

I Can't Live Without...*Baby Doe* by Rebecca Paller

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Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* had its premiere in 1956 in Central City, Colorado, and arrived at New York City Opera two years later in a legendary production that made a star of Beverly Sills. I first saw the work in 1976 at Indiana University, with faculty member Walter Cassel recreating his signature role—the silver baron Horace Tabor. Cassel, a Metropolitan Opera stalwart of the '40s and '50s, was tall and barrel-chested, with a bluff voice that perfectly captured the bravado and yearning of the real-life Tabor—who divorced his long-suffering wife Augusta to wed a woman half his age, Elizabeth “Baby” Doe. I was so taken with Cassel's moving performance that most of the other details of that production have faded from my memory.

Since then I have seen *Baby Doe* twice and listened repeatedly to the landmark recording with Sills, Cassel, and Frances Bible. I doubt whether any other American opera will ever be quite as satisfying to me. Like *Show Boat*, it is big and sweeping, with characters we can all relate to: charming, charismatic men who make some terribly bad career decisions; coquettes who prove to have unexpected reserves of strength; and wise, dignified women who are not the parsimonious shrews they may at first appear to be.

But an opera ultimately endures because of its music, and *Baby Doe*'s score (with a libretto by Broadway's John Latouche) is quintessentially American, a brilliant marriage of the toe-tapping affability of musical comedy and the tragic stature of grand opera—filled with sentimental parlor songs and rousing ensemble numbers, precision marches and lilting waltzes.

Within minutes of the opening bars, Tabor—the Donald Trump of Leadville, Colorado—is kicking up his heels with a couple of dance hall girls a la Citizen Kane. Then Baby Doe enters as a waltz—her theme—is played on a honky-tonk piano and, wide-eyed, asks, “I beg your pardon, can you direct me to the Clarendon Hotel?” It's a simple, calculated line, but a successful Baby Doe—and Sills's shoes are big ones to fill (Will any soprano ever deliver the sublime “Willow Song” with such abandon and beauty of tone?)—will have you eating out of her hand from that moment on. For Baby Doe, though initially a gold digger (or more accurately, a silver digger), ultimately falls deeply in love with Tabor. When silver is demonetized in 1893 and he loses everything, she stays by his side—and continues to hold on to the *Matchless Mine* for decades after his death (the real Baby Doe was found frozen to death in a mine shack in 1935). And Augusta, who sees the financial writing on the wall but is rebuffed in her attempts to get Horace out of the silver business, also remains steadfast in her love for her ex-husband (and nearly

steals the show with her big aria, “Augusta! Augusta! How can you turn away?”)

The Ballad of Baby Doe, which returns to New York City Opera this month in a new Colin Graham production starring Elizabeth Futral and Mark Delavan, never fails to make me cry. At opera’s end, Baby Doe sings “Always through the changing” as Horace, physically and spiritually broken, dies in her arms. The aria, nicknamed the “Leadville Liebestod,” shares the same B-major key as its namesake and shifts to the minor—the “Tristan chord”—each time Baby Doe sings the word “love.” Moore, ever the consummate composer, knew exactly what he was doing. He was writing the operatic equivalent to Solveig’s final words in *Peer Gynt*, “Sleep, my boy, my dearest boy.” For this I am forever in his debt.