

Comments about Carl Zuckmayer's *The Life
of Horace A.W. Tabor (Das Leben des
H.A.W. Tabor)*

from Carl Zuckmayer

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In [Zuckmayer's] second-to-last drama, *The Life of Horace A.W. Tabor* - written after *Dance of the Herons* but first performed on 18 November 1964, approximately three years before the one-act play - Zuckmayer again drew on his experiences as an American resident and seized upon a genuinely and uniquely American subject: an authentic hero's rise from rags to riches and, in a significant deviation from the pattern of the success story, his sudden downfall. It is hardly surprising that, in 1939, the story of the erstwhile "silver king" Tabor and his wife Baby Doe was recommended to the newly arrived immigrant as a project with the potential of a surefire Broadway success. Only a few years before Zuckmayer had set foot on American soil, in 1936, newspapers had reported Baby Doe's demise; she had been found frozen to death in her dilapidated shack in Leadville, Colorado. Until the very last she believed-contrary to the opinion of the experts - that the silver mine "The Matchless" she had inherited from Tabor would yield new treasures.

But at that time the dramatist lacked sufficient familiarity with his host country to tackle indigenous material that Douglas Moore, composer of the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), considered a "great American story." In addition, Zuckmayer was too preoccupied with the fate of Europe in general and Germany in particular - as both the unsuccessful *Somewhere in France* and the hugely successful *The Devil's General* demonstrate to varying degrees. As a consequence, we are faced with the somewhat paradoxical fact that, despite its authentic American subject, the play was not written during Zuckmayer's

stay in the United States but rather after the playwright's return to Europe. It was also in Europe, at the Zurich Schauspielhaus, that the play premiered some twenty-five years after Zuckmayer had first heard of Tabor and Baby Doe. Needless to say, the expectations of the German-speaking public differed considerably from those of American theatergoers; they may well have influenced Zuckmayer's dramatic concept.

Despite Zuckmayer's insistence that he had not intended any evocation of the Wild West, it is fair to say that he did not entirely escape the danger of making concessions to popular European preconceptions about the United States. Many critics, at any rate, made explicit references to the Wild West in the headlines of their reviews. A closer look at the text reveals, however, that *The Life of Horace A.W. Tabor* is not, by any means, simply an improved version of the early drama *Pankraz Awakens*. On the contrary, although the first act begins in the run-down gold-digger town of Leadville in 1879, the playwright endeavors to de-emphasize the adventuresome and exotic elements by referring to phenomena of the modern industrial world such as environmental pollution and social problems. Only as part of the exposition, presented by means of reports, dialogue, and as a play within a play, does the colorful past of the pioneer and the fight against the Indians play a role. Other conflicts, that is, primarily those between workers and their employers, dominate the present.

Tabor himself - he and his wife Augusta run a post office and general store in Leadville - has renounced the false romanticism of gold-digging and succumbed to a pessimistic attitude that is quite uncharacteristic of an inhabitant of the New World. But by a stroke of luck he is able to acquire cheaply two thirds of a silver vein from two German immigrants that proves to be almost inexhaustible. Only two years later - the second act takes place in 1881 - Tabor, now a wealthy man, fully subscribes to the idea of progress that for him is almost synonymous with prosperity and profit. Hence he considers a strike by his workers a criminal act; if necessary, he is prepared to use his private army in order to preserve law and order.

The third act takes place one year later and shows Tabor at the height of his power; his economic rise from rags to riches is reflected in his newly gained political prominence. He has been elected governor of Colorado; somewhat later he will become senator. In addition, Tabor's fabulous wealth has excited the people's imagination; his extraordinary good fortune provides the stuff for popular lore and legends. When Tabor first sets eyes on Baby Doe, she appropriately sings the song of silver king Tabor. The song emphasizes Tabor's foremost characteristic - his luck. According to the playwright, Tabor lived in the "time of great improvisations...in the world of unheard-of strokes of luck and enormous losses." As the subtitle of the play, *A Drama from the Days of the Last Kings*, suggests, Zuckmayer conceived of Tabor's wealth as being of magical origin.

Tabor's ostentatious display of wealth and his illicit relationship with Baby Doe have alienated him from his wife Augusta who, motivated by social compassion, tends to the needs of the exploited miners. Although she grants

him a divorce so that he is free to marry Baby Doe, it is precisely at the moment when his fortune seems to have reached a new peak, at the lavish and spectacular wedding feast, that his empire begins to crumble as a consequence of unfavorable developments in the stock market. In only a little more than three years-the wedding scene in act 4, scene 3 takes place in Washington in 1883, the following first scene of act 5 in Denver, Christmas 1886 - Tabor has lost his entire fortune and is reduced to poverty again. Miraculously, however, Augusta returns to Tabor, and Baby Doe remains faithful to him. In the last scene of the play Tabor dies a poor but happy man in a play that in almost Brechtian "epic" fashion spans twenty years of his life - from 1879 to 1899 - yet essentially concentrates on the seven years - from 1879 to 1886 - of Tabor's rise and fall.

