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In the Russian Tradition: Five Native American Ballerinas

In the mid 20th century five U.S. ballerinas from the state of Oklahoma achieved international prominence. These women, Yvonne Chouteau, Rosella Hightower, Moscelyne Larkin, and sisters Maria Tallchief and Marjorie Tallchief danced with major ballet companies, including Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, New York City Ballet, and the Paris Opera. Their remarkable careers showcased American ballet and American talent to the world during an era when Russian stars dominated the ballet scene. Their common Indian heritage, culture, and spirituality that infused their dancing helped to revolutionize ballet in the 20th century in America and Europe.



A brief history of the name Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo: the ballet company was founded in 1932, capitalizing on the name Ballets Russes used by Serge Diaghilev for his company, in the early 20th century. Under the direction of Colonel W. de Basil, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo featured dancers Alexandra Danilova, David Lichine, Frederic Franklin, Leon Woizikowski, and the choreography of Léonide Massine and George Balanchine. In 1938 the company split into two new rival companies—one under de Col. De Basil, the other under Massine. De Basil renamed his company the Royal Covent Garden Ballet Russe and in 1939 the Original Ballet Russe; the company toured internationally until 1948 before dissolving.



Franklin & Danilova

Massine, with René Blum, formed the other Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo with dancers Danilova, Serge Lifar, Tamara Toumanova, Alicia Markova, Mia Slavenska, Igor Youskevitch, and André Eglevsky, performing mainly in the U.S., and featured American dancers, including Rosella Hightower and Maria Tallchief. It dissolved in 1963, although its ballet school continued in New York City. Massine and Sergei Denham organized the new Ballets de Monte Carlo in 1966 under the patronage of Prince Rainier III of Monaco.



Slavenska & Youskevitch

Rosella Hightower: 1920-2008



Rosella Hightower, a Ballerina of Choctaw Indian and Irish descent became one of the 1950s biggest international stars. Hightower danced with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, American Ballet Theatre, and Massine's Ballet Russe Highlights Co. She grew up in Kansas City, Missouri at the time of the “roaring 20s” Charleston dance craze. Her study of classical ballet led her to New York to study with ballet master Michel Fokine. In 1937 she was invited by



choreographer Leonide Massine to join the ballet company he was forming in Monte Carlo. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo made its home in New York during World War II and Hightower joined American Ballet Theater. She was coached by Bronislava Nijinska, whom she credited with having a great influence on her musicality and stage presence.

Her most triumphant 15- year career stretch began when she joined the Grant Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas Ballet in



1947. As it's prima ballerina she toured the world and was one of the most popular dancers in Europe. Hightower danced with Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo, American Ballet Theatre, and Massine's Ballet Russes Highlights Co. She had an enormous repertory, including *Gaite Parisienne*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and Bournonville's *La Sylphide*. She was often praised for her virtuosity, flair, versatility, and mastery of a vast repertoire, dancing nearly all major classical roles. New York dance critic, John Martin, raved about her debut in 1947 at the Metropolitan Opera House in *Giselle*, dancing a role she learned in five hours when prima ballerina Alicia Markova fell ill.



Her *Black Swan Pas de deux* in 1961 with Rudolf Nureyev in his London debut after his defection to the West caused a sensation; following the performance they had to force their way through unprecedented and nearly uncontrollable crowds at the stage door. Hightower was one of Nureyev's closest friends and preceded him as artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet. She also founded the Prix de Lausanne, the world's most prestigious ballet student prize.



As the first 20th-century American ballerina to become a resident European star, she was a favorite partner of the renowned Danish dancer, Erik Bruhn, and was partnered in several companies by Andre Eglevsky. One of her partners, Milorad Miskovitch, often described as "handsome and elegant" and a desired partner by many of the greatest ballerinas of his time, began work in 1979 as an artistic adviser with UNESCO and served as president of the International Dance Council/CID from 1988 to 1994.



The French government granted Hightower the honor of Chevalier, then Officer, and finally Commander of the Légion d'honneur.

Hightower retired from dancing in 1962 and founded the Centre de Danse Classique in Cannes, France, one of the world's leading ballet schools, which also offered classes in jazz and the modern dance technique of Martha Graham. She taught at Ecole Supérieure de Danse de Cannes and also directed major companies, including the Marseilles Ballet (1969-72), the Ballet of the Grand Théâtre of Nancy (1973-74) in France, and La Scala Ballet (1985 -86) in Milan. Her last appearance on stage was in the play *Harold and Maud* in 1991 and is also the subject of experimental choreographer Francois Verret's 1991 documentary film *Rosella Hightower*. She retired from teaching in 2000.



