

Národní  divadlo

**NdB** Národní  
divadlo  
Brno



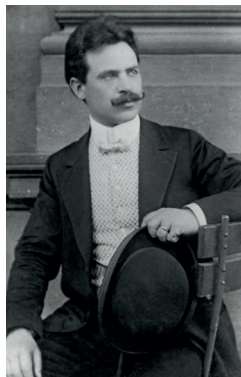
# ACHILLE VISCUSI

150 years



# ACHILLE VISCUSI

1869 ROME – 1945 PRAGUE



Achille Viscusi over the course of time.

By the time when, in 1901, the 32-year-old Viscusi arrived in Prague, he had had ample experience from engagements all over Europe (Rome, Moscow, Berlin, Zagreb, Budapest, Vienna, Paris). Over the next 12 years, he worked at the National Theatre in Prague as a dancer, ballet master, choreographer, as well as the artistic director of its ballet company. For four seasons, he lived in Ostrava, where in 1919 he initiated the foundation of the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre Ballet and assumed the post of its artistic director. From 1923 to 1931, he helmed the ballet company of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava. Between 1918 and 1920, he served as a guest choreographer in Brno. In 1912, he formed his own company, with whom he made a tour of England. In 1913, Viscusi worked as a choreographer in Rio de Janeiro.



Achille Viscusi and Anna Korecká at a rehearsal in Prague.



Viscusi played a significant role in the building up of Czech ballet companies (in Prague, he increased the number of male dancers from 2 to 17).

*From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Prague 1908. A rehearsal in a ballet studio.*



Achille Viscusi (with his wife  
Luisa in Zagreb).



*From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale,*  
Prague, 1908. Achille Viscusi  
(Prince Radoslav)

# A DEBONAIR ITALIAN

## WITH AN OPEN HEART

Viscusi spent a quarter of a century on Czech theatre stages. He was a true professional, demanding towards himself and those around him alike. At the age of 60, he was still able to dance the lead roles of Princes ... Possessing a singular grace of movement, he was an extremely charming artist. In his performances, he brought to bear his excellent skills (gained in Milan from Virginia Zucchi, and elsewhere), and he was characterised by refined technique and sense for drama, imaginativeness and wit.



*Swan Lake*, Bratislava, 1925.  
Achille Viscusi (Prince).



Prague, 1917. Achille Viscusi

Viscusi married Aloisia (Luisa) Dobromilová, a ballerina of the National Theatre in Prague. He nurtured a number of superb dancers (Joe Jenčík, Emerich Gabzdyl, Marie Dobromilová) and was instrumental in the gaining of several primacies for the Czechs.

Viscusi's pupils included his niece Marie Dobromilová, a distinguished dancer of the National Theatre in Prague.



# SWAN LAKE

FOR THE FIRST TIME  
IN THE COMPLETE VERSION

The primacies that adorn Achille Viscusi's biography include the very first Czech staging of the complete version of the iconic ballet *Swan Lake* (Prague, 1907). His production was largely adapted to the Czech milieu, featuring the character of the Water Sprite, the grandfather of Odette, who was renamed Milena. Odile was changed to Dorna.



Olga Janatová, a prima ballerina of the Ostrava company, was among Viscusi's Muses.

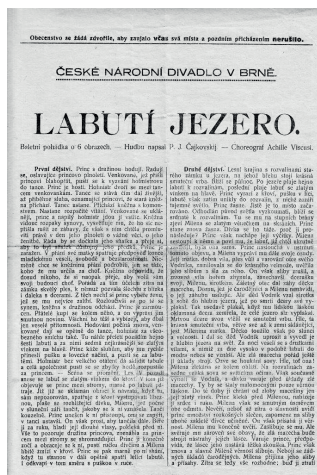
*Swan Lake*, Bratislava.  
Anďela Křístková (French  
Dance, Marianne)



Karel Váša, who portrayed hundreds of minor roles in opera, drama and ballet productions at the National Theatre in Prague, was an enthusiastic amateur photographer, documenting that which was going on there. The photograph is his self-portrait in the costume of Rothbart. The precious picture has survived as part of his collection encompassing hundreds of glass quarter plates. Váša himself appeared in *Swan Lake* in the roles of the Teacher and the old Water Sprite.



National Museum collection.  
H6E -7447



Viscusi was on to stage his *Swan Lake* (he also danced in it) in Brno (1919), Ostrava (1920) and Bratislava (1925). All the productions were based on the same scenario.



Anna Korecká, a prima ballerina of the Prague company, portrayed major repertoire roles, including Milena in *Swan Lake*.



