

Below is the complete narration, delivered by David Kanzeg, at the Champagne Wedding Tea at the Willard InterContinental Hotel in Washington, D.C., on Sunday afternoon, October 22nd, 2006. The narration provided the context for excerpts of the opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, by Douglas Moore and John LaTouche, performed by apprentices from the Washington National Opera.

Once upon a time...in a land far away...there was a beautiful princess....Well, maybe not a princess. But almost. Today we'll hear about an American-style fairy tale, full of gold and diamonds and silver. Lots of silver.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Dave Kanzeg, your host for this afternoon. And I'd like to welcome you to this special performance, honoring the 20th anniversary of the reopening of this magnificent building, and in celebration of the unique place that the Willard InterContinental Hotel has occupied in the life of this city since Henry and Edwin Willard started the ball rolling back in 1850.

Our program will not only occupy this beautiful room via a performance, but it's also inextricably connected to this space in both historical AND musical terms. To students of Colorado history, the Willard Hotel is a turning point in the life of the 19th-century's most colorful silver baron. To opera fans, who may have no inkling that such a place exists in the present day, the Willard Hotel is the setting of the closing scene of the First Act of one of the most performed American operas. The fact that it still sits here, in real life, at the corner of 14th and Pennsylvania, is the unique reality we've come here today to celebrate. For what we're about to experience is unique and impossible to replicate anywhere else--the Washington equivalent of doing *Aida* at the pyramids.

Though it's not the first time that Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* has been performed in Washington, it's certainly the first time in this setting; on the very site where the actual historical wedding took place. We'll see the opera's wedding scene, as well as a few other selections--all performed by artists of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist program of the Washington National Opera.

But first...a little background....

The Ballad of Baby Doe is the story of rags to riches and back to rags again. Of three strong-willed people who together cut a wide swath across 19th-century America. Horace Tabor, who began as a stone-cutter in Vermont, married middle-class Augusta Pierce, whom he dragged across the prairies prior to the Civil War to spend the next twenty plus years moving from one Rocky Mountain mining camp to another in search of their fortune. And Elizabeth McCourt, from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, who married Harvey Doe, and lit out for Colorado together to try their luck working a gold mine in which Harvey's father had an interest. She got the nickname "Baby" from the grizzled hard-rock miners, who admired the fact that someone of such outstanding pulchritude would actually work in a mine. Which she did.

Harvey Doe quickly lost interest in mining and took up drinking, which prompted Baby to kick him out. Around the same time, Horace, on the other hand, grubstaked two old drunks who discovered a bonanza mine, which then jump-started Horace's fortune. In less than a year he'd parlayed the proceeds from selling his bonanza stake into other mines that were pumping out *millions* of 1879 dollars: so much money that he couldn't spend it fast enough.

Straight-laced New England-born Augusta was overwhelmed by such wealth, and refused to wear the jewels and fine clothes that Horace could suddenly lavish on her. This didn't go down too well with

Horace, who was all too eager to kick up his heels and enjoy their good fortune after two decades of hard toil on the frontier.

And thereby hangs this tale.

Whether Baby Doe deliberately sought Horace out when word of his great luck spread throughout Colorado, or merely caught his eye across the Saddle Rock Café dining room in Leadville one day, as some accounts suggest, is lost to history. What is abundantly clear, though, is that by the fall of 1881 Horace and Baby were a not-too-secret couple. And Horace had all but abandoned Augusta.

He was seemingly at the top of his game by that fall. His Matchless Mine alone yielded, on average, \$8000 every week. He'd built the Tabor Opera House in Leadville, and the Tabor office Block in Denver. He invested heavily in Denver's finest hotel. And then, on September 5th, 1881, he presided over the glittery opening of the most magnificent theater in the west--the Tabor Grand Opera House--on a site in Denver that was largely untouched sod barely a quarter century earlier. That night the city honored its wealthiest citizen in a ceremony that included a complete performance of William Wallace's opera *Maritana*, the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, speeches by politicians, and the presentation of a gold watch fob commemorating the events of Horace's life up to that point. Baby Doe was in the house that night, though not in the Tabor Box. Augusta wasn't invited. Then, precisely two weeks later, something happened in New Jersey that eventually would lead to us all being here this afternoon.

But more on that later.

Composer Douglas Moore and librettist John Latouche's opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* was premiered fifty years ago this summer in the opera house in Central City, Colorado. It went on from there to become part of the repertoire at the New York City Opera, where it enjoyed considerable success with Beverly Sills as Baby Doe, a role that's been preserved on a legendary recording.

The opera is unusual for its time because of its distinctive lyric quality. It's tuneful and accessible, despite being composed in an era when melody and traditional harmonies were rare in serious music. Many critics have charged that it's too sentimental as a result. But audiences and singers continue to come to it nevertheless.

This afternoon, you can judge for yourself.

The three principal roles in the opera are Baby Doe, a soprano, Horace, a baritone and Augusta, a mezzo, all three of whom we'll hear from today. We begin by hearing a pair of arias that occur just after the opening scene of Act I. It's evening, and we're in Leadville, in 1879. Baby Doe has just arrived in town, and is wistful over her short failed marriage to Harvey, and sings of the things she's left behind. Horace, who is immediately smitten by her, overhears her song and follows it up by singing a lament of his own; about "the girl I knew back home in Vermont," among other things.

