

GENIUS: ARETHA



Costume designer Jennifer Bryan, front left, looks over an outfit with her team on the set of National Geographic's "Genius: Aretha." RICHARD DUCREE/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Not a stitch out of place for decades

Costumes span eras, and all must be perfect

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Special to USA TODAY

The magic mirror is mounted on a wall in the cavernous space. It's narrow, framed in plastic — like the sort that's hung inside a closet for that final check before heading out the door.

Stop in front of it, though, and somehow your waist nips in, your hips slim. You even seem to stand a little taller. Just a fleeting reflection is sure to make people feel a bit better about their appearance, which is costume designer Jennifer Bryan's intent.

"That's the skinny mirror," Bryan said. "They're cheap mirrors."

Bryan mixes the cheap with the expensive. The massive wardrobe she assembled for "Genius: Aretha" ranged

from \$7 Goodwill dresses to vintage beaded gowns. There were episodes where she dressed 500 extras.

"Some 4,000 costumes passed through my hands that I had to put together, even if you don't see them," Bryan said.

Even though the audience might not see each outfit, Bryan insisted that all costumes — even those for extras deep in the background — be perfect.

A photographer on set captured the

essence of the costume designer at work. "There's a photo of me adjusting a background lady's hat," she explained. "And you will never see it. It was the netting in front of the church hat, and I'm helping her adjust the netting, so it falls just right over the eye line. You can see the intensity of me doing it."

Bryan pays attention to every detail. She approaches a rack of recent arrivals and, with a practiced flick of the wrist, slides dresses on hangers.