



Walter Cassel and his wife Gail Manners Cassel

WALTER CASSEL 1910 - 2000

Walter Cassel's Metropolitan Opera debut was in 1942 as de Bretigny in *Manon* (BEFORE his debut with the New York City Opera, which came in 1948.) He stayed at the Met until 1945. And though he returned there once again in 1955, and sang there until 1974 (he sang 275 performances at the Met and only 126 at the NYCO), Walter Cassel's name will forever be associated with the "other" opera company, and then most especially for his signature portrayal of Baby Doe Tabor's garrulous husband Horace.

Yet, despite his versatility in French, German and Italian repertoire, his notoriety for having performed opposite the great Maria Callas without any wounds to show for it, and prodigious feats like performing Scarpia, Kurwenal and Jochanaan all within the space of twenty-four hours, Walter Cassel remains relatively unknown, even among opera devotees. Indeed, almost his only extant recording is the definitive *Baby Doe*, with Beverly Sills and Frances Bible, **done in a single take** during the opera's New York run in 1958.

Cassel grew up in Council Bluffs, Iowa, taking trumpet lessons and singing in his high school chorus. He intended to go into dentistry while attending Creighton University in Omaha, but changed his mind after an encounter with legendary baritone Lawrence Tibbett, a personality whose influence stayed with Cassel the rest of his life. Following Tibbett's advice to go to New York to pursue a professional singing career, he arranged with a helpful freight agent to accompany a carload of cattle "on-the-hoof" to a yard in New Jersey, just across the Hudson from Manhattan. It was December of 1933. He spent an entire week in a cold caboose. But on his first day in New York Cassel got a scalper's ticket to hear Tibbett in *Aïda*. Two days later he had a regular gig on an NBC radio show.

Cassel (who remembered, in retrospect, reading in 1935 about the death of the real

Baby Doe Tabor) created the role of Horace Tabor in the world premiere night of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* at Central City, Colorado, July 7, 1956. (Dolores Wilson was Baby, and Martha Lipton was Augusta.) Though that performance is lost to history, some of the performances from that original season survive due to Cassel's own ingenuity. He had the presence of mind not only to hook his tape recorder up to the opera house stage's public address system (the means by which singers could hear the progress of the performance while still in their dressing rooms), but to give copies to the principals, after the fact, for their archives. As a result, at least two virtually complete recordings of those original casts, which include such other wonderful singers as Leyna Gabriele, Norman Treigle and Clifford Harvuot, are preserved in private collections to this day.

Not unlike the man he chose to play so often, Walter Cassel's robustly-etched portrayal of Colorado's richest miner will loom formidably over every performance by every baritone who attempts to follow in his shoes. During the thirty-five years following the opera's premiere, he sang the Horace Tabor role hundreds of times: discovering a deeper connection with it in every performance. Or rather, spurred on by the powerful influence of the great Hanya Holm (*Baby Doe's* original stage director), Cassel became Horace Tabor hundreds of times thereafter. "It felt like we were turning into the people we were supposed to be playing," Cassel later recalled of her meticulous and rigorous direction. An audience could hardly ask for more from an artist. And as a permanent legacy, both Walter AND Horace should be "mighty" proud.

In April 1994, D. Kanzeg visited Bloomington, Indiana and spoke with Walter Cassel in his home. They talked about creating the role of Horace Tabor, the Baby Doe premiere in Central City, and the recording with Beverly Sills.



WC: After we did *Baby Doe* in Central City, some of the New York critics came out for that. But they didn't think it was very great. I think their observations were rather shallow. Because, on hearing it and rehearing it, about the third year, or something like that, they began to change their opinions. It depends on how you lis...there's a way to listen and a way not to listen...as well as sing. And they began to change their opinions and see that there was some real depth in Horace Tabor, *Baby Doe* and the whole Tabor family. But if you can't....it's like having education. You can't do something that requires education if you don't have education. I think it's as simple as that. If your observation is not deep enough how can you observe deeply. It's just as simple as that.

DK: Let's talk about *Baby Doe* and the premiere in Central City. How far ahead of that performance...I think it was July 7th, 1956...how far ahead did you become acquainted with the story, or what led up to that?

