

LEVELED BOOK • O

Maria Tallchief: Prima Ballerina



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Maria Tallchief: Prima Ballerina



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Focus Question

Who was Maria Tallchief, and why
is she an important figure in ballet?

Words to Know

ballet
career
choreographer

company
grace
reservation

Front cover: Maria Tallchief performs in *Firebird* with the New York City Ballet in 1963. Her first performance in *Firebird* in 1949 made her a star.

Title page: Tallchief poses for a portrait while in Washington D.C. in 1963.

Page 3: The Osage tribe made Maria Tallchief an Osage Princess at a ceremony held in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in 1954.

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President Clinton awards Maria Tallchief the National Medal of Arts.

A National Treasure

Maria Tallchief holds a special place in dance history. She was the first American prima ballerina, or leading female **ballet** dancer.

Maria Tallchief lived at a time when all the famous ballet dancers were from Europe. Because of her talent and hard work, she became American ballet's first shining star. She also helped ballet become popular in the United States. Her story begins on a Native American **reservation** in Oklahoma.



As a child, Betty Marie was quiet and shy.

Early Years

Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief was born on January 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Oklahoma. As a child, she was called Betty Marie. Her father was Native American, from the Osage (OH-sayj) tribe, and her mother was white. The family lived on the Osage reservation—land set aside for the Osage people. When Betty Marie's father was young, he became rich because oil was found on the reservation.



Betty Marie (left) and Marjorie (right) pose with their mother in 1930.



Marjorie's twin sons watch as the sisters dance together in 1956.

Betty Marie had a younger sister named Marjorie. Their mother saw that the sisters had a gift with music. Both girls took piano and dance lessons from an early age.

In 1933, at the age of eight, Betty Marie and her family moved to Los Angeles. There was more opportunity for the girls to study dance in California. They found a dance school even before buying a house. The girls studied ballet, tumbling, tap dancing, and Spanish dancing.



Vaslav Nijinsky (left) and his sister Bronislava Nijinska (right) were among the twentieth century's greatest dancers.

At age twelve, Betty Marie decided to stop piano lessons and just study ballet. Soon after, she became a student of Madame Nijinska (nuh-JIN-skuh), her first important ballet teacher. Betty Marie studied with her from 1937 until 1942. During that time, Betty Marie learned to dance with power, **grace**, and feeling. By the time she finished high school in 1942, she knew that ballet was the right path for her.

New York: A Star Is Born

In 1938, a Russian ballet company performed all over the United States. They were based in New York City. When they came to Los Angeles, Betty Marie saw great ballet for the first time. She became even more excited about ballet as a career.



Tallchief prepares to dance onstage in *The Song of Norway* (1944).

Betty Marie moved to New York after finishing high school. She got a job with the Russian ballet company she had seen and changed her name to Maria Tallchief.

Two years after Tallchief joined the dance company, a man named George Balanchine started working with them. Balanchine was a gifted **choreographer**. He had a special talent for making works of art with ballet. His art came to life with Tallchief's dancing.



Tallchief and Balanchine practice his choreography.



Tallchief wrote about her *Firebird* performance: "The city center sounded like a stadium . . . after somebody's made a touchdown."

In 1948, Balanchine started a new ballet company—the New York City Ballet. Tallchief joined the company and helped make it a success. She became famous when she danced the lead role in Balanchine's ballet *Firebird*. Tallchief became the first American prima ballerina.

Balanchine created some of his most beautiful ballets for Tallchief. She was the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* and the White Swan in *Swan Lake*.

While Tallchief was with the New York City Ballet, she danced with them in nineteen other countries. She also danced on television and in a movie.



Tallchief dances with her partner in *Swan Lake*.



The White Swan in *Swan Lake* is also called the Swan Princess or the Queen of the Swans.

Wherever Tallchief danced, people celebrated her. They admired the feeling she put into her ballet dancing. She danced in a grand yet free way that set her apart from other ballerinas.

Chicago: Master Teacher

In 1965, at age forty-one, Tallchief grew tired from all her hard work. Nine years earlier, she had married Henry Paschen, and they had a daughter together. Tallchief stopped dancing and moved to Chicago to be with them.

From 1975 to 1987, Tallchief was the creative director of two ballet companies in Chicago. Many of her students later became very successful in the world of ballet.

Maria Tallchief dances with her daughter, Elise, in Chicago.



Tallchief also gave more time to the work of Balanchine, who died in 1983. She and several other Balanchine ballerinas worked together to record parts of his ballets. That way, ballet students could learn from them.

In the late 1990s, Tallchief received several important awards for her work in the arts. She died at age eighty-eight on April 11, 2013, in Chicago. People around the world remember her life and talents.

Maria Tallchief's Life

1925 Born on January 24

1933 Moves to Los Angeles with family

1937 Begins dance lessons with Madame Nijinska

1942 Graduates from high school; moves to New York City and joins the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo

1944 Choreographer George Balanchine joins Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo

1948 Joins New York City Ballet and becomes its first prima ballerina

1949 Performs in *Firebird*

1956 Marries Henry Paschen

1959 Daughter, Elise, born

1965 Retires from performing at age forty-one; moves to Chicago

1980 Starts the Chicago City Ballet

2013 Dies on April 11

Legacy

As the first prima ballerina in the United States, Maria Tallchief helped inspire a new style of ballet. As ballet's first Native American star, she opened its doors to people of all backgrounds. Her grace, talent, and achievement helped move the world of ballet forward.

Another dancer once said of Tallchief, “There is one word for her: grand.”



Maria Tallchief performs at the White House in 1964.

“Maria Tallchief took what had been a European art form and made it America’s own—how fitting that a Native American woman would do that.”

—President Clinton while awarding
Maria Tallchief a National Medal of Arts, 1999

Glossary

ballet (<i>n.</i>)	a form of dance that uses a combination of exact, formal steps and movements, and light leaps and turns (p. 4)
career (<i>n.</i>)	a job or profession that a person has over a long period of time (p. 8)
choreographer (<i>n.</i>)	a person who chooses the style and arrangement of steps and moves for a dance performance (p. 9)
company (<i>n.</i>)	a group of artists, such as dancers or actors, who work and perform together (p. 8)
grace (<i>n.</i>)	ease and charm in one's movements or behavior (p. 7)
reservation (<i>n.</i>)	land set aside by the United States government for Native Americans (p. 4)

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A *Reading A-Z Level O Leveled Book*

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Connections

Writing

Watch a video clip of *Swan Lake*. Using a Venn diagram, compare ballet to another style of dance you know.

Social Studies

Create a poster to present to your class about the Osage tribe. Include details about their art, traditional clothing, where the tribe is located, and other interesting information.



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