Incidentally, both of these arias have become signature elements of this opera and frequently appear as stand-alone items on recital programs. Baby's aria, [which we'll hear first](#), has taken on the name "The Willow Song" from the words of its first line, which, [unlike most of the rest of the opera](#), were written by Dr. Moore himself, rather than by librettist John Latouche. Horace's aria, on the other hand, didn't exist when the opera had its premiere in Central City, and was added later, replacing a somewhat moodier piece titled "Out of the Darkness." Having heard both, I, for one, am pleased that in the end the darkness made way for a song called "Warm as the autumn light."

[\[The apprentices perform "The Willow Song" and "Warm as the Autumn Night.\]](#)

Horace was so head-over-heels for Baby Doe that he eventually forced Augusta to accept a divorce. "Not willingly asked for" she cried for the record in open court. He and Baby lived high-off-the-hog for roughly a decade, with peacocks strutting on the lawn of their Denver mansion, and liveried footman accompanying their carriages. All thanks to Horace's silver mines. It was an endless stream of cash. Or so it seemed.

But changes in the country's attitude about silver's role in buttressing the currency were to bring an end to Horace's good times. By the start of the 1890s, a decade of shifting politics involving the treasury's purchase of silver culminated in the total collapse of the silver market and the so-called Panic of 1893. Horace was left so poor that he even had to resort to hard rock mining to try to put food on the table.

Augusta, in the meantime, had seen the handwriting on the wall, and had maneuvered her investments to allow her to weather the storm. But despite her relative economic comfort, the years had taken their toll. She was frail and lonely. Early on, she had hoped against hope that Horace would see the folly of his ways and return to her. She even wrote him love letters inviting him to come back. But eventually, she realized that he had gone out her life forever. As she grew weaker she spent more and more time in Pasadena, believing the California air to be more therapeutic than the air in high-altitude Denver. And it's there that we find her in our next selection.

In the second-last scene in the opera Baby Doe's mother visits California to ask Augusta for some money to help Horace survive. (There is absolutely no evidence that such a meeting ever actually took place in real life. But this is opera, after all!) Augusta [declines](#), recalling that the last thing Horace said to her was that he wanted nothing from her; "kindness least of all." Baby Doe's mother exits in a huff, leaving Augusta to consider, in one of the most dramatic arias in the English language repertoire, what she's just done.

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[The 2nd Act aria "Augusta, Augusta" is performed.]

Douglas Moore was the head of the Music Department at Columbia University when he was approached in the early 1950s by the Central City Opera Company to write an opera about an American story. He was a logical choice, having already composed American-themed music about P.T. Barnum, Daniel Webster, Decoration Day and Moby Dick among others.

He was also already familiar with Baby Doe Tabor, having taken note of her obituary in the New York Times almost two decades earlier. That obit said that she had been living in a one-room cabin, at 10,000+ feet, outside the entrance to the Matchless Mine near Leadville. She was there, minus the peacocks and footmen, of course, virtually since Horace's death from appendicitis thirty-six years earlier in 1899. Sporadically accepting food from neighbors. Wielding a shotgun when unexpected visitors came to her door. Wearing a motoring cap to hide her still brilliantly blond hair, and gunny sacks instead of shoes.

Then in early March of 1935, some friends noticed that there was no smoke coming from the cabin's chimney, and, after breaking in, found her found frozen to death on the floor. Legend has it that Horace told her on his deathbed to hold on to the Matchless Mine; that it would make millions again. And even though the virtually worthless mine's mortgage had long since passed to another owner, and even though she was only in her mid-40s when he died, and still very alluring, Baby Doe kept faith with Horace, until [her own](#) end. A notion that is touchingly portrayed in the opera's final moments.

The scene is the stage of the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver. Horace, now a pauper, has returned to "take a long long look around." He imagines himself back in 1881 at the theater's grand opening

ceremonies, and hallucinates about the accomplishments of his life, all of which he now sees as having ended in failure. "How can a man measure himself?" he asks. "The land was growing and I grew with it." His anxiety catches up with him as he collapses, crying out "Ain't there something, someone, somewhere, sometime that somehow I can hold onto?"

[Suddenly](#) we hear Baby Doe, calling to Horace and running in from off-stage. It's she, after all, that he can hold onto. She comforts him in her arms in what turns out to be his final moments. After which she sings a lovely hymn-like ballad that, over the years, has come to be known, not entirely irreverently, as the "Leadville Liebestod," referring to Tristan and Isolde's love-death in Wagner's opera.

The aria, which ends the opera, is actually called "Always through the changing," and is sung by a now-aged Baby Doe as she stands before the shaft of the Matchless Mine, with snow gently falling all around her.

[The aria that concludes *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is performed.]

INTERMISSION

So what about the Wedding Scene? And the Willard? And New Jersey?

