

PAST, PRESENT and PROPOSED by Pip Clayton

I have a passion for opera, not just those of the nineteenth century but also from the earliest to the latest opus in this genre. I also have another passion, and that is for the buildings in which one can see and hear those operas. Over the years I have collected many photos, postcards, articles and books on these theatres - I thought I might share my love of them in a series of articles with you...

Little did I think that in this first of an occasional series I should have to start with an obituary. In less than five years we have lost three of these buildings to fire. First, in 1991, the lovely Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari; then in 1994, the elegant Liceu in Barcelona; now, on the night of 29 January of this year we have lost La Fenice to the flames. I shall always remember with pleasure performances of Verdi's *Aroldo* and *Stiffello* given in tandem over a weekend ie on Friday and Saturday night, and again on the Sunday matinée and evening; also Puccini's *Butterfly* in its first and final scorings. Then of course there was Donizetti's *Maria de Rudanz* with Katia Ricciarelli (now happily available on CD), also Pavarotti's production of *La favorita*. It seems inconceivable that on one occasion after a performance at La Fenice and then a meal in the upstairs dining room of the restaurant next to the theatre, I had to wade waist-high through the water back to my hotel! Already plans are being made for rebuilding, lets hope it will not be long before La Fenice rises again from the ashes.



THE TABOR OPERA HOUSE
LEADVILLE COLORADO

Nearly forty years ago I visited America for the first time, not particularly to go to the opera, but to travel around the country and see as many places as I could. While in New York I spent every evening at the theatre, on one of those evenings I saw a modern opera *The ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore. The opera, based on fact, told of the love of Horace Tabor for Elizabeth "Baby" Doe. Most of the action takes place in the mining town of Leadville, 10,000 feet up in the Rockies, Colorado. Tabor was married to Augusta when he met Baby Doe, who had acquired - and disposed of - a husband on her way to Colorado, she now induced Tabor to divorce his wife and marry her. Tabor was a prospector and speculator who had earlier bought the rights to a silver mine which he named the "Matchless"; at one time it was probably the richest silver mine in the United States, soon he was one of the richest men in the country with a fortune in excess of 100 million dollars. In 1893 the Sherman Act, which had made silver legal tender, was repealed, the Tabor's went bankrupt, they lost everything except the now-worthless Matchless mine. Tabor was reduced to working as a labourer to save his wife and daughters from starving. In 1898 he was appointed Postmaster at Denver but he died the following year. One of his last requests was for Baby Doe not to sell the mine, she kept her promise and eventually moved to a shack at the minehead where she lived as a recluse until 1935. She was last seen alive on 20 February 1835; two weeks later she was found frozen to death after a blizzard.

One of the possessions that Tabor lost was the Grand Tabor Theatre he had built in Denver. This stood until the 1960's, when it was demolished to make way for a shopping mall. What I did not know was that he had earlier built an opera house at Leadville which had had its opening on 20 November 1879 and was still standing. At one time Leadville had been a thriving mining community with a population of thousands. The Tabor Opera House, as it was named, was popular and such diverse artists as Maud Adams, Sarah Berthardt, Dion Boucicault, Anna Held, Harry Lauder, Houdini, Lillie Langtry, Helena Modjeska, the Metropolitan Opera Co., Otis Skinner, John Phillip Sousa with his band, and Oscar Wilde - to name but a few - had appeared there. It is told that Wilde lectured to an audience of miners on the life of Benvenuto Cellini: he was asked why that gentleman had not come with him? When the poet replied that Cellini was dead, another voice enquired "*Who shot him?*"

