

Shmanners 287: Maria Tallchief

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear!

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: I'm doing well. How are you doin'?

Travis: Well, I just put some nail polish on my hand, and inevitably I'm holding my hand in that way that you're like, "You don't have to hold your hand like that."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But ever since I started painting my nails, I do this thing where I kind of hold like a claw.

Teresa: Like a claw. "Don't touch this" claw.

Travis: "Ohh, stay away!" And I only also ever do one hand at a time, so, like, my left hand right now, very expressive.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um, but other than that, I'm doing great.

Teresa: Right hand, completely frozen. Immobile.

Travis: You know, I spent the weekend doing some gardening.

Teresa: Mm-hmm!

Travis: Planting some bulbs.

Teresa: Had to redo your nails.

Travis: I had to redo my nails, yeah!

Teresa: I also redid my nails. Um, I am exploring the world of press-ons.

Travis: [gasps]

Teresa: And—

Travis: [theatrical voice] Welcome to the world of press-ons!

Teresa: [laughs] So my nails are— are the longest I've had in a very long time, because they are indeed fake.

Travis: Now, we are not talking about nails.

Teresa: No, we are not.

Travis: I mean, we are right now talking about nails—

Teresa: Right, but that's not what this show is about.

Travis: No, we are—

Teresa: Just a pleasant sidebar.

Travis: We have another biography episode that I'm very excited about, because the little glimpse that I've had into this person's life I'm like, "Oh, okay!" But until we started talking about doing an episode about them, I knew zero, zilch, about this person.

Teresa: Uh, but you— you didn't take any dance classes until college, right?

Travis: I didn't— well, I took one, uh, modern dance class in college, 'cause it was required. And to say I was phoning it in is a lie, because that would imply that I picked up the phone and I was on it?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I was maybe paging it in, you know?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: That would maybe be more accurate, where I kept getting the notification like, "Call me back!"

And I'd be like, "I will!" And then I forgot and I lost my pager.

Teresa: You showed up.

Travis: Yeah, most of the time, yeah, sure!

Teresa: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Travis: Sure. In body, yeah.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: My physical, corporeal form was there.

Teresa: Okay! Well, I actually danced at a dance studio for 14 years before going into musical theater and also dancing throughout college. Um, my first love, actually, I would say, is dance, is ballet specifically.

Travis: I'm not your first love? Wait a minute.

Teresa: No, I started taking ballet lessons when I was, like, three or four.

Travis: I mean, sure, but then you met me and figured out what love *really* was, and you were like, "Well, I've never truly loved before this," right?

Teresa: [hesitantly] Sure.

Travis: Now, hold on. That— you wanna take another run at that line? 'Cause it wasn't as—

Teresa: Yeah! [laughs]

Travis: Alright.

Teresa: But on with my story. [clears throat]

Travis: Oh!

Teresa: I really enjoyed ballet. Um, I, as a developing woman, do not have a ballet body.

Travis: By which you mean, to be clear, you do not have the body that a professional ballerina would be expected to have?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um—

Travis: Because much— I would say, much like beach body, any body that does ballet is a ballet body.

Teresa: Okay. In two ways. One, my figure is— is wider and larger than most ballet dancers, and—

Travis: Expectations— just wanna make it clear—

Teresa: The expectation, yes. And—

Travis: 'Cause I think your body is beautiful, and you should be proud of it.

Teresa: Thank you. And my feet physically are not well-suited for pointe dancing.

Travis: Now that, I can't argue with, because that is just a physical truth. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: It is a physical truth. My first toe, which takes a large amount of pressure on pointe, is much shorter than the rest, only by about a centimeter, centimeter-and-a-half.

Travis: But it still doesn't work for on pointe.

Teresa: No, it is not good for pointe shoes. Um, I would have to invest in special boxes, special cushions, it's—

Travis: Toe surgery, maybe.

Teresa: I mean... maybe.

Travis: You could get implants? Is that a thing?

Teresa: No, they would shorten the other toes, I think.

