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# Without them, it's not 'All the Way'

The costume team pulls off a stunning feat for the play about LBJ


**STAGE**  
It's five minutes from the end of "All the Way," and a very specific, highly choreographed version of hell is breaking loose backstage.

Actors Bowman Wright, Adrienne Nelson and Shannon Dorsey, all covered in paper streamers from the previous scene, come out of one of the four exits at Arena Stage's Fichandler theater and into the arms of three dressers. Wright, as Martin Luther King Jr., drops the one-piece morning suit his character wears to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, revealing his next costume underneath; Nelson, who portrays multiple characters, whips from Muriel Humphrey's dress into Alabama first lady Lurleen Wallace's; Dorsey, as Coretta



JASON HORNICK PHOTOS (FOR EXPRESS)

Top: Lashawn Melton puts a wig on Adrienne Nelson backstage during "All the Way" while Alina Gerall preps another wig. Above: Nelson checks the notebook in which she keeps track of all her changes, entrances and exits.



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Scott King, stands as her gown is unzipped by one dresser and another tosses on a housecoat that, thanks to hidden magnets, practically snaps itself closed. Dorsey then shouts her next line into the theater, a dresser wipes off her lipstick, and then all three actors briskly head back onstage. Three actors, three changes, less than a minute.

"All the Way," the Tony-winning drama about President Lyndon Johnson's efforts to get the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, uses 17 actors to play more than 60 characters, which means a lot of costume pieces — 604, to be exact, all watched over by wardrobe supervisor Alice Hawfield.

Before each show, Hawfield and the four other women who handle the costumes, hair and makeup, put pocket squares into jackets, lay out jewelry and tie a closet's worth of ties on their own necks before hanging them up.

Everything down to the socks and earrings is meticulously planned in Hawfield's 23-page spreadsheet. Now, two weeks into the show's run (which concludes on May 8), she doesn't need to consult it; this pre-flight checklist is in her head as she makes sure pants are placed on



Left: Shannon Dorsey dresses as Coretta Scott King with the help of Gerri Ford. Right: Alina Gerall is ready to assist Dorsey in the actor's fastest change.



Props and costume pieces, laid out and labeled with actors' names, await their big moment backstage.

the floor so an actor can simply step in and pull, shoes are on the correct side and hats are facing forward. Then it's showtime.

The voice of LBJ, who's played by actor Jack Willis, echoes into the backstage hush as Hawfield's crew moves through its own, hidden version of the show. There's some time for brief, quiet chats, but what's heard most are the whispered "thank yous" from the actors after they've completed a change and are headed back to the stage.

During Act 1, Hawfield covers nearly a mile of ground

backstage as she gathers cast-off costumes — some of which she moves to a different entrance, as they'll be worn again later — helps actors with changes and makes a note of any problem that arises (at this particular night's show, a troublesome suit button is as tricky as things get).

Meanwhile, actors stride by, morphing from one character to another: At one point, Nelson transforms from Johnson's secretary into Wallace. You can see the shift in the pace of her walk and the position of her shoulders in the 25 steps she takes from

the ladies' dressing room to the stage.

After the controlled chaos of that final change, the crew picks up all the leftover streamers — they hate those streamers, as they get tangled in wigs, costumes and body parts — and gathers up all the clothing that's left behind. As the audience applauds, Hawfield heads downstairs; her show isn't over until the laundry is done. KRISTEN PAGE-KIRBY (EXPRESS)

Arena Stage, 1101 Sixth St. SW; through May 8, \$55-\$110.

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