



Sistine 2.0

WHO WOULD MESS WITH A MASTERPIECE LIKE THE SISTINE CHAPEL? SEASONED IMPRESARIO MARCO BALICH, THAT'S WHO. MALCOLM JACK MEETS THE MOST AUDACIOUS MAN IN ITALY

You know the Sistine Chapel, right? The famous one. The one inside the Pope's home, in Vatican City, that's 538 years old, visited by six million people annually and covered in sublime ceiling frescos painted by a roll call of artistic greats including Botticelli, Roselli and Michelangelo (the unparalleled visionary of the Italian Renaissance, not the hero in a half-shell).

Of course you know the Sistine Chapel. It's a unique wonder of the world. Which makes it surprising that one man's attempting to match, or even better, the original with a €9 million immersive audio-visual theatrical experience. From 15 March, audiences at the Auditorium

Conciliazione in Rome will be invited to witness *Universal Judgment: Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel*, featuring music by Sting.

It's an audacious project, no doubt, but artistic director Marco Balich has form when it comes to pant-soilingly high stakes, live entertainment spectacles. He's been behind several major opening ceremonies, including the Rio Olympics in 2016 (estimated global TV audience: 342 million), so taking the cutting edge of technology to one of the most sacred artworks in human history is all in a day's work.

Balich is a Venetian living and working in Milan. He sweeps into his office and shakes my hand reassuringly firmly, before settling at a desk surrounded by ornaments, such as a three-metre-

CHAPEL OF LOVE
Clockwise from above: inside the Auditorium Conciliazione, with an artist's impression of Balich's *Giudizio Universale* (*Universal Judgment*); the Galaxy and Dance of the Stars segment of the show; entrepreneurial show producer Marco Balich



wide, floor-to-ceiling, 18th-century Biblical art canvas and a sleek-looking luminous orange bicycle. “Everything that is beautiful attracts me,” he says later, suavely.

His English is perfect. It’s one of five languages he speaks fluently. “Soon six, if I learn Japanese,” he notes, coolly referring to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony which he’s presently bidding for like it’s no big deal. His passion for his work is intoxicating and he peppers our conversation with the words “beautiful” and “beauty” 17 times in total.

Universal Judgment will be Balich’s first long-running work in situ. A 60-minute meld of 270° wraparound Ultra HD 4K visuals on multiple IMAX cinema screens, original music and audio in 9.1 surround sound, featuring a cast of eight multiskilled live performers, Balich’s opus tells the whole story of Michelangelo’s masterpiece, >

“It’s respectful of religious people, but it’s entertainment and you learn”



PHOTO ALBERTO BERNASCONI



“It tells the whole story of the masterpiece. With music by Sting”

INSIDE JOB

Above: the projections, sound and lights will create an immersive experience; Below: Rome's Auditorium Conciliazione

from Pope Julius II's commission of the first Sistine frescos in 1508, through the realisation of *The Last Judgement* in 1541, to a reenactment of the melodramatic selection ritual of each new Pope. He's so excited about it he spends ages playing me fragments of top-secret, behind-the-scenes footage of the show. Together, we gawp at digital renderings of Renaissance-era Rome, monoliths made out of chicken wire shrouded in dry ice and acrobats dangling from trapezes. There's a slightly odd moment when we sit quietly, listening to a recording of Sting singing in Latin.

Why does the world need this show? “I have four children and every time we say, ‘Let's go to the museum’, they go ‘ugh’,” he says, rolling his eyes in a mock strop. To Balich, Michelangelo is “the Justin Bieber of sculpture”; Julius II is “like Trump”. His aim is to make a complex historical story feel easily accessible.

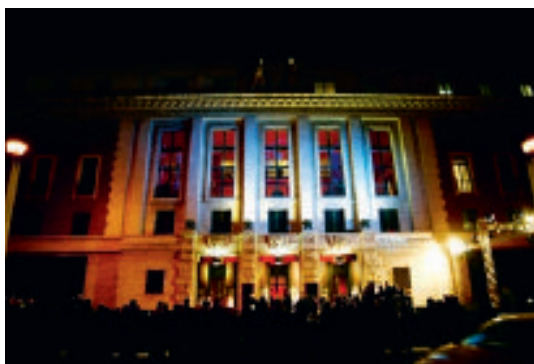
“This is not a religious show. It's a show that is respectful of religious people, but it's an

entertainment show and you learn,” he says. “When you go to see the real Sistine Chapel, you have three minutes, then you're pushed away, because thousands of people are waiting. Ten million people a year come to Rome, but they don't get to see the Vatican Museum.”

Balich reckons he's about to give the Italian capital a permanent theatrical experience that's as popular as the musicals of London's West End, the Berlin Opera or Paris's Moulin Rouge. It's ambitious, but maybe not beyond the abilities of a man whose other great visionary quest is to stage a show on another planet. “Mars fascinates me very much,” he says. “Probably 50 years from now easyJet will be the first low-cost carrier to Mars.”

Maybe high-tech, cashmere-clad Marco does have something in common with High Renaissance, paint-splattered Michelangelo, I think, as he shakes my hand again on my way out. They're both reaching for the heavens. 🙏

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