"So fleet the works of man:" "The Ballad of Baby Doe" and Mining

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It is the second most produced American opera and is acclaimed, "no 'real-life' American opera has proved more popular or more enduring." It is one of three operas dealing with American mining. It is the "America dream itself," observed opera writer Derek Mills. It gave Beverly Sills her first starring role. *Washington Post* critic, Tim Page, wrote, "This opera is one of those works that can inspire deep devotion in those it touches."[1] It is the opera "The Ballad of Baby Doe."

> Here we have the real thing, a true story, that in composer Douglas Moore's operatic setting captures something of the spirt of a time and a place. And in John Latouche's libretto brings to life the personalities involved in the remarkable rise and fall of a little-known Vermont stonecutter who struck it rich in the silver mines of Colorado.[2]

"Baby Doe" is, as a Boston critic noted in January 1998, one of the "operas with ties to American theatre." As another wrote, "It is a richly American tale—where personal happiness is based on taking risks, crossing new frontiers, on hope, freedom, starting over, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps." Reviewing the opera for the Washington, D. C. audience, David Kanzeg, an authority on "Baby Doe," noted that in 1997, it is the only opera with a scene in that city. He then went on to say, "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, Colorado, Minneapolis and Austin." A review of Central City's 1988 production concluded, "Moore has written the great American opera of the 20th century." Like many other American operas, it has not received the acclaim that it deserves. Tim Page laconically commented, "And yet 'Baby Doe' is not always given its due. Part of this neglect comes from an inherent cultural snobbery in the opera world—for all too many listeners, *real* opera remains a uniquely European phenomenon."[3]

Of the other two mining operas, Puccini's "The Girl of the Golden West" is written strictly in the European tradition. Its world premier in New York in 1910, with Enrico Caruso singing the lead, was well received. Set in California during the 1849-50 gold rush, it is based on a melodrama by David Belasco. With the hero performing two roles (stranger & outlaw), and the sheriff as the villain, it is not light opera and appreciating it is not easy unless one is knowledgeable about opera.[4] The other opera, "Angle of Repose," based on Wallace Stegner's book of the same name, follows Mary Hallock Foote and her husband Arthur in their western adventures. It premiered with the San Francisco Opera Company in November 1976 and did not survive, apparently, its first premier season.

"Baby Doe" is uniquely American. Commissioned by the Central City House Opera Association and the Koussevistky Foundation of the Library of Congress, it premiered in Central City on July 7, 1956. Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Douglas Moore, and talented, young librettist John Latouche, joined to turn the story of the three Tabors into opera. They made slight changes after the Central City premier, but tragically, within a month, Latouche died. Its New York premier was in April 1958. Following that season, they recorded the opera for the first time with Sills as Baby Doe.[5]

Reviewer Andrew Stiller felt that the tale "ideally suited Moore's musical and dramatic strengths" and

