

Ballad of the Doe Heads

Fanatics follow opera from town to town

Stephen Hunt, Calgary Herald

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David Kanzeg is the original Doe Head.

That's the name given to the lovers of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Calgary Opera's new production, which opens tonight at the Jubilee Auditorium. They're wildly crazy fans of the 1956 American opera by Douglas Moore, which tells the rags-to-riches-to-rags tale of three real-life Coloradans, Horace, Augusta and Baby Doe, an ill-fated love triangle (is there any other kind?) that took place in Colorado and Washington, D.C. in the late 19th century.

Doe Heads such as Kanzeg -- there are about 10 to 15 diehards, and more than 100 internationally -- follow the opera to concert halls all over North America. His visit to Calgary will mark the 26th time he's seen it.

"Most operas are about mythical characters and even something like (the opera) *Nixon in China*, which is theoretically about real people, weren't the kind of people that you or I would talk to," says Kanzeg.

"These (characters) -- Baby Doe and Augusta and Horace -- were people who might have been on the next bar stool or standing next to us in a store or hotel lobby. They were real folks."

If you think it's a little odd to so passionately follow an opera, you might be surprised to learn of an honourable tradition in opera of being a little nuts about the form. There are, points out Calgary Opera artistic director Bob McPhee, fanatical followers of Wagner's Ring Cycle who travel the world to see it.

"I call them geeks, but they're not geeks," McPhee says. "They're fanatics."

Kanzeg says the Doe Heads were born from a similar, and perhaps more familiar, gang of nuts.

"The notion of the Doe Heads came about of course because of Dead Heads, the people who follow around the Grateful Dead," says Kanzeg, a programming director at PBS in Cleveland who has written about *Baby Doe* for a variety of publications, including the *Washington Post*. "The name came about as a result of some conversations with a friend, who is now deceased. Since both of us had such an interest in the opera and the story . . . it seemed like a logical extension (of that passion)."

The American opera has been produced throughout the U.S. in the 52 years since its 1956 Central City Colorado debut, but only sporadically abroad. This is its first full Canadian production, starring baritone John Fanning, soprano Tracy Dahl and mezzo-Soprano Elizabeth Turnbull.

The plot centres around the rise and fall of Horace Tabor, a 19th century Colorado prospector who, with the help of his wife Augusta, strikes it big when large silver deposits are discovered in central Colorado that Tabor has a stake in. Awash in sudden wealth beyond anything he has ever imagined, Tabor does what a lot of suddenly-rich guys do: dumps Augusta for Baby Doe, a pretty little number he meets one day working in one of the mines he owns.

Alas, thanks to the wrong presidential candidate winning the election, silver loses out to gold as the basis for U.S. monetary policy, which turns out to be the end of Horace and Baby Doe's fortune.

They end up back in Leadville, Co., running a virtually worthless silver mine, and the final portion of their lives is spent in abject poverty.

It's a boom-and-bust story, set in the Rocky Mountains. Does that ring any bells?

"I don't know if they'll (the audience) translate it clearly to today," says McPhee, about the parallels between the characters in Baby Doe and the somewhat manic nature of the local economy over the years. "I think they'll see some of the similarities."

For Kanzeg, who has traveled across the United States -- including a number of trips to the Central City Opera House in Colorado where the opera had its 1956 debut (and which was built by Horace Tabor) -- the parallels between the economic upheaval in the plot of the opera and of today are vivid.

"The whole boom-and-bust theme . . . really is a good hook for all of this, because it permeates the historical story," he says.

"It even permeates the current situation in Central City, Colorado, where the clash of the revitalization of the town that was meant to happen with casino gambling have actually had all sorts of unforeseen consequences that have destroyed the community in the meantime."

That theme will be part of a free symposium Kanzeg will deliver Saturday afternoon, prior to opening night. Sharing the symposium spotlight with Kanzeg will be the oldest living Doe Head: Leyna Gabriele, who sang the role of Baby Doe in the original production, in Central City, Colorado back in 1956.

After which, it will be time to prepare for opening night. By Kanzeg's estimate, it will be his 26th full production of Baby Doe.

Which was the best?

"Clearly the ones that have taken place in Central City, which is where it was premiered have a special feel," he says.

"Of course, there are lots of ghosts there, including the real Baby Doe, who lived in Central City at the time that opera house was built.

"I also saw what I thought was as close to a perfect production as I'd ever seen in Boston with my friend who has since passed away," he says, referring to the fellow Doe Head who first had the idea of launching the site.

"That was the last time that I saw him, that was the last time we saw the opera together," he says. "It was beautiful, absolutely wonderfully done."

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