

# A Silver Lining And Its Cloud: Opera *Baby Doe* Mines Old Scandal by David G. Kanzeg

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Washington has been the setting for movies (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), books (*Seven Days in May*, *Advise and Consent*), even musicals (*Of Thee I Sing*, *Mr. President*, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*).

But the city appears only once in the standard opera repertory--in the scandalous story of a filthy rich politician and his trophy wife.

Actually, there is only one scene in Washington. But what a scene! In it, the president of the United States arrives at one of the most elaborate weddings the Willard Hotel has ever hosted--and just in time to keep a scandalized diplomatic corps from walking out on the happiest day of one of the oddest senators in American history.

That tableau rings down the first act curtain in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, which the Washington Opera will bring to the Eisenhower Theater for 12 performances from Jan. 16 to Feb. 14. These will be the first performances in the Washington area since the New York City Opera presented the work at the Kennedy Center in 1976 as part of the bicentennial.

*Baby Doe* is not an obscure work, however. In the last 12 months alone, audiences will have seen it in Chautauqua, N.Y., Central City, Colo., Minneapolis and Austin. Though never done at the Metropolitan Opera, it remains one of the most performed American operas. This even though no recording of it has existed in the active catalogue for the last 15 years. Indeed, until this year, it had had a single commercial recording, a 1958 version in which a young Beverly Sills left a definitive mark on what critic Conrad L. Osborne called "this cherishable opera."

More than music makes this story attractive. *Baby Doe* contains epic genes: geographical sweep, universal moral lessons, heroic lives, a great love story. Unlike *La Boheme*, *Carmen*, *Aida* or most of the standard operatic repertory,

this story is not fiction. Its principal characters are real historical figures. Its locales, including the Willard, all existed in the 1880s world of Elizabeth McCourt "Baby" Doe, the second wife of Colorado Sen. Horace Austin Warner Tabor. (The current Willard Inter-Continental, built in 1901 at 14th and Pennsylvania, stands on the exact location of the original, built in 1818.) In Colorado today the story remains well known. In addition to the opera, Baby Doe inspired a movie (a 1932 film starring Edward G. Robinson), a one-act opera, a German play (that premiered in Zurich in 1964), at least nine biographies, a one-woman show and a chain of "Baby Doe" restaurants, featuring a silver mine motif.

Tabor and his two wives were given life in opera form after composer Douglas Moore, the head of the music department at Columbia University, and librettist John Latouche (best known for his contributions to *Cabin in the Sky* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*) visited the 1879 opera house Tabor built in Colorado. To this day it sits on Harrison Avenue in Leadville, altitude 10,000 feet. The two apparently found the inspiration they needed standing on the building's creaky stage.

About a year later, on July 7, 1956, their opera received its premiere in Central City, in another mining-era opera house. From there, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* went on to become one of the New York City Opera's defining productions. The story itself is juicy enough for the New York tabloids. Horace Tabor was born in 1830 on a modest Vermont farm. At 19, he got a quarry job and soon married Augusta Pierce, the boss's daughter. By 1856, he was in Kansas, a member of the "Free Soil" legislature, where he helped keep the new territory from entering the Union as a slave state. Later, he and Augusta decided to try their luck in Colorado. And in the spring of 1859 they made the six-week trek to the new settlement in Denver.

For 20 years, they haunted the mining camps of the Front Range: from Central City to Idaho Springs, Oro City and Buckskin Joe. They had a standard script, setting themselves up as general provisioners, taking in boarders, handling post office and banking services for the boom towns. Respected and well liked, they became middle-class storekeepers in Leadville, a new town that sprang from one of those mining camps.

One day in April 1878, Tabor grubstaked two old prospectors. He gave them food, axes, pails--all they might need to work a claim--in exchange for a third of anything they found. Whether the jug of whiskey they took played any significant role in what followed will never be known for sure. But George

Hook and August Rische wandered out and discovered the *Little Pittsburgh* silver mine, the spark that ignited one of the world's greatest and shortest lived fortunes. The mine was so rich that by the end of 1878 Tabor had invested in 16 other Leadville mines, including the bountiful *Matchless Mine*. Money flowed into his pockets faster than he could spend it.

Though she was no stranger to money, such colossal riches apparently aggravated Augusta's New England-bred sense of thrift. She continued to take in boarders after there was no need for extra cash. She refused to wear the clothes and jewelry her husband gave her. Nor would she "paint" her face like other women.

Horace ultimately paid closer attention to those other women--most notably Lizzie McCourt Doe. She had moved west from Oshkosh, Wis., to the hardscrabble hive of Central City with her new husband, Harvey Doe, in the summer of 1877. As a wedding present, Harvey's father gave them part of a mine. Hard work and Harvey did not get along, though, eventually forcing Lizzie to work in the mine herself alongside her male counterparts. At the end of 1879, she left Central City, divorce in hand. But her childlike appearance, golden hair and appealing disposition had long since prompted the miners to anoint her with the nickname that would forever link her memory with Mr. Doe.

By the summer of 1880 Tabor was keeping 26-year-old "Baby" Doe in Leadville's leading hotel. He had packed Augusta off to set up housekeeping in Denver, where his duties as the state's lieutenant governor often took him. He was now the state's richest man. And, at 50, Tabor felt he could do whatever he pleased, which included bankrolling a fire department, a gaslight system, a telegraph line, an opera house, every church in Leadville and Colorado's Republican Party.

