

# The Perils of Baby Doe

By

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Those who have seen Douglas Moore's opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* - and few devotees of American opera have not-will quickly recall the old turn-of-the-century prints that are projected onto a screen for entre-scene atmosphere. If these scenes, which have become traditional in *Baby Doe* productions across the country, bring to mind an old wild west melodrama, consider the reference appropriate: the history of this opera is a lively and sometimes perilous one.

The story of Baby Doe first came to Douglas Moore's attention in 1935, during the ninth year of his long association with the Department of Music at Columbia University. On March 8 of that year he read in the *New York Times* an article, "Widow of Tabor freezes in shack; famed belle dies at 73 alone and penniless, guarding old Leadville bonanza mine." The article recounted the glamorous, tragic tale of Baby Doe Tabor, whose marriage to Horace Tabor, the Colorado silver baron, had delighted and scandalized the nation. A photograph appeared with the article showing "Elizabeth (Baby Doe Taylor[sic]) at the height of her famed beauty and social career." (Interestingly, this account parallels the scenario of the opera that was ultimately written. The headline, in fact, forms the basis for the opera's concluding scene.)

The inherent poignancy of the story greatly appealed to Moore who immediately sensed its appropriateness as an operatic subject. However, the *Baby Doe* project was destined not to be an easy one: twenty years would pass and Moore would write four other operas before the idea would become reality.

The first peril to the *Baby Doe* opera was lyricist trouble, which proved to be an unending peril. Moore first approached his friend Pearson Underwood with the idea of turning the Colorado legend into an opera. Underwood had poetic talents but lacked a strong dramatic sense. The project went nowhere.

In the early 1950's a second attempt with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paul Green was a disaster. (Yet through this association Moore's opera came to have its premiere at the Central City Opera House in Colorado.) Prior to meeting Moore, Paul Green had been in correspondence with the Central City Opera Association which sought to have an opera written and performed in celebration of its centennial [sic]. Green himself had previous interest in the legend, and had written a movie in Hollywood, *Silver Dollar*, which dealt with Baby Doe's profligate daughter[sic].\*

A mutual friend, Donald Oenslaeger, who ultimately designed the settings for the opera, brought Moore and the playwright together. From the outset the two men were incompatible in both personality and artistic aims, Green said, "I had gotten a lot of material together, and [Donald Oenslaeger] thought we could hit it off...I was more interested in a drama, Moore in an opera. I was interested in a play for which drama would be accompanied by music-he was interested in an opera. I wasn't interested in a thirty page libretto. I wanted something closer to Kurt Weill's *Johnny Johnson*. Moore played *Giants in the Earth*, and that was interesting, but it was drama I was interested in. Moore has the modern idiom and never does seem to climb, seems to 'gravel' along." Moore, on the other hand, remarked, "I admired Paul Green very much in [his libretto for] *Johnny Johnson*. I thought it was wonderful, and I was thrilled at the idea of working with him. But when he sent me an outline of the first scene, it was just awful. And I showed it to John Latouche who had been wanting to do something with me, and he said, 'This sounds as if it were translated from a foreign language.'"

Moore found the partnership intolerable. He said, "You see, I torpedoed the project... I couldn't work with him....Paul Green and I had outlined a story and when we separated we agreed-he was very kind-he said, 'Let's each of us take this to have it any way we want...'. Then it was subsequently commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and I was free to get my own librettist."

The libretto for *Baby Doe* was ultimately written by playwright-lyricist, John Latouche, among the most gifted and the only professional of Moore's several librettists. Latouche's professional credits in the theatre began early with contributions to the 1937 revue, *Pins and Needles*, and included the imaginative, iconoclastic musical play, *The Golden Apple*, which won the New York Drama Circle Award for best musical 1953-54.

But Latouche was a rose that came with thorns. In his work habits he was the opposite of Douglas Moore. Whereas the composer was a highly disciplined artist, working regularly, with consistent hours and habits, the lyricist was erratic and unpredictable, producing in bursts and fits. On his visits to Salt Meadow, the Moore country residence on Long Island, Latouche could be

heard pottering away downstairs late at night long after the other guests had retired. When he worked, he worked quickly, frequently with brilliant results, and to any problem had half a dozen solutions easily-the difficulty was in pinning him down.

Moore said, "In *The Ballad of Baby Doe* it was a funny arrangement. Latouche was always disappearing. He was always busy. He was doing something for Carol Channing [*The Vamp*] and something for Leonard Bernstein [*Candide*] and so I was so excited that I would go ahead and write [the words].

"Because John was always involved in so many things, it was hard to get hold of him and he would come down here [to Salt Meadow] and we would imprison him and say, 'Now you can't have a cocktail until you get that scene finished.' He would work very fast and very well. And the tragic thing was that last scene which was difficult to do. He was bringing it up to the Institute [of Arts and Letters] to the Ceremonial to deliver it to me and left it in the taxi and he had to do it all over again. But I suppose it was even better the second time. But with John you could never tell what you were going to have..."

Work began on the vocal score in June 1954 and with it Douglas Moore's twenty year flirtation with Baby Doe became a love affair. Effie Moore, his sister in law, commented on this period in his life: "We all laughed at him! It was as if he were living in a dream all of that time, and we all...said he was in love with Baby Doe and paid no attention [to us], and if you asked him a question usually he hadn't heard. He seemed to be in a dream world-that was our deduction - that he was having a love affair with Baby Doe and had no use for anybody in his family!"