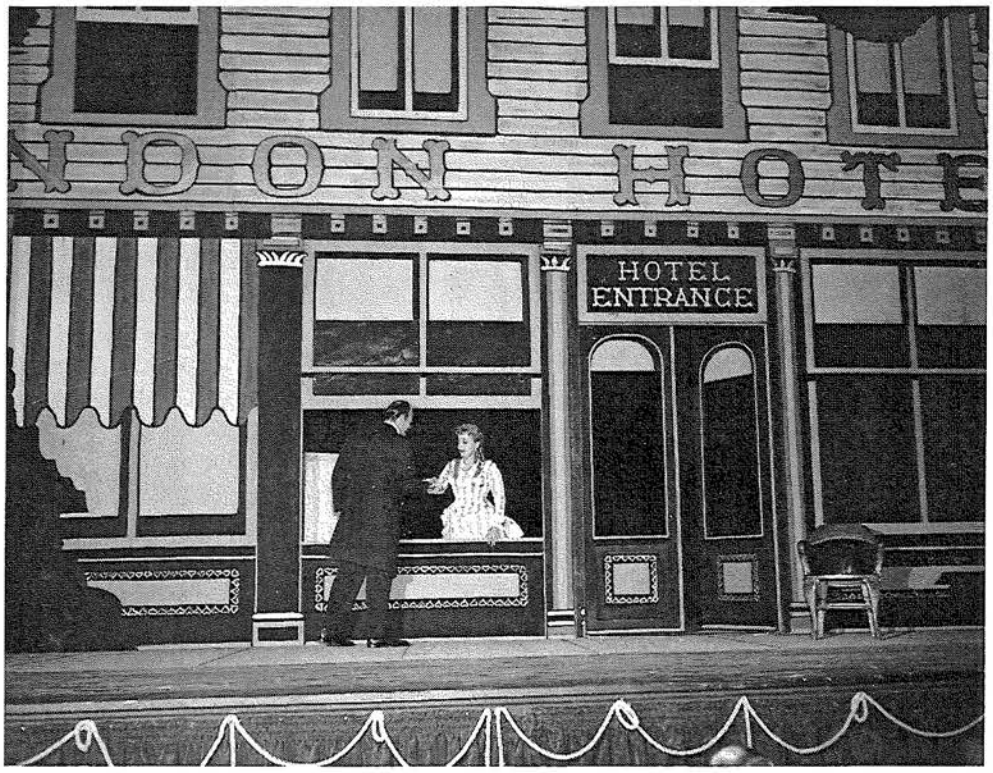
praised him for his variety of musical themes. This allowed, Stiller wrote, "both for Broadway-like production numbers (the opening scene, Bryan's speech) and for set-piece songs in the early Tin Pan Alley style of the composer's youth (Baby Doe's 'Willow Song' and letter arias)."[6]

John Moriarty, Central City's Artistic Director, and the recognized conductor and interpreter of "Baby Doe," commented during a Denver speech in 1996, "Moore does not use any American folk music in the opera except one little quotation, but he writes a lot of music that sounds as though it could have been American folk music. The style that Moore had is a very simple, very moving style, it's folksy, it is unpretentious." Those are the strengths and are part of the secret to the success of the opera. It is, in Moriarty's words, "the musical style that is most suited to an opera of this kind."

The heart of the opera is found in the last scene on the stage of Tabor's magnificent Denver edifice, the Tabor Grand Opera House. The chorus finishes singing the words of poet Charles Kingsley, "So fleet the works of man, back to the earth again." In Moriarty's view, "it seems to Horace at the moment that's what's happened to his life. That's when he says the words which I think are the core of the opera. 'How can a man measure himself. The land was growing, and I grew with it.'"[7]

While anchored in local and state interest, with a dash of anecdotal verbiage, "Baby Doe" rises above that. Moriarty understood and concluded that the universality of the opera has "won for it a place in the repertoire and in opera history. Using the story of the Tabors as a springboard, the opera deals with universal truths and values."[8]

Hailed as "a story that celebrates women of the frontier, that lets us decide who 'sins' and who 'wins,'" the opera has four main characters.[9] Baby Doe and Augusta Tabor are the primary protagonists, while Horace is the man who loved them both and left one to marry the other. To be frank, Augusta made him feel old. Baby made him feel young again. The fourth lead sings nary a word in "Baby Doe," but plays a major role—it is the Match-



Baby Doe and Horace share a tender moment at Leadville's Clarendon Hotel. This was during the 1956 world premier production at Central City. Courtesy, Central City Opera House Association.