# THE NUTCRACKER

## FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME IN BOHEMIA

Viscusi was the first to have staged P. I. Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* beyond Russia (Prague, 1908). Take note of the date of the Czech premiere – at the time, the title was not connected with Christmas, as would later on become a tradition worldwide. Viscusi also presented the production in Ostrava (1921) and Bratislava (1928).



A playbill



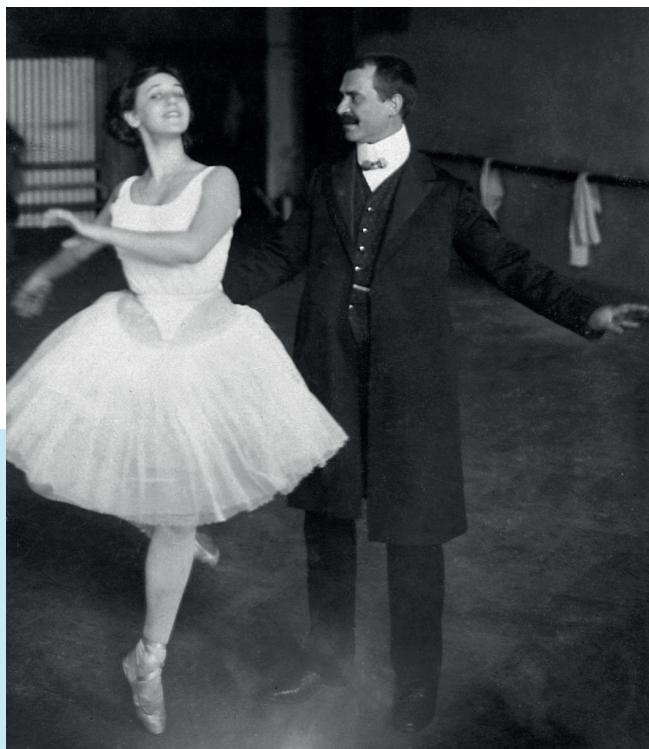
*The Nutcracker*,  
Ostrava.  
V. Chocová  
(Masha)



*The Nutcracker*,  
Bratislava. Olga Janotová  
(Whipped Cream),  
photo V. Mindszenty



*The Nutcracker*,  
Bratislava.  
Mária Koutná (Coffee)



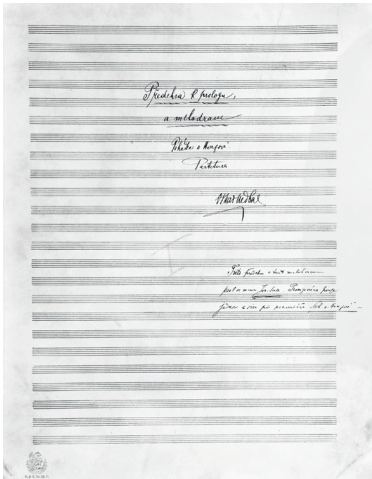
The Prague premiere was a festive occasion, due in part to the guest appearance of the Russian star Tamara Platonovna Karsavina, who portrayed the role of Eyes and Princess of Dragant. The surviving playbills reveal that she danced with Viscusi the pas de deux in Act 2. Prague again applauded Karsavina in 1909, when, beside Viscusi, she performed as Giselle. After dancing in Prague, she left for Paris, where she would become the face of Diaghilev's Les Ballets Russes, one of the finest and most celebrated prima ballerinas of her time.



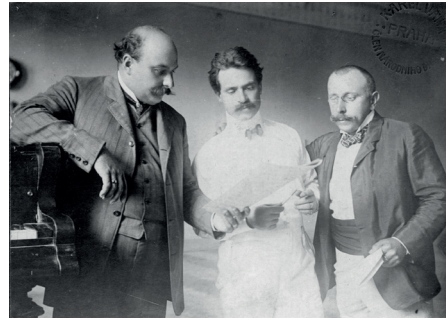
The librettist Ladislav Novák, the choreographer Achille Viscusi and the composer Oskar Nedbal.

## OSKAR NEDBAL COLLABORATION

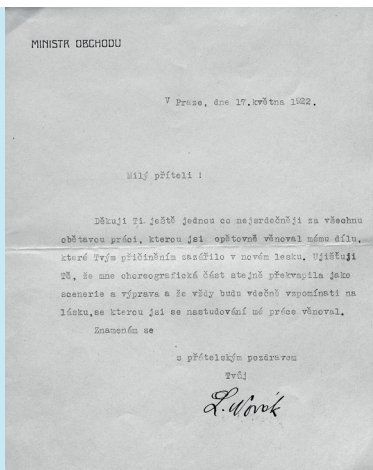
Of great importance was Achille Viscusi's intense collaboration with the composer Oskar Nedbal on original pantomime ballets. The two artists worked together in Prague and Ostrava, and Viscusi also joined Nedbal in Bratislava after he assumed the post of director of the Slovak National Theatre. Yet this fruitful creative era ended tragically. Nedbal committed suicide and Viscusi retired.



