



**House Judiciary Committee
House Bill 693 - Opposition Testimony
Josh Meek, Statewide Advocacy Manager
March 18, 2026**

Good morning Chairman Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg and members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is Josh Meek and I am the Statewide Advocacy Manager for Equality Ohio, a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to advancing lived and legal equality for LGBTQ+ Ohioans. Today, I am here testifying in opposition to [House Bill 249](#), also known as the Drag Ban.

Cross-gender performance is not a modern invention. In the time of William Shakespeare, women were legally barred from performing on stage, so every female character — Juliet, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth — was portrayed by a male actor in women’s clothing. These performances were licensed by the Crown and staged before royalty. For over 400 years, this tradition has been part of Anglo-American theatre. Criminalizing drag today would not be a rejection of some radical new social development — but a rejection of our own cultural and legal history.

That tradition did not end in Shakespearean England. Americans have long embraced gender-nonconforming performance in mainstream entertainment. From films like *Some Like It Hot* and *Tootsie* to family favorites like *Mrs. Doubtfire* and Broadway productions like *Hairspray*, audiences have understood this as art, comedy, storytelling, and expression. These performances were not treated as criminal conduct — they were treated as culture.

And that is where the First Amendment matters. The Constitution does not allow the government to prohibit expression simply because some people dislike it or find it uncomfortable. In fact, the First Amendment exists precisely to protect expression that is unpopular. The United States Supreme Court reaffirmed that principle in cases like [Snyder v. Phelps](#), holding that even deeply offensive speech by Westboro Baptist Church followers who held signs stating “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” is protected. If our



Constitution protects speech that most Ohioans strongly oppose, it certainly protects artistic performance that others simply find unconventional.

Beyond the constitutional concerns, HB 249 creates serious practical problems. The bill applies anywhere minors “may be present.” It does not clearly distinguish between adult-oriented venues and child-focused spaces. It does not include a parental consent provision. And it uses vague language that could subject performers and venues to arrest based on subjective judgments about what is “harmful” and to whom, what is “obscene,” and what “appeals to a prurient interest.” When new criminal laws are vague, people don’t just carry on with what they were doing and hope that if they’re convicted they’ll be freed on appeal — they simply stop engaging in lawful expression out of fear. That chilling effect is real.

Importantly, this bill does not close a loophole. Performances that are “obscene” or “harmful to juveniles” are already illegal under Ohio law, and this bill doesn’t add any new protections for children beyond what Ohio’s longstanding [disseminating matter harmful to juveniles statute](#) already provides. What it does is single out a category of performers based in part on gender presentation and create a new pathway for arrest, prosecution, and public pressure — even in cases where a conviction would ultimately fail. In some jurisdictions, enforcement would likely be aggressive. In others, it would not. That patchwork creates uncertainty for performers, venues, and audience members alike.

Finally, this legislation removes decisions from the people best positioned to make them: parents. In Ohio today, parents can decide whether their child attends an R-rated movie, a Broadway show, or a concert with mature themes. HB 249 contains no meaningful mechanism for parental discretion. It substitutes a one-size-fits-all criminal prohibition for individual judgment.

Members of the Committee, this debate should not be about taste or discomfort. It should be about whether we are comfortable expanding criminal law into the realm of artistic expression when existing obscenity laws already protect minors. It should be



about whether we want police officers and prosecutors deciding what counts as acceptable theater, comedy, or costume. And it should be about whether Ohio will remain a state that protects freedom of expression — even when that expression is different or unfamiliar.

For those reasons, I respectfully urge you to oppose House Bill 249 and will accept any questions at this time.