

# CMBA HONOR SOCIETY EDITORIAL

Maria Tallchief

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One of the greatest dancers of all time was born on January 24, 1925 in Fairfax, Oklahoma.



Elizabeth Marie Tallchief was the daughter of an Osage tribe member, meaning she was of Native American descent. She started dancing at a very young age, and after moving from Oklahoma to Los Angeles, she continued her dance education. Despite efforts to make it big, Tallchief had trouble finding major opportunities. It wasn't until moving to New York City after high school graduation that Tallchief's career started to take off. Selected as an understudy for a

prime ballet company called Ballet Russe, she was given the chance to step up when a lead dancer retired. Receiving positive feedback from critics, Tallchief grew in popularity. However, with her popularity came challenges. Some made an effort to convince Tallchief to change her name to prevent discrimination based on her Native American ethnic background, but Tallchief refused and continued to perform with her paternal name.

Tallchief broke boundaries in many ways, including in 1947 when she became the first American to dance with the Paris Opera Ballet. From there she married George Balanchine, who created the iconic role Firebird for her.



She was well known for her Sugar Plum Fairy performance in Balanchine's version of The Nutcracker, as she was his first Sugar Plum Fairy. Tallchief continued her distinguished ballet career and became the first American to dance at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. She retired in 1966 after dancing professionally for 24 years.

After her retirement from dancing, Tallchief joined forces with her sister Marjorie Tallchief and founded the Chicago City Ballet, serving as its artistic director. Both a ballet school and company, the CCB ran until 1987 when it unfortunately closed. Maria Tallchief also was an accomplished public speaker and made a point to speak out against discrimination against Native Americans until her death in 2013.

Tallchief was one of the greatest dancers of all time, yet she rarely is talked about in the dance community. Since the month of November is Native American Heritage month, it is important to recognize Native Americans that broke boundaries and influenced ballet. Tallchief is one of many of ballet's 'firsts': the first prima ballerina in America, the first American to dance with the Paris Opera Ballet, the first American to perform at the Bolshoi. There is no doubt that her legacy lives on in today's ballet community.