Travis: Oh, boy! Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. Anyway, um, it just wasn't feasible for my body. So I have always loved ballet, I love dancing, but pointe was not for me. It wasn't in the cards.

Travis: Okay. So, who are we talking about?

Teresa: We are talking about a person who revolutionized American ballet and was known as America's first prima ballerina, the co-founder of the New York City Ballet, and an indigenous person: Maria Tallchief.

Travis: Okay. Now, I'm just gonna go ahead and lay my cards on the table of ignorance. A prima ballerina? [chokes] I mean, I know, like, primadonna from, like, opera.

Teresa: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Travis: So I assume it's, like, super good dancer, like, lead person.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: But is that, like, a title you get? Of just, like, if you are a prima ballerina then everybody's like, "Oh, then we should hire them"? Or is it like, you are hired to be the prima ballerina of a company?

Teresa: Um, I think that they kind of go back and forth in the way of once you are hired as a prima ballerina, you can then bill yourself as prima ballerina.

Travis: Ohh! So it's kind of like being an ingenue, or being— like, once you have that, like— "Oh, them? They're a prima ballerina." Like, you know they can deliver a prima ballerina performance, they can lead a mo— like, being a movie star?

Teresa: Yeah, yeah.

Travis: Yeah, okay.

Teresa: So there is the title prima ballerina in ballet companies.

Travis: Yeah, where it's, like, the lead.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: But—

Travis: And then there's the primo ballerino.

Teresa: You kind of get that by being the lead in a company, you know?

Travis: And once you're the lead in a company it shows that you can lead a company, and then—

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: I guess that kind of makes sense.

Teresa: Um, so... Maria Tallchief was born Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief in Fairfax, Oklahoma, on January 24th, 1925. She was born right in the middle of the Osage Reservation to her Scotch-Irish mother, Ruth Porter Tall Chief, and her father, Alexander Joseph Tall Chief, who was a member of the Osage Nation.

Travis: Got it.

Teresa: And the Tall Chief name was one of great power within the Osage Nation.

Travis: I mean, yeah. The two combinations of those words both imply, like, doin' great.

Teresa: Indeed! Uh, Maria's great-grandfather, Peter Bigheart, had helped negotiate for the tribe concerning the oil reserve the reservation sat on.

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: She was, then, fairly well off, as far as people go, because she—she felt as if, as a young girl, quote, "I felt my father owned the town."

Travis: Okay. This is, like—

Teresa: Which is pretty cool.

Travis: I mean, I felt like my dad was the most popular person in town because he grew up around there, and maybe that was true. But then I also look back on it now and a lot of people were just like, "Hey, Clint!" And he'd be like, "Hey, man!" And then I'd be like, "Who's that guy?" And he'd be like, "I don't know!" And I'd be like, "Aw." I don't think my dad knew as many people as I think he did at the time, 'cause everyone knew his voice.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: And I also don't know that being the most popular man in Huntington is necessarily...

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: ... the, like, feather in one's cap that I thought it was at the time, but that's neither here nor there.

Teresa: Um, so, not to say that everything was a bed of roses, right? Um, in addition to personal struggles, her father was an alcoholic, and her parents were known to fight often about money. Um, the year that Tallchief was born, her father's tribe was dealing with the tail end of the Osage Reign of Terror, which was a series of murders that devastated their community.

Um, from 1921 to 1925, tribe members were targeted for their land.

Travis: Oh boy.

Teresa: Yeah. Not— not awesome.

Travis: Yeah, you know what? I'm gonna say, that's a bit of an understatement, yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That's pretty terrible.

Teresa: Uh, so growing up as a Native American in a small Oklahoma town, it could be rough, but Maria soon found her passion and solace: dance.

Travis: "They had troubles, and that's when they found... the arts!" And I'm like, "Yes!"

Teresa: "Yes!"