But new perils arose. The Central City Opera Association which had originally commissioned the work, feared legal difficulties with Paul Green (who admittedly had the first claim to the centennial offer) and ceased cooperation with Moore and Latouche. As Douglas said, "We were dropped like hotcakes."

The subsequent commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation came through, and for a time work proceeded smoothly. Then in April 1955, there arrived at Columbia University a letter addressed to the Messrs. Moore and Latouche from a Denver woman named Caroline Bancroft, author of certain tourist trade booklets based on the Tabor-Baby Doe affair, such as *Silver Queen: The Fabulous Story of Baby Doe Tabor, Augusta Tabor, Her Side of the Scandal*, and *Tabor's Matchless Mine and Lusty Leadville*. The letter fell like a bombshell upon the opera project.

The gist of the communication was that she, Caroline Bancroft, constituted

"The Tabor authority of the world;" that much of the material circulated about the Tabor-Baby Doe business was not in the public domain, but protected by her own copyrights; and that she expected to receive a large percentage of any receipts achieved by the Moore-Latouche opera production. The letter contained scarcely veiled threats to injunct any production on opening night if her terms were not met, and added that the expenses of a lawsuit would be more than compensated for by the attendant publicity in sales of her Tabor material.

Moore and Latouche immediately engaged in a furious round of meetings and correspondence with their lawyers. Moore certainly had had enough unhappy legal entanglements with his previous operas to be alarmed: *White Wings*, his first opera, although completed in 1935, was not allowed a performance until fourteen years later - 1949, because of legal complications with the play upon which it was based. Similar difficulties with its related novel served to deny *Giants in the Earth* its proper circulation and in large part can be blamed for preventing its publication. The award to *Giants in the Earth* of the Pulitzer Prize in Music for 1951 had no effect in removing these legal obstacles.

In dealing with Bancroft's threat, Latouche's tactics were to avoid any possibility of plagiarism by supporting each of the opera's scenes and characterizations with actual contemporary newspaper accounts. Douglas' solution was to drown the troublesome Miss Bancroft in charm. He wrote assuring her that her fears were groundless, adding, "Mr. Latouche asks me to send you his regards and to mention that his next show will be based on a short story of an old friend of yours...who has spoken very warmly of you to him." The eventual meetings between Douglas Moore and Miss Bancroft were friendly.

With this peril averted, the work once again went forward. Latouche continued to disappear for long periods of time, leaving the frustrated composer to work alone, forcing Moore to invent entire scenes and numbers on his own. Thus, in its completed published form, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* includes three arias for which the musician wrote both words and music, "Augusta's Lament," "The Willow Song," and "The Letter Song," only the first of which was revised by Latouche. (Among the Moore papers now in the Special Collections Division of Butler Library are numerous scenes and drafts of numbers in the composer's hand, attesting to his contribution to the libretto.)

Central City eventually reextended to Moore and Latouche its commission for the opera. The vocal score was completed in mid-August, 1955, and scored six months later. In November 1955 Moore could write, "Latouche and I have decided definitely to call the opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. The title has a nice lilt and seems better than just *Baby Doe*."

On July 7, 1956, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* received its premiere performance in Colorado in a first rate production by the Central City Opera Association. Emerson Buckley conducted, Hanya Holm directed; starring roles were cast from the New York opera stage. *Baby Doe* was an operatic bonanza. The music world buzzed with talk that out in Colorado an important new opera had opened--some said the best American opera ever written. First string reviewers flew out from New York to see for themselves; their judgments, with few exceptions, were enthusiastic. The reviewer for the *Denver Post* heaped upon the work his highest [sic] praise, and for added laurels personally attended two rehearsals and three performances. (Douglas wrote, "We composers do not ordinarily get such careful treatment.")

On August 7, 1956, while preparations were being made for the New York premiere, John Latouche died without warning. Douglas said, "He died at the age of thirty-nine--tragic. Suddenly a heart attack and that was it. It was right after the success of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* in Central City. We had a conference down here [at Cutchogue] and decided it needed some revision and he wrote the new part and he never heard what I had done with [setting it to music]. He went back and went up to Vermont and this thing happened. It was a great loss."

Douglas outlived Latouche by more than a decade, until July 25, 1969, and had the pleasure of seeing his creation enter that select category of works referred to as "the standard repertory operas." *Baby Doe* received its New York premiere on April 3, 1958, by the New York City Center Opera Company. There has been a national tour and hundreds of professional and college performances across the country. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has successfully survived transplants from the sturdy halls of the opera house to music tent theatres in-the-round. It was performed in 1961 at Belgrade and the West Berlin Festival by the Santa Fe Opera Company. It was been the recipient of honors and awards, among them, the New York Music Critics Circle Award for 1958. Excerpts from it have been performed on national television. Its popularity shows no signs of waning.

Thus, if the history of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* had been marked with many unhappy episodes, it indeed finally arrived at triumph.

**NOTE:** *Quotations from Douglas Moore were from tape recorded interviews conducted at Cutchogue, N.Y. between 1967-1969; Paul Green, from telephone interview, Chapel Hill, N.C., July 27, 1967; Mrs. Arthur [Effie] Moore, tape recorded interview, Cutchogue, N.Y. November 1, 1970; quotations from letters were from the Douglas Moore files now at Special Collections Division, Butler Library, Columbia University.*

\*Paul Green had nothing to do with the production of *Silver Dollar*. Writer Lewis Hardee probably confused him with Alfred E. Green who **directed**