WC: Doug Moore didn't warn me very much. All of a sudden Columbia--my manager

Kurt Weinholt--said that a composer from the university wants to talk with you about possibly being interested in an opera called *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. So I went up to Doug's apartment. He played through some of it....I don't know if you've ever heard Doug play the piano...[laughter]

DK:yes, in bawdy songs....

WC: I must admit I couldn't tell what he was playing. You see he plays almost like sketchiness looks like when you sketch...you know how some composer's sketch...I could not tell. And I took the score home. And had Stewart Willy, he was playing for me at that time, who had been Tibbett's accompanist. And we went over it and just began to fall flatly in love with it. And results was that we wanted to be a part of it. So Doug Moore was happy about that...he got another step along the way. But I went to Central City where we did it and we were so carried away with the opera....I don't remember...I'm not that great a musician...although having been a trumpeter was a great help...but it kind of sang itself....the Horace Tabor part...it was so naturally written....there was a little rewriting that went on after we left Central City, but before we played it in New York City. But basically it was there. And it...even the critics could not see this, as I mentioned before. They didn't see beyond their noses. That's the way it seemed to me. If I were going to describe it. They heard things they didn't know were there...that seems hard for an experienced critic and I don't think they would have admitted it either, but... Anyway. it seemed to be the truth...the more they heard *Baby Doe*, well [the more] us who played it [heard *Baby Doe*]...I think all of us would agree on that point. It gets into your skin and you become.... because it's real. Part of it is really real. You can't escape it...

WC: I was in New York and then went back to Omaha to give this outdoor concert. And I was the big homegrown boy going back to sing. They had a big concert. I sang with a band. But going back to New York on the train I picked up a newspaper and read about the death of Baby Doe, freezing to death. I thought that was unusual...I didn't know anything about Baby Doe then. But I remembered. I turned the pages back when Baby Doe's name appeared in my mind, and remembered that I read about her. Now why should I do that? History has strange ways of connecting itself. But there I was reading about Baby Doe and I didn't have any idea that I was...uh...would become the Horace Tabor in an opera. But until later, when I was doing the Tabor tour, I remembered that. Can you imagine!?

WC: [talking about Hanya Holm, the *Baby Doe* stage director at Central City] Hanya Holm! Who was just superb! She knew how to draw every ounce of blood out of us...and the blood that belonged to the opera. And...well,...it felt like we were turning into the people we were supposed to be playing. I think that's quite a compliment, because they were interesting, red-blooded Americans, growing up the tough way. And making a go of it. Living life, and enjoying it. This is what, in a sense, I think this is what the early stages of singers go through, to try and survive, to be alive, to stay singing, and stay healthy. And grow. This life is too short on this planet not to live that fully.

DK: So what happened that night, after the [premiere] performance?

WC: Well, some few of 'em got a little drunk, I think. But I don't drink that much. But you naturally stay up talking about how good or how bad this was. But we were all

excited with *Baby Doe*. And to say the least, Doug Moore and Latouche...he had a good habit of drinking...so he was kind of full of gin or something, but Doug Moore is a more simple person. And I'm sure Doug wept, like he did every time he came backstage...and told me what he thought of the opera. Or what we did with it. He was a sweetheart. Sweet old man.

DK: How 'bout the recording? That's a different story too.

WC: Well, that recording! We were all a little bit shocked. Because we had it in shape; we were performing it at New York City opera. And so they...it's like as if they decided 'well, they're going to make a recording'. So we went to the recording studio on Broadway up there in an old theater and uh....played it in the theatre...just went through it. Once. That's not the way they do most recordings.

DK: So that was like a LIVE recording?

WC: Yes. Yes. We went through...I don't think we repeated a single thing. But it was like doing a performance except that we didn't go through all the throws. We sang into microphones, you know.

DK: That's astounding. Because, to me, that has become, in a way, the sort of definitive performance.

WC: Well, I think it was only definitive for the simple reason that we were up in it and performing it on stage at New York City Opera. We did the same thing in that stand-still effort that we did onstage, because we were induced and practiced to do it. Because it wasn't like a stand-up-in-front-of-a-microphone performance at all. You just...you were playing the parts.