

Baby Doe: A Tale of Two Operas

By David Bamberger

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The Ballad of Baby Doe is, in a sense, two operas. One deals with the literal depiction of events in American history. It is the only stage work I know that is truly faithful to historical truth. Don't bother with Shakespeare or Verdi for objective views of *Richard III* or *Don Carlos*. But if you want to know what really happened to Horace Tabor, there is no better introduction than John Latouche's libretto.

Surprisingly, then, the second opera—the more important one—is quite abstract. It is an examination of the meaning and nature of love and life. The first mention of the word “love,” in the very first scene, deals with money. (The Miner: “I am Tabor's little lamb; Tabor loves my mine and me.”) We then get to see the cold, pragmatic marriage of Tabor and Augusta (she must love Tabor in her own way, but she is so “proper” she can't even use the word); then the bubbly love of life displayed by Mama McCourt; and, of course, the unique relationship, the love stronger than death, of Baby Doe and Tabor.

In planning a production, each stage director must decide how to balance these two simultaneously occurring operas. When Baby Doe and Tabor first meet, for example, how realistic is the world around them? Do other people pass on the street? Is the scenery arranged so that they can touch? Or are they physically kept “worlds apart” even as the music tells us that their spirits have begun to merge?

Similarly, how should one handle the great scene between Augusta and her friends? It is easy to create a naturalistic environment in which coffee is poured and cookies are served. But one can choose to focus entirely on Augusta, immobile as her shadowy friends function as the voices of society; harpies whose suspicions dig into her brain. My choice in each case is the last: the more abstract one.

But far more important is the decision of how to play the last scene. The problem facing the authors was that they were writing an opera about love, but that the end of Baby Doe's life wasn't “lovely” at all. It is easy to dress the soprano so that by removing her cloak she reveals herself in rags—but there is nothing pretty about an aged eccentric freezing to death. As I told my production staff, “We do not need to prove that we can document the appearance of the historical Elizabeth Doe Tabor when she was discovered dead. The challenge is portraying an image of eternal love, of an eternity where, as Baby Doe says in her last words, ‘both are ever young.’”

To accomplish this, we dressed her for final entrance in a simple, dark cloak.

When specified in the score, she pulled back her hood, revealing a pearl gray wig. Slowly all the stage lights closed down around her until only a tiny spot of light circled her head. From the depths of the stage, a glow of light barely illuminated the scenery representing the *Matchless Mine*. A few flakes of snow began to fall as with the words “ever young” floating in the air, the curtain slowly closed over both the opera that exists as a genuine look at a unique piece of American history AND at the opera that is about eternal love.

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Mr. Bamberger re-mounted The Ballad of Baby Doe for the New York City Opera's production in Los Angeles, historic as the last time the “recording cast” (Sills, Bible, Cassel) ever performed the work. Cleveland Opera showcased his staging in 1992.