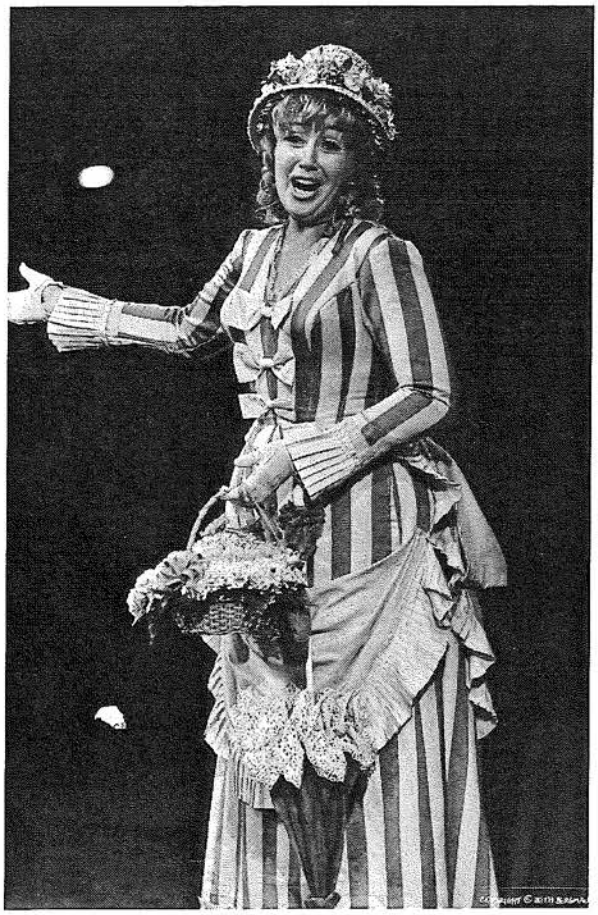
less Mine. It opens and closes the opera and hauntingly reappears throughout. Perhaps, it could be argued, silver also plays an important role, although not as closely stated or obvious. By the end of the last scene of "Baby Doe," Moriarty believes, "Horace and silver and the Matchless have all become one. Baby is there guarding the Matchless, with a head frame behind her, her man keeping it forever for him."[10]

The opera is based on the lives of Colorado's well-known Horace Tabor and his two wives, Augusta and Elizabeth, "Baby Doe." The historic sweep of the opera is amazing, from before the Civil War to 1935. It is a retelling of the great American narrative of opening and developing a new country by ordinary people, who emerge larger than life in their new setting. The Tabor saga is the epic of the promised land of the American West in its most legendary portion—the West that promised riches, perchance fame, for those who came to this new and richly endowed land.

After several years of less than great success farming in Kansas, New Englanders Horace and Augusta Tabor joined the 1859ers in the stampede to the Pike's Peak gold region. Tabor had come west to make his fortune, a fortune that Kansas did not promise easily. Thus, the siren call of gold in the Rocky Mountains easily tempted Horace to journey farther west, along with about 100,000 of his fellow fortune seekers.

For the next eighteen years, the Tabors followed their dream with varying success. In Payne's Bar, Colorado City, California Gulch, Buckskin Joe and back to Oro City in California Gulch, they chased their hoped for destiny. Tabor mined, then turned to store keeping and mine owning, with some success. By 1877, in Oro City, they had achieved a measure of wealth and a fine reputation as a pioneering couple. Augusta was honored for her willingness to go where few women had gone, her business acumen, her cooking, and the treatment of ill and injured miners. Horace, a Robert Dun credit reporter said of him in December 1876, "is a very shrewd businessman and not liable to lose money, has good chance to make money as he has no competition." The Ta-

Infuriated Augusta and four indignant friends discuss Horace's scandalous affair. Courtesy, Central City Opera House Association.



"I've just arrived from Central City." Beverly Sills, the most famous Baby Doe, has become the standard against whom all others are measured. Courtesy, Beth Bergman.

bors estimated worth was given as $15,000.[11]

The long looked for breakthrough to fortune came when, the following year in July, the Tabors moved once more. They traveled slightly over two and a half miles to a neighboring new discovery quickly to be named Leadville. This move, so short a distance in mileage, represented a lifetime in its implications.

