

'Secrets of New York' Now Given Away Across the Nation

By JILL GARDINER
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Kelly Choi has just put on her trademark black, vinyl trench coat. She is inside the towering Civil War monument on 89th Street and Riverside Drive and a television crew is setting up a shot of her staring up in wonder at the top of the monument's dome. A group of boys from a nearby yeshiva school is huddled in the doorway, trying to get a glimpse of what's going on.

Ms. Choi has become the face of the city's most critically acclaimed television program, "Secrets of New York," which last month took home more "New York Emmy" awards than any other program in the area.

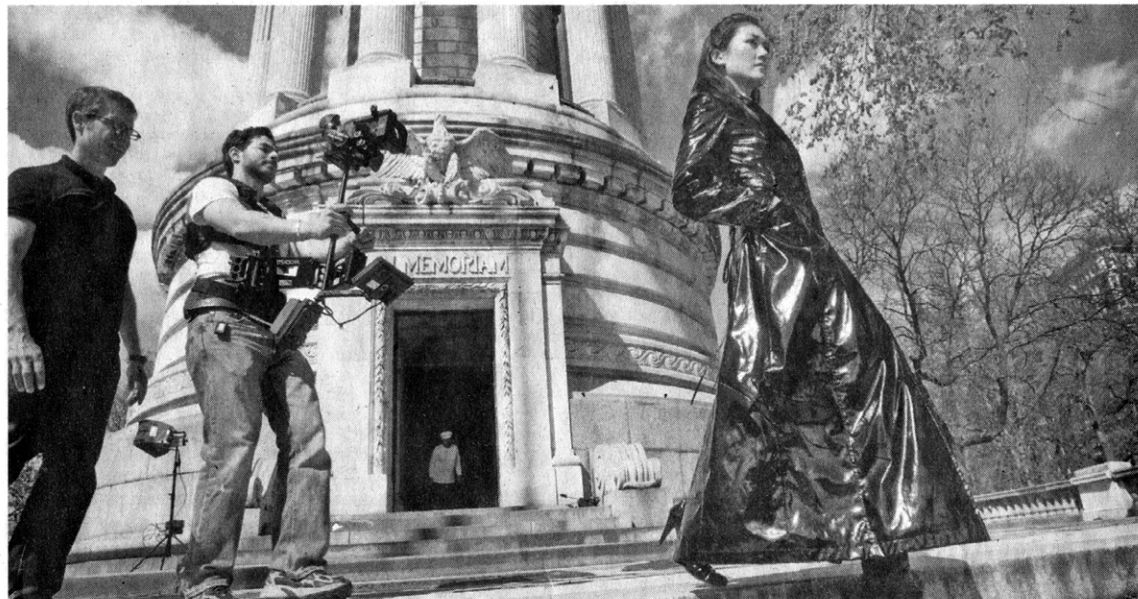
The show — which airs on NYC TV, the hip municipal cable television station the Bloomberg administration launched nearly four years ago — takes viewers on tours of the city's infrastructure and explains the untold stories behind New York's sometimes tony, sometimes gritty exterior.

This season, Ms. Choi, who hosts the show dressed in "Matrix"-like attire, and the crew have already traveled hundreds of feet below ground to a water tunnel for an episode on the city's deepest parts; visited the Execution Rocks, where the British are said to have left Americans to drown during the Revolutionary War, and shot scenes at the top of the George Washington Bridge.

"I play this character, this kind of spy, that goes to places that the typical New Yorker could never find themselves in," Ms. Choi said. "The things that I get to tell people are things that even somebody who was born here and who's lived in New York all their lives wouldn't necessarily know."

The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is an example of the unfettered access the show receives, particularly on city property. One of the show's producers, Harry Hunkele, had the city's Parks Department track down a key to the rarely opened structure.

"I've always wondered what the inside of this looked like and I bet a lot of people in New York would like to know," Mr. Hunkele said. "We can put it on video, wrap a



KONRAD FIEDLER

MYSTERY TOUR The crew of NYC TV's "Secrets of New York" films a scene for an upcoming episode at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Riverside Park. Producer Harry Hunkele and a cameraman, Elliot Stern, follow the show's host, Kelly Choi, dressed in her signature black trench coat.

show around it, and let people know that this is part of their history."

For the past few months several of NYC TV's top programs have been airing on WNBC as part of a first-of-its-kind deal that gives the city access to more viewers. "Secrets" has been airing alongside daytime megastars such as Martha Stewart and Ellen DeGeneres. It is the only one of the shows that's been picked up nationally. PBS started airing it in the fall in markets from Los Angeles to Paducah, Ky., and has already requested more episodes.

While the other NYC TV shows, such as "99.99" and "Cool in Your Code" navigate New York on a shoestring budget and swing through restaurants and boutiques at warp speed, "Secrets" has emerged as the station's crown jewel.

"We were always kind of a spunky, scrappy, interesting hip kind of local channel, but one thing I felt that the network strategically needed was a big hit to be the an-

chor," the station's general manager, Arick Wierson, said late last month during a drive up the West Side Highway en route to the monument. "That was my vision with 'Secrets.'"

In municipal television terms, NYC TV has blown past all previous ratings benchmarks. "Secrets" has garnered strong market share numbers in unexpected places such as Salt Lake City and Albuquerque (although in some places it shows in the middle of the night or other off-peak hours).

Mr. Wierson, a former investment banker who was named general manager of the station after working for Mayor Bloomberg's 2001 campaign, said the station is getting people from places such as Utah to think more about New York. That New York boosterism is exactly what Mr. Bloomberg wants. In August, the mayor said the PBS deal would get millions of potential New York tourists thinking about the city.

"Secrets" costs about \$35,000 an episode to produce — a cost the city

says is four to 10 times less than other national programs. While the show does not currently draw down revenue, station officials are in discussions with several potential underwriters to sponsor it.

Mr. Wierson said the show is also ripe for product placement. That means Ms. Choi could soon be darting between locations in a Pontiac Grand Am or using a T-Mobile handheld computer instead of the nondescript device she uses now on the show to find out where her next "secret" destination is.

Ms. Choi, a former model and a Columbia University journalism school graduate who has worked in television and print reporting, is an off-camera ham who likes to joke and flirt with the crew and with on-lookers. Between takes at the monument, Ms. Choi, a self-described foodie who also hosts the station's "Eat Out NY," fanned her coat to disclose black gym shorts and a T-shirt underneath. She jokes that the coat is like a "sausage casing" when it gets hot.

Her spiky high-heeled boots,

cinched black coat, and regularly rotating jewelry are so carefully watched by fans that the producers had a code from "The Matrix" scanned onto one of her chokers.

Some critics have questioned why the city is in the business of producing fast-paced, nontraditional programming that has little to do with government. City Council Member Gale Brewer said she had no problem with "Secrets," but that if the city is going to invest in the station's other flashier shows, it should improve its other station's coverage of public hearings. Station officials say there will always be critics, but that NYC TV is drawing in viewers for the first time in municipal history.

The director of production at the station, William Fitzgerald, said that when an NYC TV show features a New York business, the owner almost always calls to report a spike in sales.

"At the end of the day, the public is choosing to watch," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "That proves we are doing something right."