Last year, thanks to a promotional offer by American Airlines, I flew to Denver with the express intention of visiting Leadville and the Tabor Opera House. To my horror, however, I found that Leadville was some distance from Denver and that there was no public transport between the two places. Unfortunately I do not drive and to hire a car with driver would have cost more than double the airfare from London. While in Denver I was asked to give a talk at a school to some students who were due to visit England later that year. They wanted to know about Windsor, Buckingham Palace, the Cathedrals, Stratford upon Avon and other places of our heritage. Later, in a question and answer period, I was asked why I had come to Denver. I explained about wanting to go to Leadville and why it was out of the question to do so. At the end of our discussion two of the teachers told me that their colleagues would take over their teaching periods the next day and they would be able to take me to my goal. The journey took well over two hours, Leadville is now a quiet little town with just one main street, it was hard to imagine this as a rip-roaring mining town of the 1800's. The Opera House stands at the far end of the main street, I was surprised by its size. We found the owner - a charming lady in her eighties who produced the keys and a large flashlight - this was necessary as there was no lighting in the theatre. She explained how, to save the building from demolition due to non-payment of taxes - her mother had bought it in 1955.

The theatre is amazing, the ground floor has an entrance foyer flanked by two shops, a small box office on the left, the walls hung with photos of people who have appeared there. A staircase leads up to the back of the orchestra stalls, two staircases then lead up to the circle and a large salon the width of the frontage. Also on this floor is a five-roomed suite which the Tabors used as their Leadville home after moving to Denver. More stairs take you up to the third floor, here the rooms had been used as offices and at one time as 25 bedrooms for use by the adjoining Clarendon Hotel, now demolished. To the rear of this floor is a store room 40 X 60 feet used by both opera house and hotel.

Even by the dim light thrown by the torch it was still possible to get a small idea what the auditorium must have looked like in its heyday. The walls are painted red, as had been the colour of the carpet in the aisles. The wall lights shaded with opaline glass and the chandeliers found stored in the attics are once again in place. The colour scheme used was red, gold and white. Either side of the proscenium are two boxes which had been hung with lace curtains. The owner still has some of these curtains made of Valenciennes lace and imported from France. The seats are quite unusual, they are Andrews Patent Opera Chairs, the seats and backs adjust to the way in which a person sits in them. Of Victorian design, they are made of fret-worked cast iron and are upholstered in red plush. Under each seat is a wire tray to take ladies hats or the gentleman's top hat. The last patent stamped on these seats is 11 January 1876 (these same seats were used in Booths and Union Square theatres in New York and also in the famous Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. The theatre was lit by gas, and the gas pipes still run through the building although it has now been converted to electricity. The theatre was heated by a furnace under the main floor - quite a feat for 1879! The ventilation grills are still in place as are the original fire extinguishers their hoses still coiled neatly on ornate iron racks on the walls. The stage was considered the largest in the West of America being 35 X 58 feet. Below the stage are the dressing rooms - some still with the original carpet (now threadbare) on the floor, others still with the original mirrors over the dressing-tables and furniture of the period. Briefly, in one dark room, I caught a glimpse of a couple of ladies "fainting-couches".

In 1901 the theatre was sold and the stage-size increased, but what is unique about this theatre is that hanging at the back of the stage, rolled up, are a number of backdrops dating from this period and some from even earlier which would have fitted the first stage. These backdrops are all hand-painted and depict a forest, a garden, a Baronial Hall, a prison, a kitchen, a chamber with a balcony used for *Romeo and Juliet*, a waterfall, a volcano, and one of Leadville in 1881. There are also a number of hand-painted flats leaning against the rear wall, as well as props one of which used to create the eruption of the volcano.

The whole building is a veritable treasure-trove of theatrical history. I know that this is one place I want to see again.

Talking to Mrs Furman, the owner, over lunch after our tour I was told that she manages to pay the taxes to keep the theatre standing and charges 4 dollars a head for the tour to augment her income. I asked what would happen to the theatre eventually; she was not certain - although she has a family no one lives near or seems interested in the building. When one realises how many Americans come to Europe to look at those buildings which are part of our heritage I can only hope they take a look at Leadville to see a piece of their own. Perhaps the State Historical Society of Colorado will step in and preserve THE TABOR OPERA HOUSE for us all.