Travis: "So you mean stand-up comedy made it all better? [choked up] The guitar gave them a voice when they had no voice?" That, to me, is just like, ah. And listen, that's why those movies and stories exist, so that you're like, "Maybe for *me* it's the guitar."

It's not, for me, just in case anyone was wondering.

Teresa: [through laughter] It isn't.

Travis: For me, it's podcasting. I don't know if a movie will ever made of it.

Teresa: [laughs] You have too much arthritis in your hands for guitar, really.

Travis: That's true, and also, uh, laziness.

Teresa: [gasps] Ohh, yeah, yeah. That's in your hands too.

Travis: And my whole body. Go on.

Teresa: [laughs] Um, her mother dreamed of being a performer, but they didn't have the funds, uh, when she was growing up, to take lessons. Her mother made sure that both Maria and her sister were able to take lessons, dance lessons and concert piano lessons.

Travis: I'm narrowing my eyes because the combination of things you just said...

Teresa: Right, is very stage mom. [laughs]

Travis: Yeah. We've both grown up doing theater. And that, "She dreamed of doing it, so she made sure her daughter—" and it's like, "Oh, no!"

Teresa: Yeahhh...

Travis: And I'm gonna say "stage parent," 'cause I know lots of dads like that, too, and I bet there is non-binary parents out there who are also like that, and that idea of, like, "I didn't have a—" I think about that now sometimes—

Teresa: Living vicariously through your children.

Travis: Oh my God. Every time Bebe is, like, interested in jokes I'm like, "Maybe she's gonna— maybe she could be a stand-up comic!" [strained noise]

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Although the other side too of when we went and looked at a theater and there was a pretty set on the stage and I said, "Only actors get to go on the stage." And she goes, "Then I wanna be an actor." And I thought, "Noo!" [wheezes]

Teresa: [laughs] Didn't she say also, "I wanna touch it."

Travis: She did. "I wanna touch it!" And I said, "You're not allowed to." And she goes, "Why not?" And I said, "'Cause you have to be an actor." And she goes, "Then I'm going to become an actor, and I'm gonna touch it."

Teresa: Okay! Um—

Travis: Well-reasoned.

Teresa: Not— not a ton of opportunities for dance teachers to come through their area, and so the first one that they had, she and her sister, um, was bad. Bad— bad teacher. They skipped over the basics and put Tallchief on pointe way too soon.

Travis: Whoa! Yeah, you gotta work up to that.

Teresa: Yeah, she was just five years old!

Travis: No!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That's Bebe now! No!

Teresa: Um, and, you know, like I talked about earlier with my feet, um, it's typically discouraged to put children under 11, really you should wait until you're 13 or 14.

Travis: Not developing anymore, or no more bone growth.

Teresa: Right. The bones need to solidify, 'cause kids' bones, they're...

Travis: They're like jelly.

Teresa: ... little— little wibbly-wobbly, little—

Travis: They got jelly bones.

Teresa: —little rubber. So after you're 11, your bones are typically pretty strong, and you have developed the muscle around the bones to be able to support them. Right?

Travis: You should be able to crush walnuts with your toes. [crunching noise]

Teresa: [laughs] I don't know about that. But I do know that starting early can permanently damage your bones.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And thankfully, Maria was not with this company for a long time, with this teacher. Um, and so they moved to LA so that she and her sister

could, you know, get better teachers and stuff. More opportunity. Didn't have a plan, though. [clicks tongue]

Travis: Okay. Well...

Teresa: Kinda— kinda just... got there. Kinda just left and— and moved to LA. Um, and the story goes that the day they arrived in LA, her mother asked a clerk at a local drugstore if he knew any good dance teachers.

Travis: Oh boy! Oh boy. A real get off the bus with ten cents and a dream, right?

Teresa: Yeah. Uh, lucky for them, the clerk was weirdly helpful?

Travis: You know... [sighs] can I just say, I am a sucker for, like, a biopic, or bio-pic—

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: —I can never remember the right way to say it, but that moment where it's just like, "[old-timey voice] Well, funny you should mention it! Actually, my wife is the lead teacher here in LA." Okay, go on.

