

How Did Maria Tallchief Become America's First Prima Ballerina?

By: Quill.org

Adapted by Fishtank Staff



Prima ballerina Maria Tallchief poses as the Firebird. Photo by Martha Swope © Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

- 1 The ballet dancer backstage was not feeling her best. She was recovering from surgery to remove infected tonsils, and her throat still hurt. Her costume had arrived only a few hours before and didn't seem like a good fit. Perhaps worst of all, she and her dance partner had recently practiced a complicated jump, and it hadn't gone well. Still, the curtain rose.
- 2 As the music played, the ballet dancer transformed. She balanced perfectly on her toes, twirling gently across the stage. Her arms moved effortlessly, like wings carried by a breeze. She and her partner completed their jump so beautifully that the audience sighed in appreciation. And when the curtain closed, the ballet dancer heard applause. She later said people clapped as loudly as they might have at a football stadium, watching a player score a touchdown. This remarkable 1949 performance by Maria Tallchief, dancing the lead role of the Firebird in Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird*, is still considered one of the most significant achievements in American ballet.

Who Was Maria Tallchief?

- 3 Maria Tallchief was born in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in 1925. Her father was a member of the Osage (pronounced oh-SAYJ) Nation, a group of Native American people whose original homeland stretched through parts of present-day Kansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Illinois. In the nineteenth century, the United States government forced the Osage to relocate to the northeastern part of what is now Oklahoma, where Tallchief spent the first eight years of her life. She grew up watching powwows. These tribal events, which involve singing and dancing, inspired her. "I'm very proud of my Indian heritage," Tallchief told Tulsa's News On 6.

Dancing a Path to Success

- 4 Tallchief worked hard to become a successful ballerina. As a child, she took dancing and music lessons. She showed early promise in both disciplines. At age 12, she began studying with an experienced teacher who nurtured her skills. Tallchief soon made a commitment to pursue a ballet career. As a teenager, she moved to New York City and became a professional ballerina.
- 5 Tallchief was a very talented dancer known for her athleticism and grace. When she performed her first lead role as the Firebird, she impressed both audiences and critics. "She danced it like a flame," wrote dance historian and critic Lillian Moore. Heid E. Erdrich, a writer with Native American lineage, wrote that when Tallchief danced as the "magical...half bird and half woman," she must have "remembered the stories her grandmother had told her about a time when spirit birds spoke to the Osage."
- 6 With that *Firebird* performance, Tallchief became America's first prima ballerina. A prima ballerina is the dancer with the highest rank in a professional ballet company. Prima ballerinas have important roles and must accomplish difficult moves onstage. Tallchief could handle this challenging job. She went on to perform the lead role in other famous ballets like *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*. At the height of her career, she was called one of the greatest American ballerinas of the twentieth century.

Facing Adversity

- 7 Tallchief's accomplishments didn't come easily. Among other challenges, she endured stereotypes, or overly simple and inaccurate ideas, about her Native American identity. The stereotyping began in childhood, when she and her sister were asked to perform inauthentic Native American tribal dances. It continued during her professional ballet career in article headlines. For example, a French newspaper reported on her performance using a slur about her skin color instead of her name.

- 8 Tallchief also faced challenges because she was from the United States. In the mid-twentieth century, the most famous dancers were from Europe or Russia. Many people didn't believe Americans could become accomplished ballet dancers. Some people even suggested that Tallchief should change her last name to sound more European or Russian. She said she would not. She knew Americans could be good dancers too, and she wanted her name to reflect her Osage identity.

Leaving a Legacy

- 9 Tallchief, who died in 2013, is still remembered as an influential dancer who honored her cultural heritage while bringing prestige to American ballet.
- 10 In 1953, the Osage Nation recognized Tallchief's unique success by giving her a new name: Princess Wa-Xthe-Thonba (pronounced wahkh-THAY THOHN-pah). The name meant that Tallchief was a woman of two standards, or worlds: the world of her Osage culture and the world of professional ballet.
- 11 As a "woman of two worlds," Tallchief paved the way for Native American representation in ballet. Along with four other Native American dancers from Oklahoma, she was distinguished as a "Five Moons" Ballerina. These ballerinas were known for being trailblazers, or people who broke barriers in the world of ballet and led the way for other Native American dancers to do the same. Even after retiring from professional dance, Tallchief made a difference by teaching young dancers. She also started the Chicago City Ballet in 1974.
- 12 Native American ballerinas in Oklahoma still benefit from Tallchief's legacy. The Osage Ballet, founded in 2012 and directly inspired by Tallchief, performs a contemporary ballet that depicts the history of the Osage Nation. This ballet incorporates elements of classical ballet and traditional Osage music, movement, and textile arts. The final scene is titled "We Walk in Two Worlds."
- 13 Tallchief's success has encouraged professional dancers from backgrounds underrepresented in the world of ballet. Well-known ballerinas like Misty Copeland and Lia Cirio call her an inspiration who influenced their own achievements. "I consider Tallchief the first American ballerina," Cirio told *Pointe Magazine*, "someone I could look at and say to myself, 'She looks like me, I can make it too.'"