

STATEMENT OF MELODY WOJNO IN OPPOSITION TO OHIO HOUSE BILL 249

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Melody Wojno, and I am an Ohio resident, a transgender woman, and a drag performer known as Maelstrom West. I am here to respectfully urge you to oppose House Bill 249.

Like many people across this state, I simply want to live my life safely and authentically in my community. Laws like HB 249 send a message that people like me: people whose gender expression does not match what others expect, are inherently inappropriate or dangerous in public spaces. That message is deeply harmful, and it does not reflect the reality of who we are at our core.

This bill creates broad and vague definitions around “adult cabaret performances” and gender expression. As written, it risks labeling ordinary forms of expression such as performing, hosting community events, or even existing visibly as a gender-nonconforming person as something inherently sexual or inappropriate. That not only stigmatizes LGBTQ+ people but also creates legal uncertainty that could halt artistic expression, community gatherings, and public life.

Drag and gender-nonconforming performance are forms of art, storytelling, and culture. They have existed for centuries across many traditions. They are not inherently obscene, and they are not a threat to children or families. In fact, many of these events are joyful, creative spaces that bring communities together.

More importantly, bills like this affect real people. They contribute to an environment where transgender and gender-nonconforming Ohioans feel increasingly unsafe, unwelcome, and targeted by law. When legislation singles out a marginalized group in this way, it reinforces stigma and misunderstanding rather than addressing real problems facing our state.

Drag is not a new form of expression. It has been enjoyed by audiences for centuries. From the stages of Shakespeare, where men routinely performed women’s roles, to modern cultural touchstones like RuPaul’s Drag Race. Drag has long been a recognized and celebrated form of theatrical and artistic expression.

Bills like this do not simply regulate something new or unfamiliar. They restrict an art form that has been part of our shared cultural history for generations. The same tradition that allows performances at venues like the Ohio Theatre, where Ohio’s own Nina West played Edna Turnblad in Hairspray, is the tradition this bill now places under suspicion.

At the same time, these performances also take place in smaller community venues and LGBTQ+ safe spaces across our state, such as District West. These spaces provide community, belonging, and creative expression for many Ohioans including myself.

House Bill 249 risks limiting where this longstanding art can exist and who can safely participate in it. Art should bring communities together, not be singled out for restriction because of who performs it or how gender is expressed.

I ask this committee to consider the real human impact of this legislation. People like me are your neighbors, coworkers, family members, friends and constituents. We are active members of our

communities. We deserve the same dignity, freedom of expression, and protection under the law as anyone else.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask the committee to reject House Bill 249.

Thank you for your time and consideration.