

This cloud had a silver lining: the Washington Opera has revived the improbable story of Horace and 'Baby' Tabor - 'The Ballad of Baby Doe' - includes related information

Insight on the News, Feb 10, 1997 by T.L. Ponick

No matter how hard he tried, luck always seemed to elude Horace Tabor, the central figure in a celebrated mining-town rags-to-riches saga. From before the Civil War to the boom times of the 1870s, Tabor prospected for gold and silver in the craggy mountains of Western Colorado without much to show for it. When, suddenly, he hit pay dirt, he became the biggest man in Leadville and one of the richest in Colorado.

Tabor built an opera house, cast off his dour-looking wife, hitched himself to a colorful woman of dubious virtue named "Baby" Doe and spent money as if he owned the Denver mint -- only to die penniless at century's end, a victim of the nation's abandonment of freely coined silver, leaving his flamboyant wife in rags.

Authentic legends of the West, Horace and Baby Doe Tabor and their times were brought to the stage in July 1956 by composer Douglas Moore and librettist John Latouche for the Central City Opera of Denver. The Ballad of Baby Doe was revised for its New York City Opera premiere in 1958, with Beverly Sirs starring in the difficult coloratura role of Baby. In January, the Washington Opera unveiled its production featuring soprano Elisabeth Comeaux and baritone Richard Stilwell, a Metropolitan Opera veteran, as the Tabors, with mezzo Phyllis Pancella as the spurned wife Augusta. Directed by Roman Terleckyj, the production boasts new sets by designer Zack Brown.

Baby Doe is a natural for the Washington Opera and its new artistic director, Placido Domingo, who intends to mount an American opera every season. "This opera means a lot to me, too," says Edward C. Purrington, the artistic administrator, who has been involved in productions of the work in the United States and Europe. Placido regards it as the quintessential American opera, filled with political and social themes and rousing rally songs."

Brimming with romantic tunes and frontier characters, Baby Doe certainly delivers the goods. Some have belittled the operas lush orchestration and occasional Broadway mannerisms but, like Porgy and Bess, its an epic story of ordinary people trying to make it against all odds.

That story begins in the tiny Vermont hamlet of Holland, where Horace Tabor was born in 1830. A journeyman stonemason, he was a hard worker but felt stifled in New England. Tabor "lit out for the territories" in 1855, settling in Kansas, where he brought his Maine bride, Augusta, in 1857.

The prim and proper Augusta was not much of a love match, but she had good business sense and worked as hard as her husband. She didn't object when the restless Horace talked her into heading for Colorado, where deposits of gold and silver had been discovered in 1859.

Augusta soon was running a boardinghouse in the mining community of Leadville while Horace went off to the mountains in search of riches. For almost 20 years, the plucky couple put in endless hours of backbreaking work, enduring grinding poverty, getting no further ahead and often slipping behind.

When things seemed bleakest, Tabor picked up a silver mine for a song in 1878 and hit the mother lode, plowing his considerable profits into a succession of successful mines that made him a wealthy man. He built a first-class opera house to bring a little culture to the rowdy town. "It was really something," says Evelyn Furman, author of several books on the Tabors. "They did everything there -- all of Shakespeare's plays, the Chicago Symphony, the Metropolitan Opera and the John Philip Sousa band."

Tabor was appointed Colorado's lieutenant governor and served briefly as a U.S. senator. But he scandalized the state's gossips and made front-page news by divorcing Augusta and marrying a woman 30 years his junior, the zaftig Baby. Their sumptuously precentious wedding ceremony at Washington's Willard Hotel (see sidebar) is one of Baby Does high points.

Born Elizabeth McCourt in Oshkosh, Wis., in 1854, Baby had married a middle-class good-for-nothing named Harvey Doe and moved with him to work a family claim near Central City, Colo. Baby's husband was fond of the local girls, and she in turn flirted outrageously with the miners, probably earning a few extra dollars from them in her husbands absence. She divorced Doe and moved to Leadville to make her own way. When she met the wealthy Horace Tabor, she knew immediately he was exactly what she wanted.

It was an easy sales job: Baby was a handsome woman (her picture appeared on saloon beer trays and calendars). The couple had two children. The younger, as the story holds, was christened by silver's great champion, the "cross-of-gold" orator and presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, whose role is sung by baritone Kimm Julian. The child's name? Rosemary Silver Dollar Echo Honeymoon Tabor.

But the party didn't last long. The Panic of 1893 knocked the price out from under Tabor's silver holdings and he died broke in 1899 -- not before making Baby swear never to give up their precious but no longer fabulous Matchless Mine.

Good as her word, Baby lived in a shack at the Matchless Mine for almost 35 more years. Nearly toothless and often dressed in rags, she became increasingly eccentric. The locals avoided her. Destitute, she froze to death during a howling snowstorm in 1935.

The fate of Leadville until recently mirrored that of Horace and Baby. "Its fabulous mines closed down one by one," says Esther Mellott, assistant director of the National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum in Leadville. By the early 1950s, the local government had begun tearing down many of the town dilapidated buildings, including the old Tabor Grand Hotel. The Tabor Opera House, which the Leadville Elks bought to use as their lodge two years after Horace Tabor's death, also was slated to be demolished until Furman bought it in 1955 -- a circumstance that may have made Baby Doe possible, as Furman tells it.

"Just after I bought the opera house ... two gentlemen came to town and asked me if I'd open it up for them" Furman recalls. It turned out to be Latouche, the composer and librettist, looking for inspiration to complete their score. It was really cold, but it did not seem to bother them. They wandered around for a while, looking up at the balcony and walking around the stage, not saying anything. Then one of them -- I don't remember which one -- shouted, "That's it! I've got it! I've got it! I don't know what it is that he got, but they thanked me and left."

Furman gradually restored the opera house to its former glory, with a new roof, redone plaster work plus the original curtain and seats. "We even have some of the old scenery," she says. "Things don't deteriorate much up here in the mountain air."

Along with the opera house, Leadville is making something of a comeback. Its only school, which had closed in 1985, now is home to the mining museum. Motels have sprung up, catering largely to skiers. The summer is more problematic, but tourism is beginning to increase, with the Tabor Opera House a prime destination.

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From Grover Cleveland's illegitimate child to John F. Kennedy's secret love life, Washington has witnessed many a juicy sex scandal. But few were more colorful than Horace and Baby Doe Tabor's brief turn in the capital's limelight at the old Willard Hotel.

By early 1883, the divorces of Horace and Baby Doe from their spouses had become final and the couple were married in a civil ceremony in Colorado. Proud of his trophy wife, Tabor longed for a more glamorous coming-out party. He soon got his opportunity. Governors appointed U.S. senators in those days, and Tabor was named to fill out the term of a vacated Colorado seat.

Tabor brought along his new wife and threw a gala at the hotel on March, 1, 1883, inviting a number of distinguished guests, among them President Chester A. Arthur.

News of wretched excess leaked from the party to the papers: The bride's lingerie had cost more than \$7,000; a guest had given the bride a diamond necklace worth \$75,000; the groom had given her "the original necklace pawned by Queen Isabella so that Columbus might discover America."

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