Yvonne Chouteau (1929-)

Yvonne Chouteau was born in Oklahoma of Shawnee parents. She was inspired to study ballet after seeing Alexandra Danilova perform in Oklahoma City. Chouteau studied at the School of American Ballet in NYC and was recommended by Danilova to Serge Dunham for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, where she was accepted in 1943 at age 14



– the youngest professional dancer – where she danced for 14 years. Rising from the corps to soloist, her signature role was the Glove Seller in *Gaîté Parisienne*, although she danced *Giselle*, *The Nutcracker*, *Les Sylphide*, *Pas de Quatre*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. She worked with master choreographers including George Balanchine, Leonide Massine, Antony Tudor, Agnes de Mille, and Bronislava Nijinska. She married Miguel Terekhov, who danced with Col. W. de Basil’s Ballets Russes from 1942 to 1947 and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo from 1954 to 1958. Together they started the University of Oklahoma School of Dance, which was the first fully accredited university dance program in the U.S. In 1963 they founded the Oklahoma City Civic Ballet (now Ballet Oklahoma), which they ran for 10 years.



In a 1982 interview Chouteau said that her heritage had enriched her dancing. "The Indian people are very artistic as a whole," We are also very non-verbal, and so I think dance is a perfect expression of the Indian soul."

Moscelyne Larkin (1929-2012)



Moscelyne Larkin was the only child of Russian ballerina Eva Matlagova and a Shawnee-Peoria Indian, Ruben Larkin. Her early exposure to dance was at Indian Powwows. Her mother trained her at her school in Tulsa, OK, until she went to NYC to study with Mikhail Mordkin, Anatole Vilzak-Shollar, and Vincenzo Celli. At 15 she joined de Basil’s Original Ballet Russe, changing her name to Moussia Larkina, and touring throughout Europe and the West. She married dancer Roman Jasinski in Buenos Aires and toured South America during World War II, returning to NY to join the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1948. As a soloist she danced many classical roles and was prima ballerina at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Known for her magnetism, spectacular turns, and magnificent jumps, she was called "the first ray of sunshine" after the war by London critics. Her roles ranged from the lyrical waltz in Fokine’s *Les Sylphides* and the energetic cowgirl in Agnes de Mille’s *Rodeo* to the dance competition in *Graduation Ball*, Zobeïde’ in *Schéhérazade*, and the *Blue Bird pas de deux* in Aurora’s Wedding. Her charm, speed, and virtuosity enhanced her love of dance and her passion for excellence.



Larkin and her husband moved back to Oklahoma, where in 1956 they founded the Tulsa Civic Ballet and School (now Tulsa Ballet). They focused on strict classical technique with strong attention to character, flair, and emotion. Moscelyne introduced dance into the Tulsa Public Schools, taught ballet at the University of Tulsa, and instructed American Indian children in dance through the Tulsa Indian Council. The early Tulsa Ballet began to be noticed throughout the nation as a worthy successor to the technique, artistry, and repertoire of Ballet Russe as Larkin and Jasinski revived lost or little-known works from Balanchine, Fokine, Massine, and other great choreographers. Dancers from American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, and other companies flocked to Tulsa to receive personal coaching from Larkin and Jasinski in Ballet Russe repertoire and to perform with the Tulsa Ballet.



Larkin connected dance to her Native American heritage, saying “Dance is the breath of life made visible.” On her school brochure she used George Balanchine’s words that ballet training provides “the strength to resist mediocrity,” explaining that “What you are is the mind — the body is a shell. Ballet gives you control of yourself ... self-discipline.”

Marjorie Tallchief (1926-)

Marjorie Tallchief of Osage descent and her sister Marie began dancing as children and later studied with Bronislava Nijinska and David Lichine. Marjorie danced with American Ballet Theater before joining Maria in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1946. From 1947-1957 Marjorie danced with the Ballet de Marquis de Cuevas. In 1957 she became the first American Indian to become premiere danseuse etoile in the Paris Opera. Her most famous roles included those in *Annabel Lee* (1951), *Romeo and Juliet* (1955), *Camille* (1958), *Pastorale* (1961), and *Ariadne* (1965). From 1964-66 she danced with the Harkness Ballet.