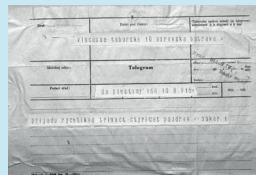
The title page of the score of *The Tale of Honza*.



Oskar Nedbal, Achille Viscusi and Ladislav Novák.



They created highly popular ballets: *From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale* (premiere: Prague, 1908), *The Tale of Honza* (premiere: Prague, 1902) and *Princess Hyacintha*, replete with Masonic symbolism (premiere: Prague, 1911).



Nedbal's telegram to Viscusi

The Nedbal-Viscusi creative tandem closely collaborated with the librettist Ladislav Novák. National Museum collection. H6p-356/62.



# THE TALE OF HONZA

## AN ALLEGORY OF THE CZECH CHARACTER



The scenery for *The Tale of Honza*, Prague.



*The Tale of Honza*, Ostrava.  
Otto Strejček (Second Prince)

The well-known fairy tale of the dumb Honza was dramatised by František Karel Hejda and staged in Prague by Josef Šmaha. Nedbal set it to music and conducted the production. The creators afforded the story further meanings, treating it as an allegory of Czech history and character. When the lazy good-natured Honza awakens from his stupor, he realises that he possesses great strength and potential. The production highlighted the idea of "triumphant power and innocent selfless goodness". The first adaptation of the title in 1902 was basically a pantomime, featuring actors in lead roles, as well as dancers. *The Tale of Honza* earned acclaim abroad too – a year after its premiere in Prague, the production was staged at the Hofoper in Vienna (1903).



*The Tale of Honza*, Prague.  
Florentin Steinsberg (Honza)  
National Museum collection. H6E-3356.



*The Tale of Honza* (Prague, 1902). Karel Šimůnek's costumes underlined Viscusi's choreography, making the production an enthralling spectacle.

From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Bratislava



# FROM FAIRY TALE TO FAIRY TALE

Based on the scenario written by Ladislav Novák, the production bore the secondary title "A ballet tall story". It was actually a fairy-tale suite, with the individual tales (*Princess Goldilocks*, *The Brave Tailor in the Enchanted Castle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Petrovs and Animals*) interconnected by a narrator – a Granny. The premiere was held at the National Theatre in Prague in 1908. The orchestra was conducted by the composer Nedbal, who also conducted the performances in Ostrava (1922) and Bratislava (1923). The production featured Achille Viscusi in the role of the Devil, who jumped headfirst through a wall (a paper prop, behind which five men stood with a stretched sheet).



From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Prague.  
Irma Rohanová (July)



From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Prague.  
Marie Dobromilová (Beauty)



Viscusi also staged the title in Bratislava (1923).

Z pohádky do pohádky, velkolepý balet Oskara Nedbal, proveden bude jako nejbližší novinka našeho baletu ještě tento m's.c. Za vedení mistra Achilla Vscusiho konají se rozsáhlé přípravy nejen v s'le baletním, ale i na jevišti, v dílnách a v malířně divadelní. Pohádky budou mít opravdu pohádkovou výpravu, navrženou našim vynikajícím divadelním akad. malířem p. Wenigem, od pražského Národního divadla, jehož návrhy dekorační v Dimitriji, v Strakonickém dudáku, v Louskáčku a j. hrách těšily se největší pozornosti. Přeměru baletu „Z pohádky do pohádky“ bude asi dirigovati sám mistr Oskar Nedbal, který bude přítomen posledním jevištním a orchestrálním zkouškám.

From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Ostrava (1922). An article in the Moravsko-slezské divadlo magazine.

In the premiere performance, Goldilocks was portrayed by Anna Korecká. In 1909, the celebrated Russian prima ballerina Tamara Platonovna Karsavina appeared as a guest in the role in Prague.

From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale, Prague.  
Rudolf Kafka (Needle),  
Karel Váňa (Court Fool)





# PRINCESS HYACINTHA

A MASONIC BALLET



*Princess Hyacintha, Prague.*  
Anna Havlíčková (Cleopatra)

The story of *Princess Hyacintha* is intriguing. The ballet's three creators – Viscusi, Nedbal and Novák – set it at the mysterious Trosky castle. Aspiring to discover a treasure, the village smith dreams of the past. He sees the secret love between the poverty-stricken knight Zvonimír and Princess Hyacintha, who is abducted by the sorcerer Aratron. The girl escapes by means of magic, and she and Zvonimír flee to the kingdom of Hyacinth.



