



# Maria Tallchief

*American Ballerina*

by Miki Terasawa



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

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BOSTON

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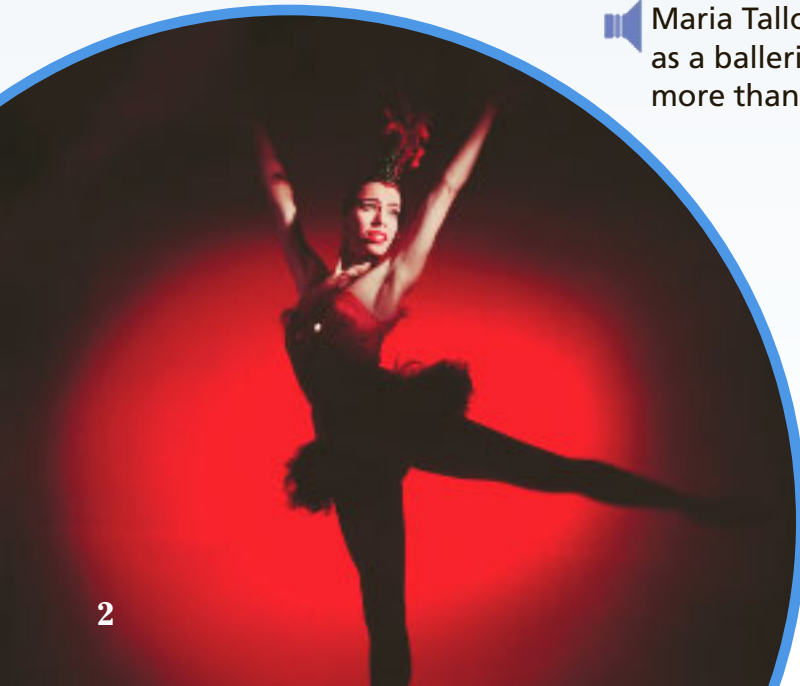
## **November 27, 1949**

November 27, 1949, is a special date in the history of American ballet. That night, a ballet called *The Firebird* was performed in New York City. When the dancing ended, the audience went wild. They clapped and stomped and shouted. They cheered, “Tallchief! Tallchief! Tallchief!”

 The crowd was cheering for a young dancer from Oklahoma. She had just danced the role of the Firebird. Her name was Maria Tallchief.


On that night in 1949, Maria Tallchief became a star.

 Maria Tallchief’s **career** as a ballerina lasted more than two decades.



## ***An American Ballerina***


Maria Tallchief was one of the most important ballerinas of our time. Her dancing was legendary. Many ballets were created for her.


 Tallchief still holds a unique place in ballet history. She was the first American ballerina to become internationally famous. Before her, there were no great American ballerinas. Many people believed that Americans could never become great ballet dancers.



## **The History of Ballet**

Why did people believe that Americans could never become great ballet dancers? The answer lies in ballet's history.


 Ballet began in France and Italy over 400 years ago. It quickly spread across Europe. It became very popular in Russia. By 1900, ballet had reached America, too. But American dancers were not taken seriously.


 Fifth and sixth graders study in an Indian reservation school in Oklahoma.



## *An Osage Childhood*

Maria Tallchief was born Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief on January 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Oklahoma. Her parents, Alexander and Ruth Tall Chief, called her “Betty Marie.” A younger sister, Marjorie, was born two years later.

 The little town of Fairfax was part of a Native American reservation. The reservation was home to the Osage Nation. Betty Marie’s father, Alexander Tall Chief, was an important member of the Osage tribe. Her mother, Ruth Tall Chief, was of Irish and Scottish **background**.

 The Tall Chief home also included Marjorie and Betty Marie’s grandmother, Eliza Tall Chief. Grandma Tall Chief was a traditional Osage woman. She kept her hair in a braid. She wore an Osage blanket around her shoulders.

At that time, the Osage, like many Native Americans, were not treated fairly by the U.S. government. For example, it was against the law for them to perform traditional customs. The Osage were worried. They feared that this would lead to the **destruction** of their culture.

Grandma Tall Chief wanted to keep Osage culture alive. So she taught Betty Marie and Marjorie about their Native American background. She took them to traditional gatherings called powwows. Powwows were held secretly on the reservation.




At the powwows, Betty Marie watched Osage elders perform traditional songs and dances. Years later, she remembered the powwows. She wrote, “The rhythm of those songs has stayed with me.”


This painting shows an Osage elder in traditional dress.



## ***Early Talent***

Betty Marie and her sister liked dancing to music. Both girls were unusually graceful. Ruth Tall Chief realized that her young daughters were very talented. She organized dance lessons for Betty Marie and Marjorie.

 In 1933, the Tall Chief family moved to Los Angeles. There Betty Marie met her first important ballet teacher. Her name was Bronislava Nijinska (brah nuh SLAH vuh nuh JIN skuh).

 Nijinska was from St. Petersburg, Russia. She had studied ballet at the famous Imperial Theatre School. She had trained many great dancers.



🔊 Dancing **required** endless practice. Nijinska told Betty Marie, “When you sleep, sleep like ballerina. Even on the street waiting for bus, stand like ballerina!”

🔊 But Betty Marie did not mind the hard work. She loved studying ballet. She became one of Nijinska’s best students.