Teresa: Uh, he recommended the teacher Ernest Belcher, who was the father of Marge Champion. Now, you may not have heard, Travis, of Marge Champion.

Travis: I haven't.

Teresa: But you have definitely seen her. She was the dance model for classic Disney characters, like the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio*—

Travis: [gasps] Yeah?

Teresa: —Hyacinth Hippo in "Dance of the Hours" from the original—

Travis: That was the one I was gonna say, yeah, *Fantasia*!

Teresa: —[simultaneously] *Fantasia*.

Travis: Oh, I love it. Sorry.

Teresa: And...

Travis: Oh?

Teresa: Snow White!

Travis: [gasps] Get out!

Teresa: Totes!

Travis: Do you know the interesting fact about Snow White's voice? And I know you do 'cause I've told you before.

Teresa: I do.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: But tell our listeners.

Travis: They made her sign— it was her first ever, like, voiceover gig, and they made her, like, sign a contract that said she would never do another voiceover gig, because they wanted the voice of Snow White to never be, like, used for commercials, or sold as a thing of, like, "With the voice of Snow White!" in a thing. And so they basically, like, decided to do that. But you can hear her voice in one other thing. And it's the song about— when you get to Oz in the Wizard of Oz, in one of the "If I Only had a Heart, or a Brain, or the Courage—"

Teresa: "Wherefore art thou, Romeo?"

Travis: Yeah, that's the voice of Snow White.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Uncredited.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Because of legality reasons, and I think unpaid, for the same reasons.

Teresa: Who knows?

Travis: But yeah. Not so much a fun fact.

Teresa: Uh, but a true one.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, so... thankfully this was a great place for Maria. She thrived in this studio, even learned things like tap and Spanish dancing and acrobatics and tumbling and things like that, which, you know, were not her passion like ballet, but—

Travis: But good to know, 'cause you can incorporate ideas and influences and stuff into other things.

Teresa: Mm-hmm. Um, so then here's— here's something that actually often happens.

Travis: I can't wait to hear what it is, but first, how about a thank you note for our sponsors?

Teresa: Okay.

[theme music plays]

Travis: This week, we want to write a thank you note to DoorDash. Oh, DoorDash. What would I do without you? DoorDash connects you with the restaurants you love right now and right to your door. It is revolutionary, right? We use DoorDash at this point, right, to get food for us, which is wonderful. But you can also use it to get grocery essentials you need with DoorDash, right? Drinks, snacks, other household items. And just this morning, I used DoorDash to send some donuts to my friend as, like, a birthday present, because they do gifts now, too! It's really incredible, and it made my friend very happy.

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[music plays]

John: Look, it's a rough world out there, especially lately. I get it. So let's take care of our minds as best we can. I'm John Moe, host of *Depresh Mode with John Moe*. Every week, I talk with comedians, actors, writers, musicians, doctors, therapists, and everyday folks about the obstacles that our world and our brains throw in front of us. Depression, anxiety, traumatic stress, all those mental health challenges that are way more common and more treatable than you might think.

Speaker 2: The first time I went to therapy I was so ashamed, and I was like, "I can't believe I gotta go to thera— like, I thought I could be a man, and Humphrey Bogart was never in therapy!" And my dad said, "Yeah, but he smoked a carton of cigarettes a day."

John: Give your mind a break, give yourself a break, and join me for *Depresh Mode with John Moe*.

[music and advertisement end]

Travis: Okay. What often happens?

Teresa: Well, Maria was doing very well at ballet school. Not so great at regular school.

Travis: Ohhh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, sometimes you just gotta chase your passions.

Teresa: Well, and here's the thing. In her biography, autobiography, she talks about it was because she was bored. She was so smart and so bored. So—

Travis: I made the joke the other day—

Teresa: Oh, what?

