

## HOMESTEADING AND HUCK FINN WITH TUNES

By Malcolm Hayes

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This side of the Atlantic at least, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is not exactly a repertory work. University College Opera's staging of it at the Bloomsbury Theatre raises some searching questions as to why not. It's also a credit to the company in its own right.

Douglas Moore's opera has been a mainstay of the American repertory since it was premiered in 1953. [sic.] It offers just about everything that a successful opera needs: strongly characterized and not too difficult principal roles, some good minor ones, some rousing chorus scenes, and an interesting story. And the libretto is even written in something syntactically resembling English. So why has the work never caught on in these islands? Probably because, like Copland's *The Tender Land*—another American vernacular opera whose reputation still languishes—*The Ballad of Baby Doe* isn't really about the world of The Opera House. It's about the country of homesteading, Huck Finn and Henry Ford. Which means that it's aimed at an altogether different audience.

The opera's hero and central character is a Henry Ford who blew it. Horace Tabor, the go-getting mine-owner of Leadville, Colorado, has got rich after years of poverty. Having been spurred on for years by his wife Augusta, he now meets the delectable Mrs. Elizabeth ("Baby") Doe, divorces Augusta, marries his new love, sticks mule-headedly with silver-mining as the country heads towards the gold standard, and dies in poverty again. Baby Doe (who like the other main characters actually existed) stays loyal to Horace's memory and to the one mine he told her never to sell. Eventually she is found frozen to death inside it.

There are plenty of small but telling parts for the assortment of high-falutin' ladies who look down their noses at the (low be it whispered) *divorced* Baby Doe, and for the equally disapproving female clientele at the local saloon. These were nicely taken by UCO's cast, and the chorus scenes really fizzed. And Moore's score is also replete with the true opera composer's gift of finding music which, rather than just filling a mould defined by the libretto, seems to expand outwards from within. The result is a sequence of set-pieces—arias, if you like—that give real opportunities to the principal singers.

Omar Ebrahim, singing much more warmly than all those schlock-horror roles for Opera Factory ever required him to, delivered a wonderfully strong and vivid portrait of Tabor. Regina Nathan's Baby Doe convincingly combined winsomeness and a sense of inner strength. And as the embittered but ultimately forgiving Augusta, the Dutch mezzo-soprano Klara Uleman offered beautifully projected singing and a stage presence of real power. David Drummond's conducting kept a firm grip on proceedings, and Robert Chevara's skilled production showed how much can be achieved on a virtually set-less stage if the ideas and costumes are both good.