🔊 When Betty Marie turned 17, she decided to become a professional dancer. She tried out for different ballet companies. She was accepted by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. The Ballet Russe was a famous ballet company. It had many Russian dancers.

🔊 Now Betty Marie was a member of the Ballet Russe. She traveled with the company. They performed all over the world. Betty Marie danced almost every night.





🔊 Many great dancers performed at the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia.




## ***Tallchief, not Tallchieva!***

Audiences saw Betty Marie's talent. The Ballet Russe saw it, too. The company gave her bigger roles to dance.


 Then the director of the Ballet Russe made a request. He asked Betty Marie to change her last name. He suggested that she change Tall Chief to "Tallchieva." "Tallchieva" sounded like a Russian name. The director thought that a dancer could only succeed with a Russian name.

 But Betty Marie did not want a Russian name. "Tall Chief" came from her Native American background. She was proud of her name. So she decided to call herself "Maria Tallchief."

 Maria Tallchief starred in the famous ballet *Swan Lake*.







 George Balanchine was one of the greatest choreographers of the twentieth century.


## ***Meeting George Balanchine***

The year 1944 was very important for 19-year-old Maria Tallchief. That was because she met a man named George Balanchine (ba lun SHEEN). Together they would create some of the most famous ballets of the twentieth century.

 George Balanchine joined the Ballet Russe. He was hired as a choreographer. Choreographers create new ballets. They also teach them to dancers.

 In 1944, Balanchine was already considered a genius. His ballets were fresh and different. Audiences had never seen anything like them.

Balanchine's ballets were very difficult. His ballets made dancers spin faster, jump higher, and move more gracefully. Many dancers had trouble performing his ballets.

 But Maria Tallchief loved dancing Balanchine's ballets. She was not afraid of how difficult they were. Learning his ballets gave her **insights** into her own dancing.


Balanchine was inspired by Tallchief's dancing. He created new dances with starring roles especially for her.


In 1947, George Balanchine left the Ballet Russe. He wanted to start his own ballet company in New York City. Maria Tallchief left the Ballet Russe, too. She joined Balanchine's new company.




## *The Firebird*

The new ballet company struggled. They had trouble finding an audience. To survive, they needed a big success. That success finally came on November 27, 1949. That night, Maria Tallchief danced *The Firebird* for the first time.

 *The Firebird* is about a magical bird. The Firebird rescues a prince from a terrible monster. It was the most difficult role Tallchief had ever danced. She had just one week to practice. She worked harder than ever before.


 Tallchief's hard work paid off. Her dancing amazed the audience. Her performance was fierce and dazzling. She moved with lightning speed.




 Maria Tallchief's performance as the Firebird made her a star.

## **Princess Wa-Xthe-Thonba**

*The Firebird* made Maria Tallchief famous around the world. She proved that Americans could be great ballet dancers.

 In 1953, Tallchief received one of the biggest awards of her life. The Osage tribe and the state of Oklahoma honored her. They called June 29th Maria Tallchief Day. A celebration was held in her hometown in Oklahoma. People held up signs that said, “Welcome Home, Maria!”

 Most importantly, the Osage tribe gave Maria Tallchief a special name—Princess Wa-Xthe-Thonba. This means “Princess Two-Standards.” The name had special meaning because Tallchief lived in two worlds. She was both a famous ballerina and an important member of the Osage tribe.



Over the next 12 years, Tallchief starred in many ballets. George Balanchine created more than 30 roles especially for her. Her wonderful dancing attracted praise wherever she went.

After a long and successful career, Maria Tallchief retired in 1965. She shared her love of dance by teaching ballet. She and her sister, Marjorie (who also became a dancer), formed their own ballet company. In 1996, Maria Tallchief was named to the National Women's Hall of Fame.


Dance was always a part of Maria Tallchief's life.





## ***A Pioneer of American Dance***

Maria Tallchief will always be remembered as a pioneer of American dance. She was the first American ballerina to become world-famous. As Princess Wa-Xthe-Thonba, she was both an important Osage woman and a great ballerina. Her historic performance as the Firebird has never been forgotten. She opened the door for future generations of American dancers.

 Maria Tallchief wore a ceremonial headdress at her hometown celebration.



## Responding



**TARGET SKILL** **Fact and Opinion** Think about the facts and opinions the author gives about Maria Tallchief. Then copy the chart below. Add an opinion from the story to complete the chart.

Fact	Opinion
Maria Tallchief was born on January 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Oklahoma.	?



## Write About It

**Text to Self** Maria Tallchief was proud of her Native American background. Think of something about yourself that you are proud of. Write a paragraph that tells what makes you proud of that part of yourself.



### TARGET VOCABULARY

background

career

destruction

edition

formula

household

insights

publication

required

uneventful



### TARGET SKILL

**Fact and Opinion** Decide whether an idea can be proved or is a feeling or belief.



### TARGET STRATEGY

**Analyze/Evaluate** Think carefully about the text and form an opinion about it.



**GENRE Biography** tells about events in a person's life, written by another person.

**Level:** P

**DRA:** 38

**Genre:**

Biography

**Strategy:**

Analyze/Evaluate

**Skill:**

Fact and Opinion

**Word Count:** 1,355

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