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What's a baseball All-Star doing onstage with Miami City Ballet?

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Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

Kleber Rebello, left, and former Major League baseball player Mike Piazza, rehearse for their performance in the Miami City Ballet's production of *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* on Tuesday, April 16, 2013.

The last time we saw Mike Piazza, it was in a familiar place — on the baseball diamond.

The 12-time All-Star who hit the most home runs ever by a catcher served as the hitting coach for the Italian team at the World Baseball Classic in March, a scrappy overachieving squad that made it to the semifinal round at Marlins Park with less than a handful of major leaguers.

These days, the 44-year-old retired Miami Beach native and father of two is working on a different stage and on a different skill. He's trying to perfect his gangster face for the Miami City Ballet, with which he will perform during a one-night show Friday at the Ziff Ballet Opera House/Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Miami.

Piazza, who hit 427 career home runs with the Mets, Marlins, Dodgers, Athletics and Padres, is playing a hit man in *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. He will walk on stage and say roughly three lines in the ballet George Balanchine choreographed as part of the 1930s musical *On Your Toes*.

"You've got to sometimes have the courage to go out there and do something like this," said Piazza, who added that he already has received a few emails and messages on Twitter from friends busting his chops.

"If I have to take a few good-natured insults — I've taken a lot of abuse before. No question I've got big shoulders. The bottom line is to draw attention to the show, to the arts, the art of ballet and dancing in general. It's something I'm very excited about."

Piazza, who didn't know anything about Balanchine when he first stepped into the rehearsal studio April 16, won't be dancing or wearing a tutu. In fact, he might never get on a ballet stage again. But after a little arm-twisting from his wife and his 6-year-old daughter, Nicoletta Veronica — who is part of the ballet's junior program — Piazza said he

quickly got on board with the idea of using his sports star status to help draw eyes to ballet at least this once.

"I advocate the definite coolness of ballet and how it's definitely an athletic movement," Piazza said. "I've been to a couple shows at the Arsht Center. It's great. I've evolved in my life and my specific tastes in entertainment. When you're a kid, you don't think much about it, but when you get older you can't help but admire classic ballet and the dancers and the shows. For me as an athlete, I know how much goes on behind the scenes."

Attracting new audience members has been a priority at the Miami Beach dance company, which is embracing new collaborations after some financial restructuring and a change in its artistic director. Earlier this year, the company paired two ballerinas with Miami Heat basketball players LeBron James and Dwyane Wade for an ad campaign promoting downtown Miami's cultural scene. It also has taken out ads in *Sports Illustrated*.

Philip Neal, who is staging the production and coaching Piazza in his role, said he is thrilled athletes such as Piazza are highlighting the athleticism and discipline of dance, particularly for boys. Neal played Little League baseball and danced before becoming a performer with the New York City Ballet while Piazza played for the Mets.

"I haven't taught his daughter yet, but I certainly worked the angle of his wife and daughter to get him here," Neal said. "We want to make ballet fans out of sports fans, and I think the athleticism that is there is a natural fit. We always want to get people through the door, because once they sit and the curtain goes up, they're shocked at how athletic it is. They see the men lifting the ladies over their head, moving at the speed of light and jumping and turning. I think someone's preconception of ballet might be different once the curtain goes up. So hopefully a lot of people will come see Mike and they'll come to the ballet and be surprised at what they see."

Working with athletes as big as Piazza — he was 6-3, 200 pounds in his playing days — isn't something the dance company's costume department is used to. But on Tuesday, when Piazza came in for his first rehearsal and fitting, Neal already had them prepared. Piazza swung his arms and shrugged his shoulders to test his range of motion in the taupe houndstooth suit. It was obvious a little tailoring would be required, as well a bigger fedora.

As for his acting, Piazza did impress the dancers with his exaggerated Italian accent, walk and the way he smoked a cigar. This, of course, wasn't his first rodeo. He had a role in the movie *Two Weeks Notice* with Sandra Bullock, and also has been featured in about 20 commercials, including a few in Japan when he was a teammate of Hideo Nomo's with the Dodgers.

"He knows a lot about acting, which makes it a lot easier," said Kleber Rebello, who will play the part of a jealous Russian dancer who hires Piazza's character to kill a rival.

"He'll be bringing different people, maybe people who haven't watched ballet yet. It's definitely a good opportunity."

Piazza, who said he has lived in Miami Beach since 2001, is expecting his third child with wife and former *Playboy* model Alicia Rickter in July. It's going to be their first boy, he said.

"We've sunk roots here," said Piazza, who played at the University of Miami and Miami Dade College, which will enshrine him in its hall of fame in June. "This city is definitely a jewel in the United States."

So what is next for Piazza?

He was hoping the Baseball Hall of Fame. But he only received 57.8 percent of the votes needed, and it takes 75 percent to get in.

Although Jeff Pearlman's 2009 book on Roger Clemens — and others — has accused Piazza of being a performance-enhancing drug user, the former catcher refuted those claims in his own book, *Long Shot*, which came out in February. In the book, Piazza admits to using androstenedione, an over-the-counter supplement that helps increase testosterone levels and that also was taken by Mark McGwire before the substance was banned. But he denied that he ever took banned performance-enhancing drugs — particularly anabolic steroids and Human Growth Hormone.

Some major-league teams have reached out to Piazza about potential coaching opportunities, but he said he's simply not ready for it yet.

"I really enjoy teaching," Piazza said. "I'm not a huge mechanical guy, but I love to work on the mental aspect of hitting. I know hitting is very individual and very personal and I learned that from Ted Williams. But there are certain things I feel I can give mentally and I enjoy it. It's really cool watching them progress. I think there's a future there. I just don't think the time is right now."

Could he make time for *Dancing With The Stars*?

"I don't know," said Piazza, who already turned down an offer to be on the show once because he had made a previous commitment to coach Italy in the World Baseball Classic.

"Actually, that show is cool. I don't want to brag and say I couldn't do it."