

## A big moment that comes after medals are won

ROME

Media firm to set tone for Rio de Janeiro Games during closing ceremony

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

As the world's best athletes compete for a spot on the podium at the Olympic Games in London, one Italian is focused on a 10-minute event that will take place once all the medal-giving is over and done with.

Marco Balich is the executive director of the ceremony to transfer the Olympic flag to the host of the next Summer Games, in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, during the closing ceremonies Sunday in London. The event will be a teaser of what is to come when Rio takes over.

Britain chose to project the quirky British sense of humor (and the benefits of the welfare state) during the opening ceremony. Mr. Balich said viewers should expect something completely different from him.

"My goal is tears and goose bumps. I work until that happens," Mr. Balich said during a recent interview in the stylish Rome office of Filmmaster Group, the advertising, events and TV holding organization in which he is a partner.

His aim, he said, was to overwhelm those watching in the stadium and on television with emotion.

Passion, after all, is a characteristic of Italians, he said.

"Others can be technical; my goal is emotion," he said.

Britain's opening ceremonies were produced by the film director Danny Boyle and dazzled and amused spectators with a mixture of technological pageantry and whimsy that captured a nation's transformation from its agricultural antecedents to its post-industrial, post-empire present, its bemused showiness a pointed contrast with the understated national character.

So what do you do when the host country already puts on one of the world's flashiest and largest spectacles during Carnival season each year?

"The world expects that it's going to be a gigantic Cariocas samba Carnival parade, but for Brazilians that is too banal," he said. (That said, his team in Britain was looking for volunteers with various British samba schools.) "I don't want to spoil Christmas, but I can say it will be more sophisticated, with the aim of getting people to better know Brazilian culture."



Marco Balich, who directed some of the pageantry at the Winter Olympics in 2002 and 2006, will do it again at the London Games.

About one billion spectators around the world watched the opening ceremonies July 27, according to the London Olympics organizing committee. Though trustworthy numbers for such events are hard to pin down, that is considerably more than for many other televised pageants that draw large audiences.

"Super Bowl halftime or Formula One races barely get a tenth of the Summer Olympics's global audience," said Kevin Alavy, managing director of Futures Sport & Entertainment, which conducts market research on sporting events. "The Olympics and the FIFA World Cup beat them by a large margin, so they are a fantastic opportunity to showcase the host country."

For people in his line of work, winning the bid to create an Olympic spectacle is "like winning the Pulitzer," Mr. Balich said. "They are the most expensive, complex, relevant, most-watched show in the world."

There are few companies whose reputations — based on track record — allow them to vie for mega-events, and Filmmaster Events, part of the group, got its

badges crafting the ceremonies for the Mexican bicentennial in 2009 and, more recently, the UEFA Euro 2012 European soccer championship held in Poland and Ukraine this summer.

In that 12-minute opening show, the Hungarian classical pianist Adam Gorygy played a Chopin etude while hundreds of dancing volunteers formed a musical score. The agronomist in charge of the soccer turf "was in tears

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— the unhappiest man in the world," Mr. Balich recalled.

For three years he staged the pre-Lenten carnival in Venice, which he said was criticized locally. "No one can be a hero on their own turf, especially in Italy," he said cheerfully. Some locals complained that residents had not been involved enough in the event, which was seen as geared too heavily toward becoming a tourist draw.

Events planning now accounts for

about half of Filmmaster Group's annual revenue, which was €70 million, or \$87 million, in 2011. Mr. Balich, who is from Venice, is president of Filmmaster Events and vice president of Cerimonias Cariocas 2016, the consortium that will do live events in Rio, like the opening and closing ceremonies.

Before joining Filmmaster, Mr. Balich worked as a promoter of rock music and producer of music videos and in television — which he abandoned because it was "too cynical" he said — after getting a law degree that is gathering dust.

Ten years ago, he did the handover ceremony at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, officially joining the big leagues. But it was the Turin Games in 2006 that cemented his reputation, a glittering ceremony framed within the creaking image of a city known as the Detroit of Italy. He said it took him a year to persuade the tenor Luciano Pavarotti to sing his signature aria from Turandot, "Nessun Dorma," at the Games.

The event was the last public performance by Pavarotti, who died in 2007. The Chilean author Isabel Allende, one

of eight women who carried the flag during the Turin ceremonies, cited the moment as central to her life and unforgettable.

Bryn Walters, a choreographer who has worked frequently with Mr. Balich, said, "Marco has a specific clarity in how he feels things should go."

Mr. Walters, whose projects with Mr. Balich included Euro 2012, added, "He has a healthy mix of creating a stamp and control over things, while giving people the feeling that they have something valuable to give to the project. He loves the medium and pushing boundaries."

Mr. Balich did not think of competing for the London Olympics, because pageantry on this scale has long been the domain of Anglo-Saxon cultures, he said. "They don't need a foreigner to tell them what to do," he said. The closest equivalent on the Continent, in his mind, is the Vatican, and he spoke with admiration of the 2005 funeral of Pope John Paul II.

"The choreography was perfect. The authorities arranged the coffin in the center, and all the bishops and cardinals and priests in their colors, with the wind blowing. It was perfect, amazing how it was choreographed," he said. "Mind you, they've been perfecting this for 2,000 years."

Mr. Balich looks to other large-scale events for inspiration, citing the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, the half-time show at the Super Bowl and the spectacular Arirang mass games in North Korea. He compares the work that goes into creating his ceremonies with making a feature film.

"The big difference is that you only get one take," he said, adding that that is why so few companies can compete at the top level. "People hire you because they want reassurance."

The flag handover, of which he is executive producer, will be a taste of what is to come in Rio.

"We're aiming to express the joy, the spirit and the essence of the next Games in 10 minutes," though it will not be easy, he said. In his experience, flag handovers are always criticized as being banal.

"Brazil wants to show a new country, beyond the beaches and the samba," he said, noting that the country's gross domestic product had caught up with those of all European countries except Germany and France.

But for him, it comes back to the tears and goose bumps. "It's about glorifying" the essence of a nation "in an outstanding way," Mr. Balich said. "If you inspire 15-year-olds, then you've inspired their parents and grandparents. You can't be cynical. There's no shortcut to emotion."