Tabor opened the second store in the camp, soon to be a full-fledged mining town and to grow into the second largest community in Colorado at the time. The well known "miners' friend" and merchant quickly became involved in town organization, establishing municipal government, and serving as Leadville's first mayor, serving two terms. A fortunate grubstake of two itinerant, would-be prospectors in April 1878 gave Horace one-third ownership of the Little Pittsburg mine. Two others followed this bonanza, the Chrysolite and the Matchless mines. Tabor's fame and fortune took wing.

The "old man" (at forty-eight he was older than the average person who rushed to Leadville) became the epitome of what mining could do for the individual. Americans had been reading about and lusting for such success since the 1849 California gold rush. Leadville was front-page news throughout the country, and no one represented Leadville and its silver millions better than Horace Tabor.

Unlike most of those who came before him, Tabor reinvested his fortune in Colorado. To make 10,200 foot Leadville more livable, Tabor was involved in creating companies to bring gas lights, telephones, and fire protection, in donating money to churches, and in building the Tabor Opera House that opened on a cold, crisp November 20, 1879 evening. Tabor moved onto Denver, following his political star, and did the same sorts of things for the capital city, including building the capstone of his career, the Tabor Grand Opera House.

A lifelong Republican, Tabor helped now to bankroll the state party. His election as Lieutenant Governor was followed by a thirty-day term in the United States Senate to fill out the unexpired term of Henry Teller, who had been appointed Secretary of the Interior. Despite continued political involvement, no other offices were bestowed on him.

Meanwhile, Tabor's marriage to Augusta fell apart, the victim of new wealth as well as differing personalities. Tabor became involved in a scandalous affair with Elizabeth Doe, better known as "Baby Doe." Divorce from Augusta was followed, two months later, with marriage to Baby Doe in Washington, D.C. at the end of his senate term, March 1, 1883. The marriage of the fifty-two-year-old groom and the twenty-eight-year-old bride shocked "respectable" Coloradans and became a cause celebre for the rest of the Tabors' lives.

Over the years that followed Tabor's fortune, at least $7,000,000, faded through poor investments, over enthusiasm and confidence in mining, too many investments that he could not carefully supervise personally, and the declining world price of silver. The end came with the crash of 1893 and subsequent depression. Tabor continued to try to rebound and pay

off his debts, but only the intervention of political friends, who had appointed him Denver's postmaster, saved the family, with its two young daughters, from poverty. Tabor died in 1899 and Baby Doe in 1935.[12]

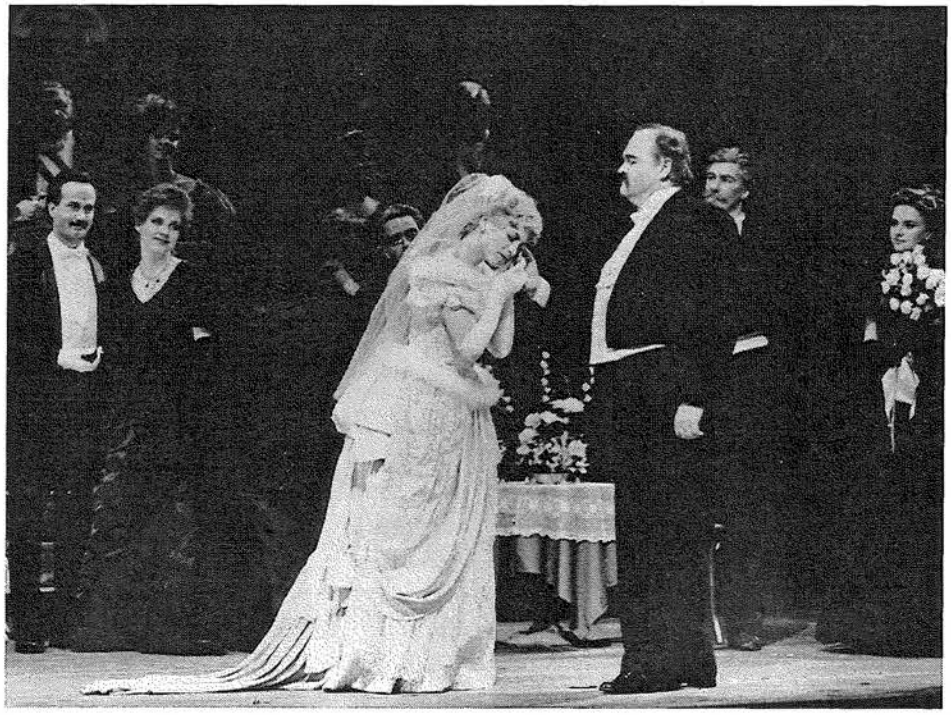
The opera follows the framework of the story well. The audience is given a quick introduction to Horace Tabor's career in the opening scene, Act One, when Tabor sings his aria about coming this way from Massachusetts, through the Kansas territory. The remainder of his earlier life is presented in Act Two, the last scene. Here, Tabor as an old man returns to the Tabor Grand Opera House to relive, through his imagination, the high points of his career. At this point, also, the story of the two daughters and Baby Doe are carried forward.