Travis: To Bebe. We were talking about, like, things people say in school all the time. And I said, "You know, my teachers always used to tell me, '[loudly] Travis! What are you doing? Sit back down!'"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And then, like, days later, this morning, Bebe was like, "Hey, why did your teachers always say to you, 'Travis! What are you doing? Sit back down!'"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I was like, "Oh. Uh, 'cause I was bored all the time and I would just get up from my desk and walk around."

Teresa: [laughs] Uh, and so, like parents do, they moved to a different place. They moved to Beverly Hills so they could enroll her in a better school. School was better. Kids, though? Not better. Still racist.

Travis: Well, yep.

Teresa: Yeah. She described it as a time of painful discrimination, where children would tease her about her heritage.

Travis: Ugh.

Teresa: Not cool, you guys. Um, this is where she began going by the name Tallchief as one word instead of the original two words, uh, in order to make it sound a little more Eurocentric?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I mean, that sucks, but...

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: I'm glad she didn't— I mean, not that it's up to me, that she didn't just, like, straight up change it. 'Cause it was Elizabeth Maria Tall Chief, right? And then she just went by Maria—

Teresa: It was Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief.

Travis: Tall Chief, and then she went by Maria Tallchief.

Teresa: Yeah. You'll see why.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: When she was 12 years old, she met Bronislava Nijinska.

Travis: Okay, got it.

Teresa: Nijinska was a legend at the time in the ballet community—

Travis: 'Cause she was a dragon!

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: She was a Polish dancer.

Travis: Oh, okay. So not, like, a legend in the sense I was thinking of. "Ah, the legend of the ballet dancing dragon," but—

Teresa: No.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and an innovative choreographer. Uh, Tallchief recalled that Nijinska was a personification of what ballet was all about. "I looked at her and knew this is what I wanted to do."

Travis: Do you think anyone's ever felt that way about me?

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Really?

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Okay. I was being, uh, a little facetious, but okay.

Teresa: No, you've done talks and stuff at, like, schools.

Travis: Yeah. Oh, so you mean about podca— not, like, other things.

Teresa: Oh. N— I mean—

Travis: Nah, okay.

Teresa: If only you would let them in.

Travis: Well, I'm just afraid to let people see me garden.

Teresa: [laughs] Alright. So, Tallchief followed Nijinska to her own studio, and was, you know, superb at all of it. Um, and—

Travis: It's always nice when you find a great teacher that engages you in the right way. Like, where it's— you know, there are different styles to everything, right? And, like, just because one style doesn't mesh with someone doesn't mean they're not a good teacher or a good student, both ways. But when you get someone who is very talented, like it sounds

like Maria was, and a teacher that, like, the student vibes with and the teacher vibes with, you know what I mean?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Where it's just like, oh, this is— this is an establishing connection, right, that's going to directly improve both of their lives. That is just— it makes me very happy. Biopic, right? Oh!

Teresa: Uh-huh. And there were ups and downs to their relationship.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: But when Tallchief graduated from high school in 1942 she was like, "Let's do college. Let's do this!" But her dad was like, "I have paid for your lessons all your life. It's time for you to get a job."

Travis: Okay. Phew. Alright.

Teresa: I feel like that's kind of the opposite of things that, like, in our lifetime people said. We were, like, really good at stuff, like our extracurriculars, and our parents said, "But you gotta go to college!"

Travis: Yeah, but 1942, man, that was a different way of looking at college, you know what I mean?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: It wasn't the, like, "If you don't go to college you can't get a job!" way. Um, and probably also, let's be fair, she would've gone to college and continued dancing at college, probably would've just gone for an arts degree. At which point you're like, "Just go dance!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: In 1942. I'm not saying now, don't go to college.

Teresa: Right, right, right. If you want to go to college you should go, but if you don't... trades are cool. Jobs are awesome.

Travis: Trades are cool. And, you know, most art— I've never gone in for an audition or live show and had someone go, "Yeah, great! Can I see your diploma?"

Teresa: Exactly, exactly. You don't have to put your GPA on your resume.

