

Dir. Resp.: James Harding

Sistine Chapel will be rejuvenated by extravaganza of special effects

Vatican

Phillip Willan Rome

An impresario known for his opening ceremonies at Olympic Games is to bring to life the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in the hope of inspiring visitors with the story of their creation.

The immersive, surround-sound theatrical extravaganza opens in March in an auditorium less than a mile from the Vatican City, which attracts more than six million visitors a year.

The show called *The Last Judgement: Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel* has been produced by Marco Balich, who devised the opening shows of the Rio, Sochi and Turin summer and winter games.

Mr Balich, who was given access to the Sistine Chapel and expert advice from the Vatican museums, hopes to combine the history of Cappella Magna, as the chapel was originally known, with modern special effects.

Actors will perform on a stage surrounded by images of the chapel projected on to the walls and ceiling of the auditorium of Santa Cecilia. The original soundtrack is the work of Sting and is inspired by medieval sacred music.

Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the chapel's ceiling in 1508. His depiction of God giving life to man is seen as a high point of the Renaissance that changed the course of western art.

Apart from its artistic significance, the Sistine Chapel is of huge importance in Vatican politics as the site of the papal conclave where cardinals gather to elect a pope. After intense lobbying

cardinals proceed into the chapel to register their vote. Once the vote is completed smoke emitted from a chimney lets the crowd in St Peter's Square know whether a decision has been reached. The Pope also uses the chapel once a year for a number of baptisms.

Mr Balich said: "We [Italians] grew up with absolute privilege in terms of taste and art, so I decided to showcase the excellence of the Sistine Chapel. Millions of people visit it badly, in haste. Here they will be enveloped by the paintings, admitted to the inaccessible conclave [that elects the Pope]."

Vatican art experts and video game makers have combined to produce a drone's-eye view of Rome as it was when Julius II commissioned Michelangelo's work. "That's what you get when you bring together the best *Assassin's Creed*-type video game developers with the experts of the Vatican library," Mr Balich said, adding that the audience's experience could become spiritual "like witnessing an aurora borealis".

Mr Balich has been granted permission to bring the figures in Michelangelo's frescoes to life through video animation.

The project was authorised by Antonio Paolucci, a former director of the Vatican Museums, but has been taken on by his successor, Barbara Jatta.

Professor Jatta said that it was an example of the Vatican's attempt to modernise and cited Leo XIII's agreement to include photography in a 19th-century allegory he commissioned of "religion overseeing the arts", and Pius XI's early adoption of radio, as examples of keeping up to date.