The balance of the opera focuses on the personal conflict between Augusta and Horace, then the marriage to Baby Doe. "Baby Doe" can, obviously, develop only certain aspects. The growing split between the Tabors and his warming love affair with Baby Doe furnish the focus for Act One. Bitterness between the two is evident and finally ends with the failure of the marriage. The embittered Augusta grants a divorce reluctantly as she did in real life. Horace is married in Washington with, as it happened, President Arthur attending.

Act Two skips forward ten years to the fateful 1893. The decline of Tabor's fortune is introduced and also the social boycott of the Tabors. Finally, Tabor places his hope on the "Free Silver" movement and the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan. Bryan's defeat in 1896 dooms Horace and his hopes. Augusta is given one last redeeming moment, after which comes the closing scene at the Tabor Grand Opera House.

The opera, while well ribbed by history, is not history in the true sense of the term. It does, nevertheless, catch the spirit of the era, a feel for the place and time that many histories, and writers, fail to grasp or develop.

Pointing out historic inaccuracies would be easy and claim they ruin one's appreciation of "The Ballad of Baby Doe." Such would be patently unfair to the opera or to what it set out to accomplish. The Tabor story is the classic account of Greek tragedy,



The new Senator and Mrs. Horace Tabor at their Washington wedding reception in the Willard Hotel. Courtesy, Central City Opera House Association.

the rise and fall of a man whose pride, in a nineteenth century sense, challenged the gods, and he was brought down. John Moriarty wrote, "It is a story of undying love (Baby's), suffocating pride (Augusta's) and hubris punished by the gods (Horace's). Thus the story of the two Mrs. Tabors becomes Aristotelian in scope, a classic framework reinforced by the vain and superficial heroine's redemption through love."[13]

The intent of the opera has been made quite clear in the opera programs over the years and in the two recorded versions that have appeared since its debut. "The dramatic treatment of Tabor's life, and the two women who dominated it, closely follows the pattern of fact. Any shifts in the time element and character emphasis have been made to shape the robust chronicle of these into the framework of the musical theater."[14]

Opera, as previously stated, is not history, nor intended to be. "Baby Doe" gently dissociates itself from history's muse, Clio, on occasion. License was taken to tell the story, some fairly major, some quite minor. For example, William Jennings Bryan never came to Leadville during the 1896 campaign, but it makes dramatic opera. Nor did Baby Doe, as far as we know, ever have one-on-one confrontations with Augusta, but the opera has two. Both are laced with strong emotions and compassion. Augusta was dead by the time of the 1896 election. Thus, Baby Doe's mother could not have made one last forlorn appeal to her to share her fortune to save the Tabors. Augusta had died a bitter woman the year before. On more minor notes, the Tabors were not married twenty-seven years; Durango is not a county; nor did Tabor die on the stage of the Tabor Grand.

