

'Baby Doe' Seen Most Noteworthy from *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Tuesday, September 9, 1958
By Harlowe R. Hoyt

Most noteworthy of all productions at Musicarnival's tent since its beginning on Warrensville Center Road is "The Ballad of Baby Doe," there for a week's stay. It is noteworthy as the midwestern premiere of Douglas Moore's American opera; noteworthy in a cast that includes several from two other productions; noteworthy for the presence of Beverly Sills and Walter Cassel, who appeared in the new York premiere at City Center. There is, besides, a cast of principals including some of the original characters and other excellent voices.

The Moore opera, like his other works, finds inspiration in our grass roots. It's the story of H.A.W. Tabor, Leadville storekeeper, who grubstaked two sourdoughs and came into a silver mine; who became a millionaire, divorced his wife and married a divorced woman half his age; who served in the United state Senate, erected many buildings and two opera houses, lost fortunes in poor investments, was impoverished when Congress embraced the gold standard, and died penniless. Elizabeth (Baby) Doe, his second wife, survived him, nursing an abandoned silver mine until with passing years she died of cold and starvation.

Difficult score

This, with variations to suit dramatic needs, furnishes the waft of the plot which the late John Latouche fashioned into a text for Moore's music. Of the Musicarnival's annual operatic offerings—three have introduced Miss Sills as guest star in past seasons—Moore's work is by far the most difficult and distinctive. There is but a touch of spoken dialogue in two spots. The remainder of the score is opera in the truest sense with the major portion assigned to Miss Sills, as Baby Doe, and Walter Cassels, as H.A. W. Tabor.

It is an intricate score, with a wide variety of diversions from principals, to chorus, to arias and duets, each distinctively different with but one or two musical hints of folk melodies, as "My Darling Clementine" and a bit of Foster's melody. But it is exciting music, expressing moods and impacting the conflicting forces: the triangle of Tabor's love affair; his skyrocketing to millions, and his equally swift descent to the depths of poverty.

Excellent Text

Its effectiveness is strengthened by an excellent text. The two acts of eleven scenes begin with the meeting of Baby Doe and Tabor, with the progress of a love affair that culminates in a Washington bridal party when Tabor is senator to fill an unexpired term. Back in the west again, ill fortune sets in. Tabor is ruined. Even the oratory of William Jennings Bryan cannot coax the government to relent on the silver question. Tabor seeks the stage of the Tabor Grand Theater where, in a mental haze, he outlines incidents of his career. Last of all comes Baby Doe who comforts him as he dies.

I have seen Miss Sills in all of her appearances at Musicarnival, including Tosca and Carmen. As Baby Doe she surpasses these performances. She was never in better voice than yesterday and the part itself makes demands upon a dramatic ability she fulfills so well. Just as she has been

given unstinted praise elsewhere, she wins it again. She has made Baby Doe her own and I can imagine no other singer equaling her in the part.

Walter Cassel created the part of Tabor in the original Central City (Colo.) production and reappeared in New York. In fine voice and with dramatic verve, he shares honors with Miss Sills. The high point of the opera is its finish. Cassel dies in Miss Sills' arms and, covering him with a strip of bunting, she sings the most haunting aria of the score. On this note the production ends.

Cast well Balanced

Augusta, Tabor's first wife, is sung by Margery Meyer [sic.], a contralto of power and an actress of ability. Her deterioration of the divorced wife with the passing years is given touching expression both in dramatic presentation and in the score which falls to her. Another is Beatrice Krebs, native Clevelander, whose contralto is familiar to local audiences through appearances with Musicarnival. Like Miss Meyer, she realizes the character of Baby Doe's mother with fine understanding. One of her most effective scenes is the encounter with Miss Meyer as the aging Augusta gives expression to her hopeless life, rendered surpassingly lonesome by her husband's desertion.

Two Cleveland singers are introduced as political characters. William Boehm, among other parts, makes his appearance as President Chester A. Arthur at the Washington bridal party. And Wayne Mack, in resonant voice, delivers the lines of Williams Jennings Bryan at a political rally at the mouth of the Matchless Mine.

Miss Sills in private life is the wife of Peter B. Greenough, associate editor of the Plain Dealer. Nancy and Lindley Greenough play Elizabeth and Silver Dollar, daughters of the Tabors.

There is one flaw in the production—or at least it seems so to me—in the matter of the stage settings. William Simpson designed the sets in a series of skeltonized frames. These represent everything from the porch of the Clarendon Hotel, to the Tabor Opera House, to a sitting room, hotel lobby, and public square. The result is confusing no end. At least I found it so, and I remember the television production of "The Ballad of Baby Doe".