

# Recreating the Sistine Chapel

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ROME

## With Vatican approval, a multimedia spectacle of Olympic proportions

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

The music swelled, heavenly clouds began to fade and impossibly bright rays of light began to cut through the theater.

And then it stopped.

The spectacle’s artistic director, Marco Balich, waited patiently. “What’s going on?” he asked his creative producer.

“Power outage,” responded the producer, Stefania Opipari. Later, she explained that it was the first time that all of the lasers, projectors and special effects of the multimedia production, “Universal Judgment: Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel,” had been turned on at the same time. “It was a minor problem,” she said. “We fixed it.”

The debut of “Universal Judgment” was just over a week away, but if Mr. Balich, who is also the show’s producer, was nervous, you’d never have known it.

He has a lot at stake in the production, which was set to open on Thursday. He has booked the capital’s former symphony hall for at least a year. If it’s successful, it would become Rome’s first permanent theatrical production along the lines of Broadway in New York or the West End in London.

The Vatican has approved the project, on the condition that it would respect the artistic, religious and spiritual values that the Sistine Chapel embodies. Mr. Balich has to live up to that promise.

The Vatican Museums, which house the Sistine Chapel, provided high-definition digital reproductions of the frescoes in the hall at a reduced rate because they acknowledged the educational value of the project. Experts from the museum consulted on historical and other questions. “This I liked, because it showed that they were serious,” said Barbara Jatta, the director of the Vatican Museums. At the same time, Mr. Balich had to create something that will enchant Romans (who, surrounded by beauty, are reluctant to pay for it), tourists, cardi-

nals and teenagers. He has a private investment of 9 million euros, or around \$11 million, and years of planning riding on it.

Mr. Balich also has to convince Italy’s traditionally skeptical art conservators that he’s not out to circumvent visits to the real chapel with a glitzy concoction that includes theater, ballet and many, many bells and whistles. “Italy has all these very conservative art critics, and they are against the idea of ‘spettacolarizzazione,’” he said, using an Italian expression for putting on a big show.

“They hate that word; I love that word,” Mr. Balich said. “When they say, ‘Oh but we don’t want to make a Disney kind of thing,’ I say, ‘But Disney was a genius — what’s wrong with that?’”

One of Italy’s most respected cultural critics, Tomaso Montanari, described the over-the-top effects as “visual Viagra,” wondering outright whether they were “more of a mirror of the present than a means to better understand the past.”

“It’s like all the buzz over virtual sex — but what’s wrong with the real thing?” said Mr. Montanari, who teaches art history at the University of Naples. “It’s based on the notion that Michelangelo no longer speaks to modern sensibilities.”

The Vatican followed the process step by step. While it did not interfere with the creative aspects of the production, Vatican officials kept tabs to make sure that the show’s content and references were historically accurate and did not stray too far from the righteous path.

“We have been very, very, very obedient and careful and precise, because that was our insurance policy. To have them on board was to be sure that everything will be exact and appropriate,” Mr. Balich said of the Vatican’s support during a break in the rehearsal. “Obviously this comes with a price,” he said conceding that if he’d had his way, he would have “probably added more special effects.”

The musical merger between the Vatican Museums, the keepers of one of the greatest artistic troves of humanity, and Mr. Balich, best known as the designer of over-the-top spectacles — among them the closing ceremony of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, both ceremonies for the Turin Games in 2006 and the 550th anniversary celebration of Kazakhstan — wasn’t an obvious match.

Pope Francis is known for his casual, avuncular style, but the Vatican is not accustomed to sharing top billing with

Sting — who wrote the main theme of the show — as they do on the playbill.

But Mr. Balich believes that his experience with the Olympics played in his favor. “The Vatican understood that our work is always celebrating values,” he said. “In the Olympics, you don’t go in with a cynical approach.”

Mr. Balich said he wanted “to put the grammar of the big Olympics at the service of the Sistine Chapel, which is one of the milestones of humanity.” The Vatican, he added, understood “that we were well intentioned.”

It took some time. Mr. Balich first began discussing his idea with the Vatican in 2015. He laughed when it was pointed out that it took Michelangelo four years to paint the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling, between 1508 and 1512, about the same time as it took to complete the project.

The Roman Catholic Church has a long history of embracing technological advancements, however. The Vatican was at the forefront of astronomical research for centuries. Pope Pius XI championed Guglielmo Marconi to establish Vatican Radio in 1931. Several popes were intrigued by photography in its nascent years, and Leo XIII was the first pope to be filmed giving a blessing in 1896.

Leo XIII “understood that through the camera, he was blessing the audience. A pope who was confined reached the world through the new medium,” said the Rev. Dario Edoardo Viganò, the priest responsible for the Vatican’s communications division, which approved Mr. Balich’s project.

With the “Universal Judgment” show, the Vatican is embracing a language that appeals to young generations, Father Viganò said.

The hourlong performance does not seek to evangelize, Mr. Balich said, adding, “The Vatican never suggested it should.” Instead, the production is more like a meditation on Michelangelo’s relationship with his creation, and on creation in general. “It’s about capturing the spirit between the artist and his masterpiece,” said Lulu Helbek, the co-director of the show.

“We can’t do anything bigger than Michelangelo; it’s like committing a sin to

suggest that," added Fotis Nikolaou, the show's choreographer, and another Olympics alumnus. "We're dialoguing with this masterpiece in the new forms of art, video, dance, theater. It's like saying thank you to a masterpiece like the Sistine Chapel."

As most sightseers to the real Sistine Chapel know, the visit isn't always edifying. The hall, though large, is almost always packed, and even though silence is mandatory it can be noisy experience. Ensuring that visitors have a positive experience there "is constantly on my

mind," said Ms. Jatta, the Vatican Museums director — and a problem that still has to be resolved.

Last week, Ms. Jatta saw a rehearsal of the "Universal Judgment" and gave it a thumbs up. "It's a delicate way to tell a beautiful story of faith, art and history," she said. "And it's a way of communicating the Sistine Chapel in a way that many generations can understand."

Asked whether she thought it could replace going to see the real thing, she blinked.

"No, sorry," she said, and smiled.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NADIA SHIRA COHEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from top: the character of Michelangelo floating while painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in a rehearsal for "Universal Judgment: Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel"; the characters of Michelangelo and Pope Julius II in the production; Marco Balich, the show's artistic director, has had to counter many critics.