Perhaps the use of the legendary, twentieth-century story, that Tabor told Baby Doe to "hang on to the Matchless mine," does the most disservice to history. It makes grand opera, however. As Tabor tells his beloved Baby Doe in Act Two, scene one, "Then promise me, no matter what happens. You'll always hang on to the Matchless Mine. There's a treasure in the Matchless. You'll keep it always." This she promises, "always." That she froze to death at the Matchless adds poignancy, but no truth to the story. Like all such legends, this one will never die and has become a treasured part of Colorado folklore.

What does "The Ballad of Baby Doe " reflect about mining which is, after all, the foundation on which the story occurred and is told? Both robustly and gently, it gives the listener insight into this industry, plus the rise and fall of one of its best known individuals. Mining is well served.

First and foremost, the initial and last scenes mirror perfectly the familiar boom-and-bust cycles that beset nineteenth century mining districts and communities. From the boisterous opening in Leadville, with its excitement and eternal optimism, the heart of a mining boom comes into full view. Enthusiastic music and lusty singing successfully portray the era when all seemed possible and, indeed, was already happening at the time.

The final scene in Denver's Tabor Grand Opera House is foreboding and dark. The same opening-scene musical melodies, here much differently played and sung, take on a different meaning in this atmosphere. Tabor sings a short aria that cuts to the heart of what happened in Colorado, Nevada, and other western mining states.

> How can a man measure himself.
> The land was growing, and I grew with it.
> In my brain rose buildings yearning towards the sky
> And my guts sank deep in the plunging mineshafts
> My feet kicked up gold dust wherever I danced
> And whenever I shouted my name
> I heard a silver echo roar in the wind.[15]

How can a miner measure himself, when the district has gone into borasca and the camp where he once lived and worked has become a ghost town?

Tabor and the chorus, at least partly, answered that. "Build me a bank!" "A big Saloon!" "Tabor owns the big hotel. Tabor owns the bank as well. Tabor owns the whole damn town." Tabor's money helped to develop Leadville and Denver, plus points in between. His faith in Colorado showered the state with enterprises and money creating jobs, a host of mining companies and other investments, and encouraged others to come and invest. His investments also can be found in most western mining states. "Where the big fish go, the small fish will follow." They did. Tabor and Leadville turned Colorado min-

"It's vote for Bryan. He's the man for me." Leadville folks rally for Bryan. Courtesy, Central City Opera House Association.

ing around after the problems of the 1860s and early 1870s. By 1880, Colorado was America's number one mining state.

The life of the miner and his expectations are only briefly portrayed, as opposed to those of the owner, which Tabor had become by the time of the opera. In the opening scene, Tabor sings with his four cronies about their lives before the big silver strikes:

I dug by day and dug by starlight.
I'm an honest son of labor
Dug my way right through to Hell.
Satan said "why here comes Tabor!"

Dig you gophers
Dig them holes
Dig away to save your souls
More buckets of gold than banks can hold
Lie deep in Colorado.

Dig away to save your souls
When the chips are all down
You'll wear a silver crown
Right here in Colorado
When the chips are down
You'll put on a crown
Right here in Colorado.

If not all the way to hell, they dug, nevertheless, and many of them found their "silver crown" right in Colorado. In the end, they contracted nearly incurable gold fever and silver fever, both of which can be terminal diseases. Whether "deadly" or not, both "fevers" affected miners, without question, in almost everything they did.

These nineteenth-century miners had pride in their profession and what they had accomplished in developing the West. This idea comes through clearly, when Tabor sings, "We're the ones who built this land and we're going to run it or know the reason why." Mining was the foundation for settlement and development in three Rocky Mountain states—Colorado, Montana, and Idaho.

