

Maria Tallchief, ballet star who was inspiration for Balanchine, dies at 88

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Maria Tallchief, prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet, in Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" during the opening performance of the company's engagement at the Scala Theater in Milan, Italy. (AP)

Maria Tallchief, a dancer of electrifying passion and technical ability who forged a pathbreaking career that took her from an Oklahoma Indian reservation to world acclaim and who was a crucial artistic inspiration for choreographer George Balanchine, her first husband, died April 11 at a hospital in Chicago. She was 88.

The cause was complications from a broken hip sustained in December, said Kenneth von Heidecke, a choreographer and founder of the Chicago Festival Ballet.

Ms. Tallchief — born Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief — was of American Indian and Irish-Scottish descent. In a career that flourished from the 1940s to the 1960s at what became the New York City Ballet, she helped break down ethnic barriers in the world of dance and was one of the first American ballet stars in a field long dominated by Russian and European dancers.

After retiring in 1965, she settled in Chicago and taught at the Chicago Lyric Opera Ballet and founded the Chicago City Ballet.

When she received the Kennedy Center Honors in 1996, she recalled the pressure she faced as an American dancer. One impresario insisted that she Russianize her name to Tallchieva. “Never!” she said, although she was open to the concession of changing her surname to one word and to use Maria, a variation on her middle name.



Former New York Ballet ballerina Maria Tallchief arrives at the Kennedy Center, December 8. Tallchief attended a gala hosted by President Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton to honor her and four others actors and entertainers. (Mike Theiler)

From the start, her dancing was characterized by precise footwork and an athleticism that dazzled without being excessive. Her regality and grace won critical admirers, as well as the attention of Balanchine, who was consistently impressed by her musicality, which had been honed through childhood piano lessons.

Balanchine revolutionized ballet by creating sleek, streamlined works that demanded athleticism, speed and attack like no choreography before them. “I always thought Balanchine was more of a musician even than a choreographer, and perhaps that’s why he and I connected,” she told *The Washington Post*. Balanchine had a history of blurring the lines between the personal and the professional. He was known to fixate on one woman, making her his artistic obsession and romantic partner, only to eventually abandon her when a new talent came along. Ms. Tallchief became part of this pattern after the two married in 1946, when she was 21 and the Russian-born Balanchine was 42. It was Balanchine’s third marriage.

The next year, Ms. Tallchief accompanied her husband to the Paris Opera Ballet, where he was invited to serve as a guest choreographer and where she would become the first American to dance with that troupe.

She wasn’t greeted very warmly by company members, but she easily won over French audiences. No matter where she performed, Ms. Tallchief wanted to be judged on the merits of her dancing alone. “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,” she once wrote.

Ms. Tallchief originated roles as the lead dancer in Balanchine’s ballet “The Firebird” in 1949 and in “Swan Lake” in 1951, along with such works as “Symphony in C,” “Orpheus” and “Scotch Symphony.” Her virtuosic execution of these dances — executed with fiery, sometimes erotic fervor, while maintaining a lightness of foot — helped establish Balanchine as the era’s most prominent and influential choreographer.

One of her best-known roles was that of the Sugar Plum Fairy in Balanchine’s 1954 production of “The Nutcracker,” then considered an obscure ballet. Balanchine revamped it in a number of ways, most notably by adding numerous children to the cast, including in the central roles of Marie and the Nutcracker Prince. Ms. Tallchief’s commanding performance helped transform the show into a American holiday season staple and the ballet world’s most perennially reliable box-office draw.

Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief was born Jan. 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Okla. An Osage tribal member, she grew up on the Osage reservation, where her family and others prospered from oil royalties that the tribe received from the U.S. government.

Ms. Tallchief's mother, the former Ruth Porter, had dreamed of being a performer but, as a young woman, could not afford dance or music lessons. Determined to make her daughters stars, she enrolled her 3-year-old, whom the family called Betty Marie, in ballet classes. Her other daughter, Marjorie, also became a professional ballerina.

The children were made to perform at area rodeos and other events. With the intent of getting them into Hollywood musicals, Ruth Tall Chief moved the family to Los Angeles in 1933. Maria Tallchief later said her father happily agreed to the plan because he was an avid golfer and thought the climate would allow him to play more often.

Ms. Tallchief and her sister studied dance with David Lichine, a student of Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, as well as Bronislava Nijinska, the sister of celebrated dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Upon meeting Nijinska for the first time, Ms. Tallchief observed that she "was a personification of what ballet was all about. And I looked at her, and I knew this was what I wanted to do," she told CNN television host Larry King.

After graduating from Beverly Hills High School in 1942, Ms. Tallchief joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a troupe that included some of the artists from the esteemed Ballets Russes, which had recently disbanded after the death of its director, Sergei Diaghilev. Balanchine was also affiliated with the Ballet Russe. At Ballet Russe, there was tension between the American and Russian dancers. Ms. Tallchief wrote that she became the biggest target of the Russians' resentment after a choreographer chose her for a key role. In addition, word spread that her father had bought her train ticket when she moved to New York, which gave the impression that she was spoiled.

In 1944, Balanchine was named one of the leaders and coaches of the Ballet Russe, a move that proved to be a major turning point in Ms. Tallchief's career. From the start, she was impressed by Balanchine and his choreography. Of her first time dancing in one of his works, Ms. Tallchief wrote in her self-titled autobiography, "When I saw what he had done, I was astonished. Everything seemed so simple yet perfect: An elegant ballet fell into place before my eyes. The musicality of the man was magical."

The newly married couple returned to the United States in 1947 from their European trip, and Balanchine began focusing his attention on the Ballet Society,

a group that he founded that soon became the New York City Ballet. Ms. Tallchief's star soared after her 1949 debut in "The Firebird." Noting the immense technical difficulty of the role, New York Times dance critic John Martin wrote that Balanchine "has asked her to do everything except spin on her head, and she does it with complete and incomparable brilliance."

Despite Ms. Tallchief's professional success, she said her marriage to Balanchine became strained. "Passion and romance didn't play a big role in our married life," she wrote in her memoir. "We saved our emotion for the classroom." Balanchine didn't share her desire to have children, and both began to feel attracted to other people. Their marriage was annulled in 1952, but Ms. Tallchief stayed on at New York City Ballet until her retirement.

In addition to her work with New York City Ballet, Ms. Tallchief danced on television programs, including "The Ed Sullivan Show," and in 1952 she played Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova in the Technicolor musical "Million Dollar Mermaid," which starred Esther Williams. In 1960, Ms. Tallchief performed in Russia with Danish ballet sensation Erik Bruhn, making her the first American dancer to appear at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow.

After her break-up with Balanchine, Ms. Tallchief married Elmourza Natirboff, a pilot for a private airplane charter company, but they divorced after two years. In 1956, she married Henry D. Paschen Jr., an executive at a Chicago construction company. He died in 2004.

Survivors include a daughter from her third marriage, poet Elise Paschen of Chicago; her sister, Marjorie Tallchief, who had a noteworthy ballet career of her own with American Ballet Theatre and the Paris Opera Ballet, and now lives in Delray Beach, Fla.; and two grandchildren.

Although she retired from the stage, Maria Tallchief remained committed to dance. She founded the School of the Lyric Opera in 1974 in Chicago, where she taught the Balanchine technique. She launched the Chicago City Ballet in 1980, which collapsed less than a decade later.

Of her long career with Balanchine and her key roles in some of his most beloved dances, she once told an interviewer, "I was in the middle of magic, in the presence of genius. And thank God I knew it."