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Plié Ball! Baseball Meets Dance on Stage and Screen by
Jeffrey M. Katz (review)

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der' Weatherly into a Gulliver with a glove, a racing, leaping, diving maker of impossible catches" (115).

Cleveland's "political volatility and fragmentation," its racial and ethnic composition, economic history, and geography have made Cleveland "different from cities of a similar size and background" (271). While the history of the Indians will certainly resonate with Cleveland fans, Odenkirk's personalized approach will have a broader reach, for it reminds readers that one of baseball's universal truths is that it is experienced uniquely through the lens of fans' personal participation, the subjective meanings they find, and the intimate connections they develop. Baseball history is thus best reflected in the way each fan—including James E. Odenkirk—chooses to recount her or his memories of the passing seasons.



Jeffrey M. Katz. *Plié Ball! Baseball Meets Dance on Stage and Screen*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016. 295 pp. Paper, \$39.95.

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A variety of long-published books have surveyed various aspects of baseball and the arts. Among them are James Mote's *Everything Baseball* (1989), Hal Erickson's *Baseball in the Movies: A Comprehensive Reference* (1992), and my own *Great Baseball Films* (1994). A welcome addition to this list is Jeffrey M. Katz's title-tells-all history: *Plié Ball! Baseball Meets Dance on Stage and Screen*.

Plié Ball! is divided into five chapters, each of which deals with a specific aspect of baseball and dance. The first four center on the union of the two on stage: nineteenth-through-early-twentieth-century music halls, vaudeville, and Broadway; mid-twentieth-century through early-twenty-first-century theater; concert dance in the twentieth-century; and concert dance in the early-twenty-first-century. The final section spotlights dance and baseball in film and on television and video, and an appendix examines the union of the two in youth culture. Scattered throughout are interviews with a range of contemporary choreographers and others who articulate their views on the link between the sport and the art form. One is Edward Villella, the celebrated dancer and choreographer, who also penned the brief, heartfelt foreword. Villella astutely observes that he "grew up with a need to move" and was "a far better baseball player for having taken ballet as a kid. From a very early age, I understood the connections between dance and baseball" (1).

Plié Ball! is not so much a history of baseball and dance that one might read uninterrupted from cover to cover; it is, instead, a fact-crammed reference. Notwithstanding, how accurate is its reportage? It has been my experience that histories which deal with multiple subjects or biographies of individuals who earned fame in diverse fields occasionally are problematical. Take, for example, Gene Autry, the famed singing cowboy who enjoyed success as a film and television star, a businessman, and a baseball team owner. A writer's expertise may be in one of these areas, and the content of his or her book may reflect that knowledge. But in the case of Autry, what about his other successes? Can their citations be depended upon for accuracy? For indeed, I have seen baseball-related books and articles in which the author-scholar nails the facts relating to the sport but flubs the non-baseball narrative. So, my question as I began reading *Plié Ball!* was whether, despite Katz's professed affection for both subjects—for after all, the first words in his preface are "I love baseball and I love dance" (2)—he will be guilty of the same questionable research.

Happily, the answer—for the most part—is a resounding no. Katz references countless sources as he establishes the historical link between baseball and dance (as well as the arts in general). Plenty of his facts ring true: for example, his observations of De Wolf Hopper, Digby Bell, and the Actor's Amateur Athletic Association of America; his description of "High Pitch," a 1955 made-for-television musical featuring William Frawley and Vivian Vance, of *I Love Lucy* fame; his references to Joe E. Brown, whose show business career was not limited to his presence in *Some Like It Hot*, the Billy Wilder-Jack Lemmon-Tony Curtis-Marilyn Monroe classic; and his extensive citations of ballplayer-turned-stage-and-screen performer Mike Donlin.

Adding to *Plié Ball* are the interviews. Here, Katz steps aside and allows the interviewees to cite their sports links and influences. "What attracted me to baseball in particular, say over some of the other sports," observes choreographer Gail Conrad, is that it's "both huge and it's intimate. The spaces in between the action of the game are as interesting to me as the actual home runs and the winning. This is also how I think about choreography . . ." (50). But baseball is not the sole athletic endeavor that may be connected to dance. Lynn Parkerson, Artistic Director of the Brooklyn Ballet, notes that her organization "has always made a strong connection between ballet and sports in our education programs. When we teach in public schools and do residencies, particularly with regard to boys doing ballet, we've talked about Michael Jordan and Herschel Walker and Lynn Swann doing ballet—different sports figures who, at one point in their careers, have either done ballet or supported the idea of ballet and know how difficult it is and what an athletic endeavor ballet is" (176–77).

Unfortunately, however, it must be stressed that the *Plié Ball* text is far from error-free—and this is apparent in the book's first pages, during which both the sport and the art form are misrepresented. Katz refers to “Don Mattingly of the Los Angeles Dodgers” (13), as if Mattingly's career as a New York Yankee is nonexistent. He writes that Jeff Richards “was a featured dancer in the blockbuster film version of the classic Broadway musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* . . .”(12) While Richards was one of the seven onscreen siblings, *Seven Brides* was no stage hit. It was a celluloid original and it only came to Broadway in 1982, twenty-eight years after the release of the film version. Its run lasted a mere five performances.

Nonetheless, for those fascinated by its subject matter, *Plié Ball!* is well-worth perusing and referencing. There certainly is a wealth of information here.