The life style of the mining towns was briefly glimpsed in the opening of Act One, as Tabor and

his friends celebrate the evening at Leadville's opera house. The music sets an excited, busy tempo. Optimism is in the air. "It's a bang up job," sings Tabor about his opera house. "Yes sir, it's a fittin' place for art and culture. We can use some culture here in Colorado." Augusta provides further comments, when she admonishes her husband. "Can't you manage to cooperate in our efforts to provide some change of tone in this money-grubbing town—some touch of beauty and refinement?" Horace's response is revealing. "Dollars from that old saloon same as dollars from the mines helped to build that handsome opry house—helped to put this shindig on."

The typical mining town showed both attitudes—the desire to develop and get rich and a yearning for art and culture. In real life, many, including the Tabors, desired something beyond the materialism of the era and the industry. Leadville might have been grander and more exuberant than most of its contemporaries, but it mirrored, on a larger scale, aspirations of a generation of mining folk.

A central theme of the opera is the impact of wealth on individuals. Horace and Augusta responded in generally different ways. After complaining that her husband had documents, stocks, bonds, invoices, and bills all "jumbled helterskelter" on his desk, she finds a check to buy the Matchless Mine. "Lorda-mighty, no! He wants to buy another mine! The man's idiotic." Tabor did not think so. His decades long grubstaking had finally paid off handsomely. It would only take one Little Pittsburg to redeem a host of poor investments.

Tabor's faith in mining and himself guided his career; he built an empire before he finished that included mines, opera houses, a stage coach line, property, banks, and a host of other investments. They all led him into eventual financial decline, however, but he never lost the "faith." The same could be said of other mining men throughout the West, including, for example, the Comstock's Big Four, Butte's copper kings, and legions of the lesser known individuals.

Fortunes affected many life styles in ways very similar to Tabor. The sudden acquiring of large amounts of money has a way of changing people—their spending habits, their morals, their very way of life. As the Greek philosopher Sophocles warned more than 2,000 years before, "Money. There's nothing in the world so demoralizing as money." For Tabor and some other successful mining men, that warning proved apt. The willingness to enjoy money with reckless abandon was not unusual, nor was the desire to build monuments to their name and fame. As Denver newspaper man and poet Eugene Field wrote at the glorious opening of the Tabor Grand Opera House, "The opera house, a union grand of capital and labor; long will the stately structure stand, a monument to Tabor."

Sowing one's wild oats later in life also seems to have been a fairly common occurrence of the suddenly wealthy mining magnates and others. The flings of older men with younger women happened so often that it did not create much comment, unless publicized. Augusta knew much about her husband's wanderings from the marriage. As she told Baby Doe, in their first meeting in the opera, "I suppose he's told you that there have been others?" Baby Doe might protest, "Yes, he has. But what I feel is different from women like that." Augusta did not think so.

The decline in his marriage to Augusta started long before the silver wealth, but Leadville's bonanza cut the final cords. Augusta, the astute businesswomen, ended with a fortune and loneliness. Tabor went on to fame, scandal, and legend, despite the sad end to his life. The public liked this type of story in the nineteenth century, as it still does, and many wealthy mining men provided grist for newspapers and tabloids.

A turning point in the opera, as it was for mining, proved to be the silver issue. Basically this reflected overproduction of the metal against lessening use, resulting in a falling silver price. Miners and westerners did not look upon it in quite that black and white economic way; to them, they were not a fault. They blamed plots concocted by bankers, foreigners, big business, easterners, the federal government, and almost anyone else that came to mind. The election of 1896 would tell the story, a fact generally recognized by voters during the campaign. The Republican Party stood four square behind gold and nominated William McKinley. Meanwhile, the Democrats selected William Jennings. Bryan and silver. As Tabor said at the Leadville Bryan rally:

McKinley's dogs have had their day
cause silver ore is here to stay
Let the merchants understand
We're the ones who built this land
and we're going to run it
Or know the reason why.

It was debtor versus creditor, easterner versus westerner, gold-bug versus silverite, rich versus poor, urbanite versus ruralite, in a struggle for America's heart and future. Logic went out the window. Emotion came to stay.