Travis: No. Unless you really want to, and then not get the job. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: [laughs] Okay. So, she did. She went out, tried to get some jobs. She was actually in an MGM musical, *Presenting Lily Mars*, which starred Judy Garland.

Travis: [gasps]

Teresa: She was a dancer in that, but it really— Hollywood was not for her. Um, she decided to go east.

Travis: To New York?

Teresa: To New York!

Travis: New York City!

Teresa: Right.

Travis: The great... white way— Broadway, they call it! The c— uh, City of Lights, the Big Snapple!

Teresa: Some— I think some of those are right.

Travis: All of them.

Teresa: Okay. Uh, and immediately looked up Sergei Denham, which is the director of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Travis: Well, we all know that. That's just common knowl— you didn't even have to say it. Like, you said the name and everybody was like, "Ah, yeah, that guy."

Teresa: She was a great dancer, and they told her she was a great dancer, but the thing that they really liked about Maria is she had a passport!

Travis: Okay! [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Alright, alright!

Teresa: Because a lot of the Russian dancers in the company lacked passports, and so they couldn't go on the Canadian tour that had been planned. Uh, so she was working with them because she could cross borders.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: She was offered a place, along with a \$40 a week salary, uh, which in 1942 was awesome. Here in 2021, that's about \$678 a week?

Travis: Not bad, yeah!

Teresa: Not... bad.

Travis: Pretty good! Okay!

Teresa: Not bad. For a 17-year-old?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah, totally. So there were lots of— of trials and tribulations of, you know, being relegated to the chorus, then slowly making her way up.

Travis: Biopic stuff. You can just say biopic stuff. Biopic stuff?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Bionic stuff.

Teresa: Right. And so... [laughs]

Travis: You kind of agreed to it and then thought, like, "Wait."

Teresa: "Wait, why?"

Travis: "Wait. Did he say bionic?"

Teresa: Why did I do that? Anyway. Um, this is where her name changed, and it was actually suggested, like you said, to change the whole thing, to make it actually sound more Russian?

Travis: Hmm.

Teresa: Because at the time—

Travis: Russia was where it was at for ballet, yeah.

Teresa: Exactly, for ballet, so it was suggested maybe Tallchieva? Hmm?

Travis: Hmm. No.

Teresa: But no, she was very proud of her heritage. Um, and so she compromised by changing her name to Maria, right? Which again, popular name.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: At their first two months within the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, she was in seven different ballets.

Travis: That's a lot.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: More than I've been in.

Teresa: That is a lot. She regularly took classes at the School of American Ballet. Um, she did the tours, she, you know, was... known for her work ethic and professionalism, but still, you know, like at school, racism plagued her life. The Russian dancers in her company made her life very difficult, because not only was she indigenous, of indigenous heritage, but also, she wasn't Russian!

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And like we said, I mean, we just talked about it. Like, Russia was where it was at.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: So... here comes her big break.

Travis: [gasps]

Teresa: 1942. Um—

Travis: So still 19— this is a lot happening in 1942!

Teresa: Still 1942, yes.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Uh, the prima ballerina in the company, was Krasovska— I hope that's right— was kind of a diva, and walked out.

Travis: No way! What?!

Teresa: [laughs] And Maria was her understudy, so Maria got to go on, and she...

Travis: Destroyed.

Teresa: ... destroyed it. It was awesome, and she got a slew of positive reviews for her role.

Travis: Excellent. I'm feel— oh, I'm— we're on the up— oh, we're on the upswing! Oh, the big break. I love this point in the movie, yes!

Teresa: Yep, totally on the upswing. She was, you know, being a soloist, she got a lead in a different— in lots of different ones. Um, and so in the spring of 1944, she met choreographer George Balanchine.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: You've heard of this?

Travis: No?

Teresa: No. Alright.

Travis: I'm so sorry! You looked at me with such, like, "Right? It's about to click for you and you're gonna go, 'Oh! I—'" I made the noise for Judy Garland. Didn't that count?

