

VISUAL ART

Performance review: Universal Judgment — Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel at the Auditorium Conciliazione, Rome

The frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's Vatican masterpiece, have come to life in a high-tech dramatisation

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The dramatisation of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel paintings uses projections, electronic music and dry ice

Marco Balich. As the director of the Winter Olympic Games closing ceremonies in Turin in 2006 and Sochi in 2014, and the opening ceremony of the Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, the Italian has choreographed casts of thousands as fireworks explode, orchestras hit high notes and the world watches, knowing that one mistake can mean ridicule for a nation.

But the soft-spoken Venetian faced an even tougher challenge last week as priests, bishops and cardinals crowded into a darkened theatre near the Vatican to judge his boldest show to date: a dramatisation of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel, with cutting-edge projections, electronic music, lasers and dry ice.

The prelates packing in for a preview of *Universal Judgment* wanted to see if the frescoes, considered a cornerstone of western and sacred art, were safe in the hands of Balich and a crew of artists more accustomed to working with rock stars.

They might have been perturbed by Balich's description of the frescoes as "a humungous statement of everything", or his unusual view of Michelangelo, who was 33 in 1508, when he was commissioned to paint the iconic image of God reaching out to give Adam life. "After seeing seven *Spider-Man* films, seven *Batmans* and 11 *Avengers*, this is a chance to use all my Olympic experience to prove Michelangelo was a superhero," he said.

The Vatican cautiously backed him, supplying high-definition images of the paintings in the chapel to project across the stage, the ceiling and the walls of the theatre as dancers enact episodes in the famed frescoes and actors tell their story. Balich says that he was determined "to celebrate Italian art" and has invested €9 million in the year-long run, "instead of buying yachts and fancy cars".

The hour-long show kicks off as Pope Julius II hands Michelangelo the Sistine Chapel job, ignoring his protests that he is a sculptor, not a painter. The show projects images from Michelangelo's ceiling panels, taking in the creation of the universe and the giving of life to Adam and Eve, their ousting from the Garden of Eden and the Flood. The audience is surrounded by a mix of close-ups of Michelangelo's determined-looking God and wraparound projections of galaxies, fire and breaking waves.

“Hammering home the story of creation was my favourite bit,” says Luke Halls, Balich’s British projectionist, who has conjured up images for U2 concerts, the Royal Opera House and Elton John’s shows at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. The effect is impressive, not least because it brings the audience up close to figures and faces one can normally only glimpse by squinting 60ft up at the ceiling during a visit to the chapel, where distractions include jostling mobs of tourists and zealous guards hissing at visitors to be quiet.

Going face to face with Michelangelo’s cast of characters is what the show is all about, says Barbara Jatta, the director of the Vatican museums. “Every January we start cleaning the frescoes from 7pm to midnight to get rid of the dust of a whole year, and this show is a way to see what we see,” she says.



Lulu Helbek, the co-director of Universal Judgment, grew up close to the Vatican

Jatta says that she was alarmed when Balich announced plans to animate the projected figures, making iconic, sacred images move slightly as they were projected. “I was a little anxious, I wouldn’t have done it, but it’s a show and there was nothing inappropriate,” she says.

“They were very concerned,” says Halls. “But we weren’t about to make Adam and Eve walk out of a scene — we showed the Vatican what we had in mind and they were fine.”

Balich admits that he decided against suggesting a few Olympics-style showstoppers. “There are a few more special effects I would have indulged in,” he says, smiling. What he did squeeze in at the start of the show is a soaring, CGI bird’s-eye view of Rome in 1508, which takes the audience from the Colosseum to St Peter’s, swooping down cobbled streets and up over the Tiber. Put together by video-game makers who teamed He is already making plans for similar shows across Italy, starting with a night-time spectacle at Pompeii depicting the city’s last night before it was buried by volcanic ash in AD79.

Balich’s contagious enthusiasm was felt by John Metcalfe, the British composer and arranger who wrote the electronic score. “The music had to help to describe the unknowable, the cosmos, the universe, the big questions Michelangelo was asking as he climbed his ladder,” says Metcalfe, who started life in the Manchester post-punk band Durutti Column before handling string arrangements for Morrissey, Coldplay, Blur and the like. The show reaches its climax as Michelangelo returns to the chapel 25 years after painting the ceiling, when he is commissioned by Pope Clement VII to add the Day of Judgment on the east wall behind the altar, despite the artist’s protests that he is now too old for the job.

As the show's theme tune kicks in, written and sung by Sting, the projections bring the audience up close to the wild-eyed faces of Michelangelo's nudes, some of whom are being shepherded down to hell, while others soar towards Heaven as Jesus directs the traffic. Getting so close to the figures gives a glimpse of the strategic bits of fabric later painted to cover the genitalia of Michelangelo's muscular and naked men, following orders from Vatican conservatives.

After growing up close to the Vatican, Balich's co-director Lulu Helbek says that she has been entranced by the paintings since she visited as a child. "When you walk into the chapel you feel and hear the voices of the characters," she says. "As a kid I could hear them talking around me. Michelangelo can scream in total silence, he can give gravity to bodies that are still. The paintings are so astonishing and strong you don't need to add an interpretation, you just need to add lighting, music and some spirit, and then they talk to you."

"Too much glitz? No — it gets you into Michelangelo's soul," says one.

"It brought the word of God even closer," says another.

Jatta also seems satisfied. "We don't allow guides into the chapel with the six million visitors we get a year, so this show can be a way to explain it," she says,.

"It is a way to see the chapel in a more modern way," she adds.

"But it is a show. It cannot be compared to the original."

***Universal Judgment: Michelangelo and the Secrets of the Sistine Chapel* is booking at the Auditorium Conciliazione, Rome, to May 31; giudiziouniversale.com**