Bryan, as he did during the campaign, returned to these themes in the imaginary Leadville speech, calling the miners "the sinews of our nation's strength." The "armor of a righteous cause" made the humblest citizen more powerful than the "hosts of error." His listeners well understood that meant bankers, Republicans, eastern and foreign investors, and anyone who opposed free silver. "Drive the money changers from the temples of our land. Renew the ancient covenant between mankind and God." That was the challenge with which he closed, while his listeners chanted "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan."

Defiant, dedicated, determined--the silverites stood for their cause, their man. The opera catches a clear sense of the era, the people. The music, the lyrics, and the chorus and soloists all mirror the temper of the times. The hope stood framed against desperation:

You miners, doctors and you cow-pokes
You city clerks and farming folks
You're not deaf and dumb and blind
Now it's time to speak your mind!
Tell it to the nation upon election day!

They told the nation, but the nation did not hear. McKinley won.

Instantly the opera takes on a new tone. Desperation turns to despair, an era has ended, a new America has triumphed. Tabor and his age slipped into history and legend. He can now only reflect back on what had been or what might have been.

How could a man measure himself, he pleadingly asks. The words of the English poet Charles Kingsley, which Tabor had inscribed on the drop curtain of the Tabor Grand Opera House, now take on a haunted meaning:

So fleet the works of man
Back to the earth again;
Ancient and holy things
Fade like a dream.

Tabor never intended these words to be an epitaph for himself or nineteenth century mining, but they honestly could serve as that.

"The Ballad of Baby Doe " recaptures an era, as few other things have been able to accomplish. The time, the place, come alive; hopefully, the spirit and vigor of "Baby Doe" will cultivate interest among its audience to pursue the era further. If so, the question has been answered that the despondent Tabor sings, "Ain't there something, someone, somewhere, sometime, that somehow I can hold onto?" In the end, he will not be forgotten. The measurement of a man can be assessed.

NOTES

1. *Washington Post* Jan. 17, 1997. *Newsweek*, April 21, 1969, 69-75. *Stagebill*, January 1997, 12. Derek M. Mills, "An American epic: Ever Young," *Washington Opera* (Issue 73), 28. The most produced American opera is "Porgy and Bess."
2. *The Allegro Quarterly* (Spring 1997), 6.
3. *Washington Post*, January 12, & 17, 1997. Robert J. Lurtsema, "Robert J," undated column, author's possession. *Daily Camera* (Boulder, Colorado), July 11, 1988. Sharon Daniels, "Director's Notes," *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, (Boston: 1998), 22-23.
4. Edith Ordway, *56 of the Best Operas* (New York: 1917), 90-93.
5. *The Center Programme* (Denver: 1976), 7a. *Bravo* (Denver: 1981), 4b. *Central City Opera* (Denver: 1988), 8.
6. Andrew Stiller, "The Ballad of Baby Doe," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (New York: 1992), v. 1, 289.
7. John Moriarty, Speech, Denver, May 9, 1996.
8. John Moriarty, "The ballad of Baby Doe," Notes included with CD recording, 1996, 3.

9. Daniels, "Director's Notes," 23.
10. John Moriarty, Speech, Denver, Mary 9, 1996.
11. R. G. Dun Report, December 27, 1876, R. G. Dun Co l-lection, Harvard University.
12. The books, articles, and pamphlets on the Tabors are l e-gion and often legendary. Recommended books to read are Betty Moynihan, *Augusta Tabor: A Pioneering Woman* (Evergreen, Colorado: 1988) and Duane A. Smith, *Horace Tabor: His Life and the Legend* (Niwot: 1989 edition).
13. "The Ballad of Baby Doe," Notes included with CD, 1996.
14. "The Ballad of Baby Doe," (New York: 197?) Pamphlet included in the MGM recording of the opera.
15. Quotes from "Baby Doe" are taken "The Ballad of Baby Doe," *MGM Academy Series* and *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (New York: ?).