Teresa: You did, you did.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Good job. If you know dance, Balanchine is a big dude.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and so— and he pretty much fell in love with her from dancing, right? Fell in love with her dancing.

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: She became sort of what... uh, a muse?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, and... then... he proposed.

Travis: Okay. So when you say "Fell in love with her dancing... "

Teresa: Okay. Well, they didn't really know each other, right?

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: He proposed to her, and she said "But George, I'm not sure I love you. I feel I hardly know you," right? Um, because he was like, "We'll be great together. Let's get married [holding back laughter] and then we'll get to know each other."

Travis: So, very— literally like something out of, like, a biopic stuff of, like, "But that's doesn't matter, my dear! We'll get to know each other, but think of the beautiful works we could create together!"

Teresa: Exactly, exactly. That was one—

Travis: I don't know if that's what he sounded like.

Teresa: [laughs] Probably not. Uh, August 16th, 1946, she was 21 and he was 42.

Travis: Ooh.

Teresa: Her parents... not into it.

Travis: Yeah, I get that.

Teresa: Um, so... her mother in particular was furious, and I can understand why. Like, I mean... Maria has kind of, like, built this whole career, and what usually happens when ladies get married is it becomes about the dude, and, you know—

Travis: Especially at this time, right? Where you're gonna get the pregnancy push really hard, and especially at this time, but even now, if you are in an arts career, pregnancy can massively derail that. Just to where suddenly people— you know, you have to take some time off for maternity, and unfortunately societally that will push you out of peoples' minds, and then coming back in is way harder.

Teresa: Um, and George won her over. She did— did feel like she was falling in love with him, so... yay? Right? Yay for that.

Travis: [unenthusiastically] Sure. Yeah.

Teresa: Um, and after they honeymooned—

Travis: It's amazing this person I did not know anything about 27 minutes ago I'm now feeling very protective of.

Teresa: [laughs] I know. It's so nice.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Uh, they honeymooned and went straight back to work. She talked very fondly of Balanchine, uh, both professionally and personally, describing him as a warm, affectionate, loving husband. Uh, they would annul their marriage in 1952, uh, but they stayed on good terms with each other for the rest of their lives, and of course they made history in the ballet world, which was— which was kind of the point, right?

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: "I love you...r work. Let's get married."

Travis: Right. Okay, so now I want to get to where she's, like, so esta— because one of the things I saw about her is not only was she this prima ballerina, but she is considered, like, America's first prima ballerina. It's that because was, like, from Russia, and Russia was the superstars, and here comes this, like, American woman who is just like, "No, no, no, no. We can do it too"?

Teresa: I mean... yeah! Kinda.

Travis: She's so cool.

Teresa: Even though the media was racist...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: ... about her, um, her most famous role was actually back at the New York City Ballet. Um, Balanchine choreographed a dance called The Firebird.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and her—

Travis: It was all about that cool car.

Teresa: —her appearance—

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: —was electrifying. Quote, "Emerging as the nearest approximation to a prima ballerina that we had yet enjoyed," right?

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: So this was in New York. That was from *The New York Times*. And she, quote, "Did everything except spin on her head." [laughs quietly]

Travis: Wowww!

Teresa: That's amazing!

Travis: Wow! What a review! Okay.

Teresa: Um, she also was the original Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Which is great—

Travis: Wait, really?

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: And so after they separated, and she continued to break career barrier after career barrier, shortly before the birth of her first child with her next husband, affectionately called Buzz, she became the first American dancer to perform at the Bolshoi.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and this time when she returned to the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1954 and '55 she made \$2000 a week.

Travis: Wow!

Teresa: Yeah. So, add a zero, and that's how much it would be in today's money.

Travis: Wow, okay!

Teresa: She was on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. She was in a movie musical. She danced throughout Europe, South America, Japan, Russia, and all over the US. She retired in 1966 and moved to Chicago to raise her daughter.

Travis: What, after 24 years?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Wow! That's a really long career for someone in the arts, especially in dance.

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: Phew!