In 1966 Marjorie and her husband, George Skibine, directed the Dallas Ballet. She taught at the Dallas Civic Ballet Academy and helped her sister Maria to found the Chicago City Ballet in 1980 before accepting the position of director of dance for the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida, until her retirement.

Maria Tallchief (1925-2013)

Hailed for her "thrilling power of momentum," Betty Marie Tallchief, was one of the 20th century's greatest ballerinas and was considered America's first major prima ballerina. At age 8 her family moved to California where she studied with Ernest Belcher, the father of the television and film dancer Marge Champion and with Tatiana Riabouchinska and Bronislava Nijinska. She moved to New York and joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942, where she quickly achieved soloist status. Tallchief traveled the world and was the first American to perform in Moscow's Bolshoi Theater. She was Rudolf Nureyev's partner of choice in his 1962 American debut on television in *Flower Festival of Ganzano* shortly after his defection.



Tallchief came to George Balanchine's attention as an understudy to Alexandra Danilova in *Song of Norway*. They married in 1946. As Balanchine's wife and "muse" Tallchief achieved acclaim with the New York City Ballet, dazzling audiences with her speed, energy, and fire. She was Balanchine's inspiration for *Symphonie Concertante*, *Sylvia pas de deux*, *Orpheus*, *Night Shadow*, *The Four Temperaments*, and *Scotch Symphony*. The part that launched her to fame was the title role in Balanchine's 1949 version of *The Firebird*. She was proud of her Indian heritage and refused suggestions to change her name to Tallchieva to sound Russian.



Dance critic Walter Terry described Tallchief in the 1954 world premiere in New York of Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*: "Maria Tallchief, as the Sugar Plum Fairy, is herself a creature of magic, dancing the seemingly impossible with effortless beauty of movement, electrifying us with her brilliance, enchanting us with her radiance of being. Does she have any equals anywhere, inside or outside of fairyland? While watching her in *The Nutcracker*, one is tempted to doubt it."

In 1952 Maria Tallchief appeared as "Pavlova" in a *Swan Lake* ballet for the film *Million Dollar Mermaid*, starring water ballet actress Esther Williams. In 1953 she was honored as an



Osage princess, and the governor of Oklahoma declared her a colonel on his staff.

After retiring from the stage in 1965, Maria became a respected teacher in Chicago, where she founded the ballet school of the Lyric Opera in 1974 and the Chicago City Ballet, serving as its artistic director from 1981–87.

Dancer/choreographer Jacques d'Amboise, who at 15 was in the corps in Balanchine's *Firebird* before becoming one of America's great ballet stars, compared Maria Tallchief to two of the century's greatest ballerinas: Galina Ulanova of the Soviet Union and Margot Fonteyn of Great Britain. "When you thought of Russian ballet, it was Ulanova. With English ballet, it was Fonteyn. For American ballet, it was Tallchief. She was grand in the grandest way." When she received a Kennedy Center Honor in 1996, Tallchief said of the award: "I hope it will set a precedent for young American ballerinas. You don't have to be from Russia." When U.S. President Bill Clinton presented her with the National Medal of the Arts in 1999, he said: "George Balanchine once told audiences not to analyze ballet. 'Words cannot describe it, you cannot explain a flower.' So it's impossible to explain the radiance and grace of Maria Tallchief."



Oklahoma Treasures

The centerpiece for an event celebrating the 60th anniversary of Oklahoma statehood (1967) was a performance of *The Four Moons*, a ballet by Louis Ballard that emphasizes the Native American heritage of these five ballerinas. Hightower represented the Choctaw Nation, Chouteau represented the Cherokee, Marjorie Tallchief, the Osage, and Moussie Larkin, the Shawnee.



In 1991 the State of Oklahoma honored the five dancers when it dedicated a mural painted by Mike Larson (Chickasaw), titled "Flight of Spirit." The mural shows past and present Oklahoma history and the contribution these five ballerinas have made to the arts and to the State. The painting hangs in the Great Rotunda of the State Capitol in Oklahoma City.



In 1997 all five ballerinas were honored at the state Capitol as official 'Oklahoma Treasures.' Sculptures by Monte England, called The Five Moons, were unveiled on the grounds at the Tulsa Historical Society in November 2007. The sculptures depict each of the ballerinas in a costume and pose that represents one of their signature roles.



Dancing their way into the hearts of ballet lovers throughout the world, these five women were both the inspiration and the living expression of the best that the United States has given the world. They danced with spirit and passion credited to their American Indian heritage and gave global recognition to American dance.

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