The spot we're all occupying this very minute was, on the evening of Thursday, March 1st, 1883, the site of one of the most lavish weddings Washington had yet seen. It occurred in a private parlor of three adjacent suites that Horace had rented, probably in the area of the building [he points left, toward the front of the building] that fronted on 14th and Pennsylvania. Father Chappelle of St. Matthews' Parish officiated. And in attendance were members of the McCourt family from Oshkosh, all incidentally wearing mourning clothes after the recent death of one of Baby Doe's brothers. The McCourt family women were virtually the only ladies present, since Washington's society ladies and the wives of Colorado's congressional delegation had decided to boycott the wedding. However, President Chester A. Arthur, another Vermonter like Horace, was present. The groom was 52. The bride 29.

The Willard wedding was the crowning achievement of Horace Tabor's term as a United States senator—a term that lasted all of thirty days—during which Horace spent 300,000 1883 dollars just here in Washington. In 30 days! He had been elected by the Colorado legislature to serve the remainder of the unexpired term of Senator Henry Teller, who had been appointed Secretary of the Interior by President Arthur. The President himself had risen to the presidency upon the assassination of James A. Garfield, who died just two weeks after the opening of the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver. His death was on September 19th, 1881 in Elberon, NEW JERSEY, starting the chain of events that brought Horace to Washington and brings us all here now.

Though Horace was born a New Englander, nothing was plain or simple about his life. Both the bride and groom on that Willard evening were, of course, divorced. AND they had already been secretly married six months earlier in St. Louis, a mere five weeks after Horace had gotten his divorce from Augusta. Father Chappelle knew nothing of their divorces, by the way, and was suitably scandalized when he found out. He returned his fee [to Horace](#) and refused to register the marriage in St. Matthew's Parish records. No matter. Horace apparently thought the dazzle of his money could take care of everything.

And dazzle there was! Like the fact that Baby Doe's gown cost \$7,000, and the fact that her lace undergarments all were handmade. And the fact that he paid \$75,000 for a diamond necklace purchased

for the occasion, which he was made to believe had belonged to Queen Isabella of Spain, and which she supposedly "hocked" to finance Columbus' voyage of discovery. *The New York Tribune's* correspondent pulled no punches: [quote] "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." [unquote]

(By the way, this scene is also portrayed in the 1932 movie *Silver Dollar*, in which Edward G. Robinson plays Horace Tabor and Bebe Daniels is Baby Doe. The movie was made three years BEFORE the real Baby Doe's death. And she WAS aware of it.)

Like it or not, the Tabors made an impression on Washington. The President was quoted as saying "I've never seen a more beautiful Bride." Poet and journalist Eugene Field wrote a satiric account of Tabor's farewell to the Senate, when Horace's term ended: [quote] "Flags were hung at half-mast....[As] Senator Tabor 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." [unquote] 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.

Before we hear the wedding scene, [a few clarifications](#): First: there's no wedding in the wedding scene. It's actually the wedding reception that we'll be seeing, taking place in an adjacent parlor.

Also....[here's a quick glossary of some 19th-century vocabulary terms to listen for](#): Baby Doe's mother calls Augusta Tabor a "termagant," which is a shrewish bullying woman; we'll hear that Baby Doe's gown is trimmed in "real marabou," [which are decorative](#) stork feathers [he pulls some marabou from his vest pocket], [and some of the wedding guests sing about "bimetallism," which is the term used when the country's currency is backed by both gold AND silver.](#)

And, [at one point in the scene](#), you'll hear Horace shout exasperatedly "Those pussyfooting pipsqueaks!" [referring in general to](#) Washington bureaucrats. From time to time, Walter Cassel, the usually impeccably professional and distinguished baritone who created the role, would become so caught up in the moment that line tumbled out as "Those pissyfooting pipsqueaks!"

There's no question that the Wedding Scene depicts the pivotal point in both the opera and the historical Tabor story. It's the moment, at the close the work's First Act, when Horace and Baby Doe are at their zenith; when they "had such perfect bliss," as they sing to one another. Tellingly, it's one of the few times in the opera when they sing in harmony. It's also the beginning of the end of both of their lives: the point from which the outcome of the real-life story is *foretold* in classic tragic form. From this point on, everything is downhill.

For now, though, we have an opportunity to linger on the moment at hand...123 years ago...right here. In the scene we're about to see, Baby Doe has a beautiful aria in which she sings of silver as lying hidden in the core of dreams: dreams of the type that took place in the building that stood on this very spot. Dreams that, not too long afterward, [would](#) lay shattered at the feet of a silver that would never again have such power over men's fortunes.

At the end of his life, Horace thought he'd be forgotten as a failure. But here we all are...and I believe we're being invited to a party.

[The apprentices perform "The Wedding Scene."]

The performers were:

Elizabeth Andrews Roberts, Baby Doe
Trevor Scheunemann, Horace Tabor
Claudia Huckle, Mama McCourt Greg
Warren, Priest Byron Jones, Chester
A. Arthur VaShawn McIlwain, footman
Samantha McElhaney, wedding guest
Magdalena Wor, wedding guest Obed
Urena, dandy Yingxi Zhang, dandy
Benjamin Makino, conductor Thomas
Rimes, pianist Andrea Dorf, stage
director Dave Kanzeg, narrator