

Frances Bible



Frances Bible 1919 - 2001

Once described as having a "voice of molten splendor," Frances Bible's New York City Opera career lasted from October 1948 to November of 1977, and included four dozen plus roles, including Elizabeth Proctor in Robert Ward's *Crucible*, which she premiered opposite Chester Ludgin in 1961. Born an "army brat" in Sacketts Harbor, New York, Bible was a scholarship student at Juilliard from 1939 to 1947. A breakthrough came in 1949 when she did Octavian in *Rosenkavalier*, a role she later reprised to great acclaim in San Francisco alongside Elizabeth Schwartzkopf.

Augusta Tabor came into Bible's life during *The Ballad of Baby Doe's* premiere season at Central City, Colorado in 1956, where she alternated in the role with Martha Lipton (who sang the opening night premiere). It was Bible's Augusta, however, that became the definitive one for the next generation. She "owned" the role at New York City Opera, having learned it directly from composer Douglas Moore and librettist John Latouche. She etched it in vinyl, as it were, on the opera's first recording playing opposite Beverly Sills and Walter Cassel, and made television history singing it on the first-ever *Live from Lincoln Center* nationwide opera broadcast on PBS during the 1976 celebrations surrounding America's Bicentennial.

Beverly Sills has said: "The only time I hated playing Baby Doe was when Frances Bible was singing Augusta Tabor. She made me want to murder Baby Doe for being the other woman. In a way, Frannie helped me to shape Baby Doe's character because I realized every woman in the audience was on Augusta's side."

In the fall of 1973, D. Kanzeg spoke by phone with Frances Bible, who was in her home in New York.

DK: How did you first become acquainted with Baby Doe?

FB: Well, oh, let's see. I was just called and asked, would I like to do it in Central City. And, of course, I said 'yes.' I didn't know what it was all about at that point. And then I started looking into the history of it. And getting books to read. That sorta thing. Of course Caroline Bancroft is probably the biggest authority on that subject. She wrote a number of books on that subject. And so I started reading. And they sent me a photostatted copy of the score. And we rehearsed in New York City for a while. And then continued when we got to Central City. And I met a lawyer out there who's father had been Tabor's lawyer. Which is an interesting experience. And he had photographs of Augusta Tabor and Horace Tabor as they came across the country.

DK: Uh huh.

FB: You know those old tintype things? He brought them over and we looked at them. And Augusta Tabor, surprisingly enough, was a...could have been a very handsome woman. (In this day and age with make-up and all that sort of thing.) She was slender and had good features. As you can see by her later photographs ...the ones used usually in the show, you know, on the curtain...she became very stiff and austere looking. But originally, on their trip across the country, she looked quite young and lovely.

DK: I get the impression that uh...from the opera, and from the stories of Caroline Bancroft, that Augusta was a New England-type girl...a very plain stock and yet very upright and...uh strong features.

FB: Very religious and proper, you know. And typically New England. Coming from that part of country myself it helped me a little to understand the character and...uh I find that, well, to be truthful the first performance I did of it I was more worn out than I was when I...I am when I do Amneris in *Aida*, because I find it more taxing, because the emotion is all held inside. You know when you do Amneris you can, you know, chew the scenery and carry on a bit. But New England people don't show their emotions that way. They're all inside you. And...I'm a...I love to eat. (This is leading to something.) But when I was...for three hours after that first performance I couldn't even THINK of eating or anything. I was just worn out...emotionally, you know.

DK: How does the role compare with others you've performed, in difficulty in learning it first of all and ultimately in singing it and portraying the dramatic qualities that it has?

FB: Originally, the part of Augusta was written for a dramatic soprano. And then, the composer decided that he wanted a little heavier voice than that, in the part. But he didn't rewrite the part. So it is quite taxing. It gets up on the top quite a lot, you know. And uh, you know he didn't rewrite any of the high

notes. To fit a lower voice. So it's quite taxing. And very dramatic. Especially the scene with the friends of Augusta. I think that's the high point, although the last aria that she does about...you know she's torn between whether she should go help him or whether she shouldn't....and she decides not to. And that's her last appearance in the opera. It's very dramatic. But I think the scene with the friends, where they needle her about that...uh Mr. Tabor's running around with this young pretty thing..and uh, she should get a divorce, and, of course, in those days you didn't DO that....and she says "I'm not going to do that," and...you know. She was sort of small town.

DK: She's sort of forced into it.

FB: Yes.