

Written Testimony in Opposition to H.B. No. 249

Ohio House Judiciary Committee, 136th General Assembly

To the Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Jonathan Miller, also known as Envy Mwah. I am an Ohio native, a performer, and someone who has made my life and my home in this state. I write today in strong opposition to H.B. No. 249.

I want to begin by saying that I love Ohio. I was born here, raised here, and shaped by the people and communities that make this state what it is. Ohio taught me the value of hard work, creativity, and showing up for one another, even when we do not always agree. That is why this bill concerns me so deeply.

H.B. 249 proposes to criminalize performers who express a gender identity that differs from their biological sex, unless they appear only in narrowly defined adult venues. At its core, this bill does not regulate harmful conduct. It regulates visibility. It tells certain artists and certain people that who they are and how they express themselves does not belong in public life.

I know this not as an abstract policy debate, but as lived experience.

Last year, I found myself at the center of a public controversy in Lancaster, Ohio. After a family friendly Pride event that included drag performances, conservative groups demanded that drag be banned from public spaces altogether. My image and my work were used as examples of what they claimed was obscene and dangerous, even though the event was attended by families, monitored by law enforcement, and conducted openly in the town square.

Videos were shared without context. Accusations spread quickly. It was painful to watch an art form I love, and people like me, be framed as a threat simply for existing in public.

What mattered most, though, is what happened next.

Lancaster's city law director reviewed the footage. Police officers who were present reviewed what occurred. Career prosecutors from different political perspectives reviewed the evidence. All of them came to the same conclusion. No laws were broken. No obscenity occurred. No criminal behavior took place. They affirmed what the Constitution already guarantees, that drag, like dance or theater, is protected expression. Some people may not enjoy it. Some may find it uncomfortable. But there is a clear and critical difference between personal discomfort and illegality.

That moment stayed with me, because it showed what happens when the law is applied carefully, fairly, and without fear.

H.B. 249 would undo that clarity. It would turn disagreement into criminal suspicion. It would replace established constitutional protections with vague language that invites confusion and selective enforcement. It would place artists, venue owners, and transgender Ohioans in constant uncertainty about whether simply showing up to work, or to perform, could result in punishment.

This bill would not only impact drag performers. Its language is broad enough to affect theater productions with cross gender casting, dancers who challenge traditional costuming norms, and transgender people simply existing in public artistic spaces. In practice, it tells an entire group of Ohioans that their participation in culture must be hidden away.

There are real economic consequences to this as well. Performers would lose work. Small businesses would lose events that bring people together. Communities would lose moments of joy and expression that help them feel alive and connected. And all of this would happen without any evidence that our existing laws are failing to protect anyone.

But beyond the legal and economic arguments, there is a deeper question.

What kind of Ohio do we want to be?

Do we want to be a state that governs based on fear and discomfort, or one that trusts its people and its Constitution? Do we want to tell some Ohioans that they are welcome only if they make themselves smaller, quieter, or invisible?

My experience in Lancaster showed me that Ohio is capable of better. When faced with pressure, local officials upheld the law and protected free expression. They recognized that art is not a crime, and that self expression does not become dangerous simply because it challenges someone else's comfort.

I am asking this Committee to do the same.

Please reject H.B. 249. Choose a path that respects constitutional freedoms, protects artistic expression, and allows every Ohioan to participate fully in public life, regardless of who they are.

Respectfully submitted,
Jonathan Miller
(Envy Mwah)