

An American Epic: Ever Young by Derek M. Mills

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Baby Doe and Horace Tabor are buried together on a small ridge in the Mt. Olivet cemetery west of Denver, a modest tombstone marking their grave. The epitaph is only his. It reads: "Unknown to fame until approaching the age of 50, chance suddenly brought him considerable wealth and reputation. A few years later, another throw of the dice as quickly returned him to his former obscurity."

The Tabors' grave sites fittingly face to the west toward the great peaks of the Rockies where they and Augusta, Horace's first wife, panhandled and shopkept and danced and mined. In its view are Blackhawk, where Baby lived as the young bride of Harvey Doe; Central City, Buckskin Joe and Oro City, where Horace dreamed and grubstaked and Augusta ran boarding houses and took in laundry; and Leadville, the two-mile-high silver boomtown where their three lives were fatefully intertwined, where Horace and Baby fell in love and Horace and Augusta separated, where he became for a time the richest man in metal-rich Colorado, and where Baby froze to death, destitute and alone, in a March blizzard in 1935.

Theirs is a quintessentially American tale. It is a story of dreams and defeat, of optimism about a future that finally failed in a West that was growing. It is an epic of "the common man," an epic that would inspire Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Douglas Moore and poet John LaTouche in 1956 to write what would become arguably the quintessential American national opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

Baby Doe is an opera in which America is a suffusing, immanent presence, much as Russia is in *Boris Godunov*. It is an opera whose music and message resonate with what Vernon L. Parrington called the "main for other" "storytelling modes" - such as tragedy. "Other peoples' myths," Limerick writes, "face up to human despair...to failure, to defeat, to sin." Why doesn't ours?

Well, guess what? The saga of the Tabors-sketched by LaTouche and Moore in a way that is symbolically if not literally accurate - surely does. Lord Byron, in a famous observation, noted that comedies end in marriage and tragedies in death. Fittingly, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has both, with its first act culminating in the buoyant wedding reception for Horace and Baby at Washington's own Willard Hotel, and the second closing with the moving deaths of each of the protagonists. It is precisely in the mix of materials that comprise the comedy that the source of the tragedy is found, that is, the very construct of comedy will deconstruct into tragedy. The "fatal flaws" that will

doom each Tabor in the second act are the very consequences, the costs, of the choices they make in the first.

Horace Tabor is the American Everyman: stumbling into a fortune, wasting it, paradoxically baffled by success and ennobled by failure. He believed in the promise of the West, of the renewing frontier. He epitomized Turner's characterization of "the historic American [as] an opportunist...who knew not where he was going, but who was on his way, cheerful, optimistic, busy and buoyant."

As we learn in the opera's masterful final scene, Tabor "was born in 1830 in the little town of Holland, Vermont;" after working some years in New England as a stonemason, he emigrated in 1855 to Zeandale, Kansas, where he farmed and served in the territorial legislature. It was here in 1857 that he brought his new bride from Maine, "the boss's daughter," Augusta Pierce. But a house on this prairie was not the future for this "panhandlin' man:" when gold was discovered in Colorado in 1859, the Tabors headed for fledgling Denver.

Ahead were nearly 20 years of plodding storekeeping and fruitless prospective in the wilderness towns of the Continental Divide, years in the "miners' sweetheart" and soon realized that while these mountains held her future, Harvey did not. An affair with a local merchant became her catalyst to divorce Harvey and move to Leadville, where in 1880 she contrived to meet "fabulous Horace Tabor."

And thus we have the makings of a case study fit for Gail Sheehy to include in a 19-century version of *New Passages*: a man and a woman discontent with their lives, firm in their faith in the future, willing to risk to reinvent. They exemplified what Turner called our national "indifference to the dogma that because a condition exists, it must remain." We're "quick to find expedients," and Horace and Baby did, creating what the libretto calls "another administration scandal." Horace divorced Augusta, and while serving briefly as senator, married Baby; President Arthur himself attended the reception in January of 1883.

After the divorce, Augusta spent the remaining decade of her life living quietly, even abstemiously, in Denver. She invested her considerably settlement wisely in local real estate, endowed the Unitarian Church, was active in social causes and died in 1895, one of the wealthiest women in the state.

Horace's fortune remained fabulous, and he and Baby lived with the reckless extravagance that is the trademark of the *nouveaux riches*. After a giddy decade of conspicuous consumption, the veins feeding their lifestyle played out. The mines were mortgaged, the Panic of '93 devalued Horace's other holdings, and the plummeting price of silver finally exhausted their assets. This was the "throw of the dice" that returned Horace "to his former obscurity," but he refused to bend to misfortune. Although a lifelong Republican, in 1896 he supported William Jennings Bryan and free silver; he still sought mines to invest in and even began to work some claims himself, despite his age. He was finally rescued from poverty's brink by an appointment to the postmastership

of Denver, a position he filled with distinction (although he must have been bemused to think that in wealthier times, he had donated to the government the land on which the Post Office stood).

After Tabor's death in 1899, Baby was an eminently marriageable widow in her mid-forties. But she would choose neither life in Denver nor remarriage, and instead moved back to Leadville with her daughters and attempted to revive what remained of the Tabor mines.

Her life there was hard. The boom times were gone, and Leadville was more Appalachia than El Dorado. The children would drift away. The elder, Elizabeth, who seemed to her mother "more Augusta's daughter than mine," soon left for Oshkosh and cut herself off from her mother and sister; she did not invite them to her wedding, nor would she attend their funerals. By contrast, the younger child, Silver Dollar, was almost too much Baby's daughter; like her mother, she was a "wild girl." A writer of some promise, she moved to Chicago in 1915 to seek her fortune, but instead found that life of dissolution depicted so vividly in the opera's "Moonshine" song. She became, as the Chicago Tribune wrote after her death in 1925, the "synthetic South Side's heroine of post-Volstead gayety."

Baby lived in Leadville for most of the 36 years between Horace's death and her own, growing increasingly isolated, reclusive, mystical. Although she was tireless in her attempts to raise money for-and even work in-the dwindling mines, they did not produce again. As the corporal world failed her, she turned increasingly to the spiritual, and her confidante was a rambling journal she kept called "Dreams and Vision." (Interestingly, her mysticism was peppered with pragmatism, for many of her fantasies concern the business moves she could make if only she had the capital.) She would die in the tiny cabin by the Matchless Mine in which she had lived her last years.

Thus, just as the first act's comedy ends in marriage, the second's tragedy ends in death, and Horace and Baby and Augusta each "die a failure." But in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, death does not close all; there remains an apotheosis, a redemption, even what we now might call a "reinvention." This begins with Augusta's last aria and continues through Horace's final scene. After his death, alone on a darkened stage, Baby sings a hymn to the redemptive power of love, a hymn suffused with an American "faith in a benevolent progress," a faith now tested by tragedy and enriched by awareness and softened by love. "I shall walk beside my love," sings Baby, "who is husband, father, child; I shall change along with him, so that both are ever young."

"Ever young" - Baby's last ethereal words float across the opera house, thus concluding this saga of our national experience with neither a bang nor a whimper, but with a shimmer.

Derek M. Mills writes frequently on opera. He has contributed to Opera News, Opera Monthly and Opera Digest, as well as the publications of Seattle Opera, Opera Orchestra of New York, Portland Opera and Opera Colorado. He is indebted to his friend and colleague, David Kanzeg, for many rich hours of discussion about the Tabor saga.

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