operating paths, with the operating path being a closed loop, plus a guide path for the counterweights, which in some theatres was a brick chimney.

If you like detective stories as well as rigging systems, there is much to enjoy here. Boychuk spends several pages working out why there are bridges between the battens in the typical stage shown in Georges Moynet's *Trucs et Decors* (1893). The rigging system uses a tambour to synchronize the movements of drops. If the lift lines terminate at a drum, the only way to trim a drop would be to adjust the hitches at the batten—thus making a bridge for stagehands high in the fly loft necessary.

I have a few quibbles about the book. It was written very quickly, and that shows in the writing. It reads clearly, but the punctuation and some of the word choices had me reaching for my red pen. Furthermore, it's not really a history of counterweight rigging in the world. Boychuk only covers rigging in Europe and North America. People in Asia and other continents have their own theatrical traditions, but they aren't covered here. That said, *Nobody Looks Up* is a good read, and an example of some admirable research. ■

Nobody Looks Up: The History of the Counterweight Rigging System: 1500 – 1925, written by R.W. (Rick) Boychuk. Toronto, ON: Grid Well Press, 2015. ISBN-13: 978-1508438106; ISBN-10: 1508438102.