

Maria Tallchief: Prima Ballerina

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book
Word Count: 991

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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Written by Kira Freed and Charlie Alolkoy

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Focus Question

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

Words to Know

ballet	inspiration
choreographer	preserving
company	reservation
elegant	stereotypes
grace	

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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Correlation

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President Clinton awards Maria Tallchief the National Medal of Arts.

A National Treasure

The date was September 29, 1999. The place was Washington, D.C. The event was the award ceremony for the National Medal of Arts. This award is the highest honor given to an artist by a U.S. president.

One of the people awarded that year was Maria Tallchief. A tall, **elegant** dancer, she had taken the world of **ballet** by storm fifty years earlier. How did Tallchief become American ballet's first shining star? 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—nicknamed Betty Marie—was born on January 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Oklahoma. She was born on the Osage (OH-sayj) Reservation, and her father, Alexander, was full-blooded Osage. Oil found on Osage land when he was young made many members of the tribe rich. As an adult, Alexander owned a large amount of property in Fairfax.

Betty Marie's mother, Ruth, came from Scottish and Irish settlers. She saw that Betty Marie and her younger sister, Marjorie, had a musical gift. Both girls took piano and dance lessons from an early age.



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

In 1933, when Betty Marie was eight, her parents decided to move the family to Los Angeles. They thought the girls needed a better education than Fairfax offered.

When they moved, they found a dance school even before buying a house. The girls studied ballet, tap dancing, acrobatics, and Spanish dancing.

Before long, Betty Marie and Marjorie were dancing at rodeos and county fairs. Both girls disliked the fake Native American dance routine they sometimes performed. It was an example of the **stereotypes** many people had about Native Americans.

Authentic Osage Dancing

Only men were active dancers in ceremonial Osage dances. The women formed a circle around them and took small sidesteps back and forth in time with the drumbeat. While Betty Marie and Marjorie were growing up, ceremonial Native American dances were outlawed by the U.S. government. Grandma Tall Chief often took the girls to ceremonial Osage dances, which continued in secret.



Bronislava Nijinska (right) was the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky (left), one of the twentieth century's greatest male dancers.

At age twelve, Betty Marie decided to stop piano lessons and just study ballet. That's when her life as a dancer really began. Soon after, she became a student of Bronislava Nijinska (brah-nuh-SLAH-vuh nuh-JIN-skuh), her first important ballet teacher. Betty Marie studied with Madame Nijinska from 1937 until 1942. During that time, she 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.

"I chose dance because I felt the music I loved grew inside of me in a different way than could be expressed by my hands on an instrument. It coursed through my body."

—Maria Tallchief, *Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina*

New York: A Star Is Born

When Betty Marie was a teenager, all the well-known ballet dancers were Russian. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (ROOSS DU MOHN-tee KAR-loh) was a Russian ballet **company** that often performed in the United States. The company, which was based in New York, came to Los Angeles in 1938. Betty Marie attended all their performances and saw great ballet dancers for the first time. She was amazed.

After Betty Marie graduated, she went to New York. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo hired her as a dancer almost immediately. At that point, she changed her name to Maria Tallchief.



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

Two years after Tallchief joined the Russian ballet company, a **choreographer** named George Balanchine started working with them. Many people consider him one of the twentieth century's most important choreographers. Building on classical ballet, which was graceful and flowing, he created a new style of American ballet. It required dancers to be very strong, quick, and athletic.

George Balanchine's choreography came to life with Maria Tallchief's dancing. She became his muse—his greatest source of artistic **inspiration**. Together, Tallchief and Balanchine lived and breathed ballet. They married in 1946. Their marriage only lasted five years, but they worked together for many more.



Tallchief and Balanchine practiced ballet up to fourteen hours a day.



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

In 1948, Balanchine helped start the New York City Ballet, and Tallchief joined the company. At first, it did not have a strong following. Everything changed when Tallchief danced in *Firebird* in 1949. The role made her famous. She eventually became the New York City Ballet's first prima ballerina, or leading female dancer. She held the title for thirteen years, until 1965.

"I think it is an innate thing in the American Indian to want to move, to want to dance. This is the way we are. We express our happiness or our sorrow in dance."

—Maria Tallchief

Tribute for the Producers Guild of America's
Celebration of Diversity awards, 2006

Balanchine created some of his most beautiful roles for Tallchief. These included roles in *Swan Lake* and the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*.

While Tallchief was with the New York City Ballet, she performed with them in nineteen countries. She also danced on television and in the musical film *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952). She was a guest dancer with the American Ballet Theatre as well.



Tallchief dances with her partner in Balanchine's *Swan Lake*.

People praised Tallchief wherever she danced. They saw that she was a strong and graceful dancer and wanted to see her perform more. She was also light on her feet and exact in her movements. Tallchief danced in a grand yet free way that set her apart from other ballerinas. She was also respected for her intelligence and honesty.

Tallchief danced the role of the White Swan in *Swan Lake*.



"A ballerina takes steps given to her and makes them her own. Each individual brings something different to the same role. As an American, I believe in great individualism. That's the way I was brought up."

—Maria Tallchief

Interview in the *Des Moines Register*, 1965

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, Illinois, to be with them.

In 1975, Tallchief became the creative director of the Chicago Lyric Opera Ballet. She started the Chicago City Ballet in 1980 because she felt that Chicago should have a leading ballet company. She was its creative director until 1987. Many of her students later became very successful in the world of ballet.

Maria Tallchief dances with her only child, Elise Paschen, in Chicago.



Tallchief also spent time **preserving** the work of Balanchine, who died in 1983. She felt strongly that his ballets should be danced the way he had choreographed them. She and several other Balanchine ballerinas recorded parts of his ballets. That way, future students could learn from them.

In 1996, Tallchief became a member of the National Women's Hall of Fame. This award honors people whose artistic gifts have improved American society. Tallchief died at age eighty-eight on April 11, 2013, in Chicago. People around the world praised her life and work.

Maria Tallchief's Life

1925	Born on January 24	1948	Joins New York City Ballet and becomes its first prima ballerina
1933	Moves to Los Angeles with family	1949	Performs in <i>Firebird</i>
1937	Begins dance lessons with Madame Nijinska	1956	Marries Henry Paschen
1942	Graduates from high school; moves to New York City and joins the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo	1959	Daughter, Elise, born
1944	Choreographer George Balanchine joins Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo	1965	Retires from performing at age forty-one; moves to Chicago
		1980	Founds the Chicago City Ballet
		2013	Dies on April 11

Legacy

Maria Tallchief was an American treasure. As the first prima ballerina from the United States, she 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.

A fellow dancer, Jacques d'Amboise (ZHAHK dahm-BWAHZ) once said of Tallchief, "There is one word for her: grand. She was absolutely grand."



Maria Tallchief and Jacques d'Amboise perform 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, performed to music, that uses exact, formal steps and movements (p. 4)
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)
elegant (<i>adj.</i>)	dignified or graceful; beautiful in a simple way (p. 4)
grace (<i>n.</i>)	ease and elegance in one's movements or behavior (p. 7)
inspiration (<i>n.</i>)	a good influence; something that leads to a creative thought or activity (p. 9)
preserving (<i>v.</i>)	taking care of and saving for the future (p. 14)
reservation (<i>n.</i>)	land set aside by the United States government for Native Americans (p. 4)
stereotypes (<i>n.</i>)	oversimplified images or ideas about a particular group of people or things that are widely held but often unfair or untrue (p. 6)