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Which brings us back to Washington. Or rather, brings the "silver king and his queen" to Washington. By 1882, Tabor was so powerful that he engineered a divorce from Augusta without her knowledge. A henchman simply presented her with a *fait accompli*, which she was ultimately unable to contest. The divorce came just before Colorado's legislature elected Tabor to serve the month remaining in the unexpired term of Sen. Henry Teller, whom President Arthur had appointed secretary of the interior.

Tabor's tenure as a U.S. senator was as flamboyant as it was fleeting. His jewelry, boisterousness and back-slapping style earned him a reputation as

"the Wild West senator." Some called him "Senator Nightshirt," from a report that he wore diamond-studded nightgowns.

The high point came March 1, 1883. On that day, six months after being secretly married in St. Louis, and a mere five weeks after being granted his divorce from Augusta, he and Baby Doe repeated their vows in a magnificent ceremony at the Willard. Baby Doe's gown cost \$7,000. Her lace undergarments were handmade. A diamond necklace purchased for the occasion cost Tabor more than \$75,000. The Catholic priest who presided knew nothing of their divorces.

The wedding reception concludes Act 1 of the opera. Since none of Washington's society ladies wanted anything to do with the Tabors, the women on-stage represent only family members and wives of foreign ambassadors. Champagne flows and State Department "dandies" spar with Tabor over the falling price of silver against gold.

Nineteenth-century monetary policy is no easy subject to handle on-stage. But Latouche captured its essence by focusing on a few key ideas--the gold and silver standard, for example. The brilliant scene foretells silver's collapse and the resulting loss of all of Tabor's wealth.

For the moment, though, Tabor and his excesses command the stage. Even after the officiating priest, Father Chapelle, inadvertently finds out about the pair's earlier marriages, the timely arrival of the president keeps the party going. Talk of scandal sweeps through the crowd as Act 1 ends.

In real life the papers quickly weighed in. *The Washington Post* was careful: "The bold originality of the methods and hour (9 p.m.) of celebrating his marriage and the splendor of its surroundings are exciting much comment, and none that is not favorable to the Senator's taste and independence." *The New York Tribune's* correspondent pulled no punches: "There is nothing...so picturesquely vulgar as this gorgeous hotel wedding of a pair who had been married for months already but were determined to have the eclat of being married over again in a senatorial capacity." Father Chapelle returned the \$200 fee and refused to register the marriage in St. Matthew's Parish.

Like it or not, Washington was impressed with Baby Doe. "I've never seen a more beautiful bride," said President Arthur, who hosted the Tabors at a White House reception four days after the wedding. When the term ended, poet and journalist Eugene Field wrote a satiric account of Tabor's farewell.

"Flags were hung at half-mast. ...Senator Tabor entered the room, bearing a new patent-leather grip-sack and wearing a superb trousseau of broadcloth and diamonds....As he proceeded to recount his services, love of country and devotion to the public weal, men groaned in agony and whole platoons of police were kept busy carrying insensible ladies from the galleries." In reality, Baby Doe sat in the Senate gallery on that last day--in diamonds, rubies, emeralds and silk, the object of stares from the floor.

After their brief but noteworthy stay in the capital (during which they spent more than \$300,000--in 1883 dollars---in one month), the Tabors returned to a life of fountains and peacocks in Denver. Horace continued his lavish habits, buying mines in Mexico and Arizona, indulging every whim. Their fun, however, was to last barely a decade more.

The 1890s saw great economic turmoil and change. Things that once were obscure, abstract concepts to Tabor--global markets, protective tariffs, the gold standard--were to have a profound impact on his life. The repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893 kicked "the props from under silver," as the opera tells it. The act required the treasury to buy 4.5 million ounces of silver each month. With the end of government support the price of silver plummeted, along with Tabor's fortune.

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In *The Ballad of Baby Doe's* final scene, Horace revisits the stage of the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver. "I wanted to take a long long look around," he tells the startled night watchman. "I dreamed up this place myself." The former "silver king" hallucinates the theater's lavish opening night, while the watchman runs for help.

Some view this scene as an American version of Wagner's "love-death" scene from *Tristan und Isolde*. Seeing the triumphs and failures of his life flash before him, Tabor succumbs in Baby Doe's arms, but not before each vows eternal devotion to the other. There are usually tears in the house as Baby walks upstage toward a shadowy image of the *Matchless Mine*. Now an old woman, she sings her last words with her back to the audience: "I shall change along with him so that both are ever young. Ever young."

Fifty-two years after Tabor's visit to the 47th Congress, a headline at the top of Page 23 of the *New York Times* on March 8, 1935, reported Baby Doe's fate with operatic starkness: "WIDOW OF TABOR FREEZES IN SHACK. Famed Belle Dies Alone and Penniless, Guarding Old Leadville Bonanza Mine." The obituary tells how, at the end, she had food but no fuel; how she

had become too feeble to fetch wood and had been dead for almost two weeks when found by a neighbor. She had been faithful to Tabor's dying command to always "hold on to the *Matchless*."

Scholars question whether Tabor really ever said such a thing. Nevertheless, something in their relationship led Baby Doe to hang on to his most celebrated mine for 36 years after his death, often with the help of a shotgun, despite its having little value.

She spent much of her final year in a cabin by the Matchless, scribbling "dreams and visions" on page after page of scrap paper. Despite the hardships of the Depression, the people of Leadville tried to help her out. Zaitz' Mercantile extended credit. Others left food baskets at her door. She fully believed, and wrote as much, that silver prices would go up, the mine would revive and she would repay everyone someday.

And perhaps, in a way, her story has repaid her debts. It is a tale that stretches from before the Civil War to the Great Depression, with no villains, no heroes, no gunfights, merely sadness and stern reality. It's what an American legend probably should be.