In the view of a number of critics Zuckmayer's play lacked relevance in the middle sixties, at a time when the documentary drama had begun to assert itself. Both Zuckmayer's choice of subject matter - usually decried as a Western or gold-digger story-and the artistic means chosen to present this subject-essentially realism-these critics argued, lacked modern appeal and were an insufficient attempt at historical analysis. In fact, one critic went so far as to charge that Zuckmayer had dramatized material that was also used by Hollywood for "the creation of the American myth." To be sure, Zuckmayer delights in the creation of a milieu that is populated by colorful characters whose very names hint at the unusual. Thus we encounter John Savage, a former medicine man of the Cheyenne Indians, Buckskin Joe, an old gold-digger, "Chicken-Bill" Lovell, a prospector, and Harvey "Vulture" Doe, the former husband of Baby Doe. Particularly the last named appears as the prototypical Chicago gangster when, during his brief presence on stage, he successfully blackmails Tabor. At the same time, however, in accordance with his avowed intention of minimizing the ingredients to be found in Westerns, Zuckmayer stressed the "documentary" character of his drama by appending a list of works he consulted - a procedure far more familiar from, for example, Rolf Hochhuth's documentary drama *The Deputy* (1983) than from Zuckmayer.

At any rate, in the final analysis it was not the playwright's aim to explore the social dimensions of an important phase of American history; rather, Zuckmayer was fascinated by the figure of Tabor whose rapid rise and fall-despite its peculiarly American traits-seems to transcend the specific time and place of the action. That Tabor's fate is not primarily determined by socioeconomic factors and that he refuses to be cast in a mold is evident, for example, from the apt characterization of one of his fellow bonanza millionaires who calls him a "mystic,...not an entrepreneur,...not a modern man." On the one hand, Tabor is not a true capitalist in the fashion of Pierpont Mauler in Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*; on the other, as an avowed individualist he neither fully grasps nor sympathizes with the ideas of social reform that are advocated in the play by the character Stratton. Stratton, incidentally a historical figure, is presented by Zuckmayer as a Marxist millionaire - the seeming contradiction notwithstanding.

Tabor's existence is, in the last analysis, little affected by the laws of

economics. The repeated references to his fortune, the subtitle, and initial stage directions of the play suggest quite apart from Zuckmayer's additional comments—that the atmosphere of the fairy tale, in which riches and power are bestowed upon the pure in heart, pervades the drama. There is, indeed, a popular play (Volksstück) by the nineteenth-century Viennese playwright Ferdinand Raimund, entitled *The Farmer as Millionaire*, that bears a remarkable structural - thematic resemblance to Zuckmayer's drama. Raimund presents, although within the confines of the Romantic, Original, Magic Fairy Tale (thus his subtitle), the rise and fall of a humble man, his temporary delusion, and ultimate happiness that is preceded by the recognition of the errors of his ways. Zuckmayer's drama lacks Raimund's didactic application; however, like Raimund Zuckmayer is primarily interested in the "purely human" devoid of its social and political implications. *Der Spiegel*, hardly noted for subtle understatement, was quick to seize upon the fairy-tale aspects of Zuckmayer's drama and recommended it to the children's hour of the German broadcasting companies. Other critics expressed more balanced but not entirely positive views. The astute Friedrich Luft, for example, asseverated in his review that one could no longer write naively realistic plays as if Brecht, Beckett, or Ionesco had never existed.

The objections raised against Zuckmayer's play concerning the choice of subject matter, the lack of social relevance, the realistic means of presentation, and the creation of a fairy-tale atmosphere have their common denominator in the implicit or explicit assumption that Zuckmayer is no longer "modern" by virtue of the fact that he adhered to both his dramatic creed and his essential means of expression. Lack of modernity, in turn, almost automatically denotes a dramatist of less consequence, many critics seem to infer. Yet such views have not remained unchallenged. One perceptive reviewer observed correctly that critics form only part of the theatrical establishment. Some directors, many actors- for whom Zuckmayer wrote highly rewarding roles-and large segments of the theater-going public constitute Zuckmayer's following. To be sure, these followers tend to be less vociferous and articulate than the critics. Nevertheless, their loyalty to Zuckmayer provides an indication that the playwright continued to be a viable force in the theater-even if, as in the case of *The Life of Horace A.W. Tabor*, he shunned the message play and made an only partially successful transition from the exoticism, inspired by Karl May, of *Pankraz Awakens* to a play in which the social dimensions, represented by the ideas of Karl Marx as interpreted by Stratton, come clearer into focus.