## MUCHA'S HYACINTHA

The poster for the premiere of *Princess Hyacintha* was created by the renowned painter Alfons Mucha. Replete with symbols, it indicates that it was a work transcending theatre, possessing additional meanings. (By the way, Oskar Nedbal was a member of the Masonic Lodge in Vienna, which he joined in 1911.)



A playbill



Sylvia, Bratislava 1930. Olga Janatová (Sylvia),  
photo: Otto Apfel

# VISCUSI AT NATIONAL THEATRES

After rounding off his Prague era, Achille Viscusi and his unceasing verve went on to influence the ballet art in Brno, Ostrava and Bratislava.

Andersen, Bratislava 1926



Andersen, Bratislava 1926



Samson et Dalila, Ostrava 1921.  
Sláva Mazáková (Dalila)

## SLAVONIC DANCES

Another major accomplishment was Viscusi's very first adaptation of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, which launched the tradition of the work's ballet rendition. The premiere of the production, marking the composer's 60th birthday, was attended by Dvořák himself. The adaptation was also important because it was for the very first time that a choreographer (within the conventional ballet genre and stage form) had used "non-ballet music" (Michel Fokine would only do so in 1907, in St Petersburg). Noteworthy is the fact that Achille Viscusi treated the *Slavonic Dances* on five occasions. Besides the National Theatre in Prague (1901), he staged the production in Buenos Aires (1915), Ostrava (1920), Plzeň (1923) and Bratislava (1924, under the title *A Year in the Country*).







*Philandering, Prague, 1909.*  
Jaroslav Hladík (Shoe Polisher),  
photo: Karel Bachman.



## VISCUSI IN NUMBERS

During his tenure in Prague, Achille Viscusi created or co-created some 93 productions (ballets and operas). He performed 81 repertoire roles. While in Brno, he staged four titles (*Coppélia*, *Swan Lake*, *The Queen of Puppets*, for instance). During his time in Ostrava, he choreographed 64 productions and portrayed 14 ballet roles, presenting the complete period repertoire, including *Giselle*, *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, as well as *The Veil of Pierrette*, *From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale* and, in 1919, Delibes's *Coppélia*. Viscusi was also immensely prolific in Bratislava, where he choreographed 89 opera and ballet productions, and, notwithstanding his mature age (almost 60!), he performed 61 dance roles.

*Philandering, Prague.*  
Anna Korecká, Vilemína Hájková, Karel Váňa,  
photo: Karel Bachman.

Viscusi seemed to have been at home in Czechoslovakia – he even became a citizen. Let us focus on his major primacies and creations, which are of great significance within the Czech and European cultural heritage.



*Philandering, Prague, 1909.* Eugen Viesner (Cesare), Marie Papírníková (Julie), Karel Váňa (Photographer),  
photo: Karel Bachman.



*Philandering, Prague, 1909.* Eugen Viesner (Cesare), Marie Papírníková (Julie),  
photo: Karel Bachman.



A playbill

The exhibition marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Achille Viscusi, who played a vital role in the formation of the National Theatre Ballet in Prague, as well as the ballet companies in Ostrava, Brno and Bratislava. It also commemorates the centenary of the premiere of Viscusi's production of *Coppélia*, which will also be marked by its revival at the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in Ostrava, scheduled for 19 March 2020.

If we were to seek an example of a foreigner who fully dedicated his artistry and skills to enhancing ballet in the Czech (and Slovak) milieu and the local original creation, we would have to choose the Italian dancer, ballet master, choreographer, librettist, educator and artistic director Achille Viscusi.

Cover photo:  
*Princess Hyacintha* – Prague, 1911. Achille Viscusi and Marie Dobromilová (Gypsies from Biscay).



MINISTERSTVO  
KULTURY

The exhibition was initiated by the Czech Dance Association (Association of Czech Dance Artists) and is the result of collaboration between the National Theatres in Prague, Brno, Ostrava and Bratislava. It has been financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, Department for Regional and National Culture.  
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Devised by: Kateřina Hanáčková  
Graphic design: Václav Machurka, Formata v.o.s.

We extend our thanks to the National Museum in Prague for their assistance and provision of archival documents, and the Archives of the National Theatres in Prague, Bratislava and Brno, and the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in Ostrava.