

# Romantic West in *Baby Doe*

by Lucius Beebe

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CENTRAL CITY, Colo. The biggest doings in this remote and romantic old mining town, since the razzle-dazzle which accompanied the visit to the Teller House Bar in 1873 of President Ulysses S. Grant, took place a week ago with the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of revivals in Central City's opera house in Eureka St.

The turnout and general hooray even ensmallled the splendors of that well-remembered night in 1932 when Lillian Gish in a Robert Edmond Jones setting for "Camille" brought Central City back from the dead and into the national news for the first time since the Boston Mine was making millionaires in Colorado as commonplace as they are today in Houston.

The occasion last Saturday evening was the world premiere of a flashback into Colorado's own well-publicized folklore called "The Ballad of Baby Doe," composed by Pulitzer Prize-winning Douglas Stewart Moore with a libretto by John Latouche and sung by a cast partly recruited from New York's Metropolitan Opera. For the story's unveiling there was assembled an audience of critics, social and political notables and names that make news ranging from Lily Pons to Kim Novak. Music reporters from as far away as Seattle, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles occupied aisle seats in what is perhaps the most perfectly preserved monument to the grandeur that was the old mining West.

A Legend of Love

The romance of Horace Tabor, richest of the carbonate kings of Leadville, Lieutenant Governor of Colorado and briefly United States Senator, with a blonde adventuress who was to become immortal as Baby Doe, is an established staple of Colorado's full-blooded folklore, which teems in resolute profusion with Indian fighters, fur traders, railroad builders, embattled editors and other stock characters of the Wells Fargo years.

To clear the way for his June and September alliance with Baby Doe, Tabor had to divorce his first wife, Augusta Tabor, herself a tall tower of pince-nez respectability, through the agency of a variety of legal devisings which still bemuse students of Colorado law. What had originally been a local scandal confined to Denver and the gold town circuit of the Rockies flowered into the full light of national awfulness when Tabor prevailed upon President Chester A. Arthur, himself a man who liked nice things, to marry the ill-assorted couple in the White House. The razzberry from the pulpits of the nation that greeted this defiance of man's conventions is still clearly audible to students of the period.

### The Wages of Sin

The force of righteousness eventually prevailed, however. The declining fortunes of silver which spread ruin throughout the West combined with Tabor's own fantastic investments in mythical enterprises in a few years reduced him to a mendicant for minor political favors. He died in office as Denver's postmaster in the nineties in a small room in the Windsor Hotel where once he had swaggered at the banquets of the mighty. A third of a century later Baby Doe was found frozen to death in a shack by the hoist of the long disused Matchless Mine in Leadville, her wealth and reason long gone in the delusion that one day the mine would reopen and restore her to wealth.

Today no mining town of any pretensions in Colorado but has its Tabor or baby Doe Suite in the George Washington-Slept-Here tradition of the best New England taverns.

Baby Doe's unloved end was universally seen as a vindication of virtue and rebuke to those of evil ways. It was also nicely timed to bring Colorado into national attention just about the time the Central City revivals were being inaugurated by Miss Gish's tragic camellias. Briefly suspended during the 1941 war, Central's summer theater revivals have become the most important theater event in the entire West and are noted alike for the high gold bearing content of their audiences and for the

professional precision and expertise of their productions.

The sets for this season's run of "The Ballad of Baby Doe" were designed, together with the lighting and costumes, by Donald Oenslager, a Central city veteran of long standing. Musical direction was by Emerson Buckley and Walter Taussig.

It is not often that complete illusion is so available to theatergoers as it was the night of the opening of "Baby Doe." Here, in a playhouse where once they themselves had been participants in departed dramas, in a setting which had been the factual background for their own lives and hopes and frustrations, amidst the wreckage of the mining years that might well symbolize the wreckage of their own fortunes, the characters of Tabor, Augusta and Baby Doe came to life behind the footlights in a manner intensely startling. To a few oldtimers in the audience, who had at first hand known those departed scenes and faces, the recreation of reality was overwhelming.

While this very familiarity with the Tabor-Colorado theme is an asset to the production of "Baby Doe" in Central City, it also constitutes what is undoubtedly a hazard to the opera's presentation in the great world or on Broadway. The authors have traded heavily on audience understanding of, and indeed vicarious participation in, the story. To make it understandable to theatergoers less informed in Colorado history than those who applauded every local reference last Saturday night at Central will require ample background material in the program.

The tone of both score and book is uneven, but with a calculated unevenness obviously intended by the authors; ranging from an almost Gilbert and Sullivan quicktime and rhyming at the outset to authentic grand opera of emotional volume in the scene during a ball at the Windsor, in which Augusta renounces Tabor and warns Baby Doe of impending tragedy if she continues to believe in him, and concluding on a note of dreary melancholy in an interlude in which the future is revealed to Tabor with its fated consequences to his descendants.

The performance, appearance and manner of Walter Cassel as Tabor could hardly be improved. His creation of a pathetic figure in the rich and swaggering rum-bum without the emotional stability to balance his great wealth and fortune was without flaw, his makeup so realistic as to be a matter of universal remark. Dolores Wilson as Baby Doe, while both personally and vocally adequate to the part, lacked in character and definition. This may very well have been suited to the historic fact but it made for an emotional vacuum.

The evening was dominated by Augusta Tabor, played by Martha Lipton, and she carried it off in the very grand manner indeed, supplemented by a stately presence which diminished Tabor in his person as in character and capacity for emotion.

This is the conventional estimate of Augusta, and almost all historians of Colorado's great days unite in their sympathy for her as a figure of noble dignity in circumstances of overwhelming tragedy. Of authorities on the Tabor legend, only Caroline Bancroft dissents with the view that she was a miracle of avarice and domestic shrew of the first chop. The Augusta of the moment gives no hint of this uncharitable assay.

Regardless of what considered critical opinion may make of "The Ballad of Baby Doe"—and it should be remarked parenthetically that the Denver press, never impartial in matters of Rocky Mountain context, roared with critical acclaim—it was a date marked with a star in the annals of Central City. Donald Oenslager's always professional and often inspired recreations of such Colorado landmarks as the Clarendon Hotel at Leadville, the Windsor and the hoists of the Matchless Mine enchanted all beholders.

The same gold and crimson curtain that had gone up for first night audiences in the Central City seventies, and had seen on both sides of the footlights so much of life and drama, went down amidst a snowstorm of bouquets distributed by the ushers and tossed from the audience as the players took their bows.

If there were moist eyes and a covert dabbing of handkerchiefs as the audience filed out into the Colorado night, they were not for Augusta Tabor and baby Doe and the Matchless Mine alone, but for one more evening of sentiment and one indissoluble tie with the storied past about which Colorado is very properly very sentimental indeed.