Teresa: Well, because the toll it takes on your body.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely.

Teresa: Um, and like I said, retired to Chicago to be with her new husband, Buzz, and to raise her daughter. Um, in 1974, she founded the Lyric Opera Ballet School and she and her sister went on to found the Chicago City Ballet in 1981.

Travis: Wow! I think this person is very cool. [laughs]

Teresa: Yes, a true artist, I would say.

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Um, she also fought against Native American stereotypes every chance she could, obviously. Um, and she spoke out against misconceptions and harmful imagery, and was involved with the Americans for Indian Opportunity, and was a director of the Indian Council of Higher Achievement Award. She is counted as one of the five Native American ballet dancers born from Oklahoma in the 1920's. Like, big figure.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She paved the way for non-traditional ballerinas. She broke stigmas, and even was hailed as one of the most brilliant ballerinas of the 20th century!

Travis: Now, I'm just gonna guess, right? But eventually, she died?

Teresa: Eventually.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: In 2013, she passed away from complications from a broken hip. Um—

Travis: For a second I thought you were gonna say broken heart. Okay. Broken hip. Okay.

Teresa: Awww, no. No, but, I mean, all you have to do is, like, look at her countless awards.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: She received a Kennedy Center Honor for Lifetime Achievements in 1996. She was inducted into the Women's— National Women's Hall of Fame, and was named Woman of the Year twice by the Washington Press Club, awarded the American National Medal of Arts by the National Endowment of the Arts, received the Chicago History Museum's Making History Award for Distinction in the Performing Arts— I mean, it just— it's—

Travis: It goes on and on.

Teresa: The list goes on and on. So, I think that other than the beautiful dancing, Maria Tallchief left us with a legacy of, like, class, and elegance, and ethnic pride. Right?

Travis: Yeah! And also being able to, like, shed whatever preconceptions of, like, where art comes from and where artists come from and what the artist is supposed to look like, right? That's amazing.

Teresa: She talks about her roots, um, in her autobiography, saying:

"I think it is an innate quality that Indians have to dance. They dance when they are happy, they dance when they are sad, they dance when they get married, they dance when someone dies. 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."

I got goosebumps.

Travis: Yeah, I think she sounds super cool, and I'm very glad that you brought her. Thank you very much, Teresa, for presenting the episode. Thank you—

Teresa: Alex.

Travis: —to Alex, yeah, our researcher, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Thank you to Rachel, our editor, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Also, if you enjoyed this show, make sure you check out all the other amazing Maximumfun.org shows. That is our podcast home. If you want to check out other McElroy projects, you can go to mcelroy.family. They are all there.

If you are interested in history, but also looking for maybe a little bit spooky and weird stuff, go check out Chasing Immortality, a podcast that I executive produce, all about people throughout history who have tried to cheat death in a myriad of ways.

Oh, if you are interested in maybe putting on some cool stuff, you can go to mcelroymerch.com. What else do we always say, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also, thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That's @shmannerscast, where we get our questions when we... [hesitantly] ask for... them... from you? [laughs]

Travis: [laughs] Yes. Nailed it. No notes!

Teresa: [laughs] And thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook page, *Shmanners* Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group!

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners, *Shmanners*. Get it.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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Jordan: You're in the theater. The lights go down. You're about to get swept up by the characters and all their little details and interpersonal dramas. You look at them and think, "That person is so obviously in love with their best friend. Wait, am *I* in love with my best friend? That character's mom is *so* overbearing. Why she doesn't she stand up to her? Oh good *God*, do I need to stand up to *my* own mother?"

We never know when we'll see ourselves in a movie, but that search for recognition is exactly what we're going to talk about on the podcast *Feeling Seen*, with me, Jordan Crucchiola. Each episode, we'll bring in a

guest to talk about the films that they see themselves in, and also the ways that movies have fallen short.

So, join me every Thursday for the *Feeling Seen* podcast, here on Maximum Fun, or wherever you find your podcasts.

[music plays]