

# **Baby Doe a triumph**

**Kenneth DeLong, For The Calgary Herald**

Monday, January 28, 2008

Review

Calgary Opera presents: The Ballad of Baby Doe Tracy Dahl, soprano John Fanning, baritone Elizabeth Turnbull, mezzo soprano Kelly Robinson, director Hal France, Conductor

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The Ballad of Baby Doe received its triumphant first-ever professional Canadian performance by Calgary Opera on Saturday night.

In significant ways, the opera is similar to John Estacio's *Filumena*: it is a story of the frontier West, and the story is true, romantic, and (now) a legend. It is also similar in its accessible musical style and its impressive staging by Kelly Robinson, who also directed *Filumena*. If you saw and enjoyed *Filumena*, you will unquestionably enjoy *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. The music is tuneful, with a number of highly appealing songs, and the performance of the opera matches, or even exceeds, the previous opera.

The story is set in the boom times of Colorado in the 1880s when silver was king. If you exchange Colorado silver for Alberta's "black gold," the story could easily set in Calgary during the late 1970s and the early 1980s with its boom and bust mentality.

The core of the story is the relationship between Horace Tabor, a bluff, hearty figure of a man and newly rich from his silver mine, who meets and is mesmerized by Baby Doe, an extremely pretty young woman who has recently left an unhappy marriage. Horace's wife Augusta is not much amused by her husband's infatuation with Baby Doe, and many of the opera's most dramatic and powerful scenes involve Augusta's challenges in dealing with, and ultimately having to accept, this new relationship.

As music, the work lives on the very edge between the world of opera and Broadway musical or, perhaps, American operetta. This is especially true of the effervescent first act, where the music evokes the spirit of the West in the 1880s with its rich assortment of sentimental drawing-room waltzes and peppy marches.

The performance of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by The Calgary Opera is splashy and splendid. From the opening choral scene to the final song by Baby Doe, the production never falters.

With the exception of the title role, the music is not so very difficult to perform, but it does require precision and a certain Broadway-style zing for it to come across to full effect -- and zing the performance certainly has.

The opera will be performed again on Wednesday and Friday.

Don't miss it.

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