

The Firebird Maria Tallchief



By Lauren Kratz Prushko

To listen call:

Maria Tallchief was the first American prima ballerina and Native American or Indigenous prima ballerina! What does it mean to be a prima ballerina? Maria Tallchief was the best dancer and brought great fame to herself and her ballet company. Since prima is an Italian word that means first, Maria performed all the lead roles in the ballets. Performances included Swan Lake as the White Swan, The Nutcracker as the Sugar Plum Fairy, and Firebird as The Firebird, her most outstanding performance.

Maria Tallchief said, “Above all, I wanted to be appreciated as a prima ballerina who happened to be a Native American, never as someone who was an American Indian ballerina.”

Maria Tallchief, born Betty Marie Tallchief, was proud of her family and being a member of the Osage Nation. The Osage Nation is a Midwestern Native American tribe living in multiple states, including Oklahoma, where Maria was born in 1925.

Maria was proud of her last name, Tallchief, and refused to change her last name to something that sounded more Russian. All the professional ballet dancers at the time were from Russia. But Maria wanted to stand out for her hard work, unmatched energy, and strive for perfection when she danced, not from what she looked like or her background.

Maria Tallchief started to learn to dance at a very young age. Her family moved to California for Maria and her sister to receive a better education and join a better dance school. When her friends asked her, ‘Don’t you get tired of all that practice?’ Maria would say, “How can I get tired of what I love?”

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Maria was shy but knew how to speak the language of dance. Maria's new dance teacher was Madame Nijinska from Russia. She spoke very little English and was the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky, the most famous ballet dancer in the world. Madame Nijinska told Maria, "When you sleep, sleep like a ballerina. When you stand and wait for the bus, you must wait for the bus like a ballerina." So every day, Maria Tallchief would practice her ballet positions while she waited for the bus. There are five basic positions in ballet that a dancer learns how to place their feet and arms in different ways. Feet are turned out, and arms go up in different graceful positions. As young ballet dancers get older, they dance on their toes in pointe shoes. They do this so that they look like they are floating on air.

Maria was brave and determined, and after she graduated high school, she moved to New York City at just 17 years old! Maria Tallchief wanted to become a professional dancer and join a ballet company. The road would not be easy, but Maria was up for the task!

Maria had difficulty finding work because most ballet companies only wanted white dancers. But Maria would not give up. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo ballet company did not need more dancers on their tour. Still, at the last minute, a dancer dropped out. The head of the company remembered Maria from when he visited Maria's teacher Madame Nijinska and had seen Maria dance.

Maria first had to perform without pay, but she used the opportunity to gain experience performing not as a student but now as a professional dancer. Sometimes Maria didn't have enough money to eat to keep her stomach full. Still, she was willing to learn and listen, and the reviews in newspapers and choreographers noticed.

George Balanchine, a new choreographer for the Ballet Russe, would later become "the father of American Ballet." He pushed Maria further

than she thought she could go and gave her the gift of discipline. Maria took dance classes every day while she performed at night. Maria became George's muse, his inspiration to choreograph dances just for Maria to perform. To choreograph is the art of making dances, and the choreographer tells dancers how they should dance and move.

George started his own dance company, the New York City Ballet featuring Maria Tallchief! At first, the company was small and didn't make much money. Then George created a new ballet just for Maria called *The Firebird*. Maria wore a beautiful red headpiece with long red feathers sticking up. This very difficult dance would showcase Maria's technical abilities, passion and athletic talents. Maria would dance on her pointe shoes and move her feet fast across the stage and use her arms to go up and down like she was dancing and moving like a bird.

The Firebird was a mythical rare bird who lived in an enchanted garden, and a prince caught her. The Firebird gives the prince one of her blazing feathers for her freedom. The prince may use the feather to call to her for help. Later the Firebird saves the prince and his princess from an evil magician. Maria Tallchief had to perform incredible leaps and use her balance and speed as the Firebird to tell the story of the bird trying to escape the prince.

Before the first performance of *The Firebird*, rehearsals for the show did not always go well. Maria was nervous, and she even had to have an operation to get her infected tonsils removed. As a result, there wasn't any time for Maria to rehearse in full costume with her now-famous headdress with feathers.

All of this didn't matter. When the music started, and Maria stepped onto the stage, she was *The Firebird*, and she danced and leaped, taking

off from one foot and landing on the other. The audience gasped and watched in amazement. Finally, the performance ended, and people in the audience jumped to their feet and cheered, “Tallchief, Tallchief! Tallchief!” When Maria performed The Firebird, she made the New York City Ballet famous! That was when she became America’s first prima ballerina!

Maria stopped dancing in 1965, and Maria and her sister Marjorie started the Chicago City Ballet and helped many students from different backgrounds become dancers!

Maria Tallchief said, “Dance from your heart and love your music, and the audience will love you in return.”

(Applause sound effect)