

## The War on Drag

Jessica Sconfienza

A logical mind will note that without question, there is a vast difference between drag performance and gun violence. This fact is indisputable. While both the freedom of expression and the right to bear arms are embedded in the fabric of our country's identity, Republicans in at least sixteen states including West Virginia, Minnesota, Idaho, and Texas have drafted, introduced, and (in some cases) signed into action bills that will ban and/or criminalize drag performances (Rogers). Most recently, Tennessee has moved forward with their efforts by signing a bill into action that would criminalize drag if it is done in a place where a minor may see it. The performer could be fined or worse, jailed, for simply doing their job in any place that is not "underground". What exactly is so dangerous about people finding self expression and empowerment through costuming and theatrical performance? The answer to this question is simple in the eyes of these Republican lawmakers: we must regulate, ban and even criminalize these sorts of performances in the interest of not only the public but also in the interest of our children. In reference to Boise's Pride Festival that would have allowed children to participate in a drag-style lip sync performance, Blaine Conzatti, the man who runs the Idaho Family Policy Center puts it this way: "I think, to many families throughout the state that in our public parks, this type of, you know, deviant sexual behavior is being peddled to our kids. And through that, our kids are being sexualized" ("Why Lawmakers"). What we must realize however is that our children are not being sexualized by drag queens but they are however facing very real threats - gun violence, poverty, human trafficking - everyday that are being pushed aside while lawmakers focus on the War on Drag.

In order to understand the broader scope of the issue, it is crucial to have an understanding of the history of drag performance. In the theatre, drag and cross dressing has been traced all the way back to the Ancient Greeks when women were not allowed to perform in plays at the time. Along the way, countless cultures, including Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish, utilized men in playing female roles. This kind of drag survived all the way through the Elizabethan era of theatre in England, most recognizably in Shakespearian plays. Then in the 1800s drag performance made its way into the Vaudeville scene which was popular entertainment in the United States. It wasn't until the early 1900s that drag was tied more concretely to the queer community. Outside of performance, it was not uncommon throughout history for women to dress as men in order to do things that they couldn't in female dress like vote or work in certain fields. Today, drag performance is found in numerous places including comedy clubs, Pride parades, on theatrical stages, in libraries, and on television. Whether free or with admission granted by a purchased ticket, drag performances can be enjoyed by anyone who is willing to consume that media. A quote from MasterClass on the current nature of drag reads:

Drag is a gender-bending art form in which a person dresses in clothing and makeup meant to exaggerate a specific gender identity, usually of the opposite sex. While drag's main purpose has been for drag performance and entertainment, it is also used as self-expression and a celebration of LGBTQ+ pride. A typical drag show will include lip-syncing or dance, and performers often have elaborate clothing, hair, and makeup ("What Is Drag").

As a member of the queer community and frequent consumer of drag performance and art in general, I must add that any drag performance that I have seen has always been voluntary. It is a ridiculous notion that Republican lawmakers have fed to an unknowing public that drag shows

are something that can be forced on someone, that a person or a child could be made to watch something that they are not consenting to. Further, I have always been well informed on the content of the show and the details are always readily available. Whether it be lighthearted comedy, expressions of sexuality, or a political statement, I know what to expect and I have never been blindsided by content that I did not consent to. To perpetuate the idea that these performances are sinister and coercive is dangerous misinformation that leads to confusion and hate towards the queer community.

Along with a rich history of drag performance on a global level, however, comes a dark history of drag bans in America. States including Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, California, and New York (Sears) have all had bans on drag and crossdressing in the past. The punishments for breaking these bans were harsh, oftentimes including fines, arrest, and even psychiatric detainment (Sears). Many of these bans lasted from the early 1800s through the late 1900s and ruined countless lives along the way. Horrifically, today in 2023, in far too many states, this has not changed. Here is an excerpt from a bill in Arkansas defining what drag is:

(26) "Drag performance" means a performance: 36 (A) In which one (1) or more performers:(i) Exhibits a gender identity that is different 2 from the performer's gender assigned at birth using clothing, makeup, or 3 other accessories that are traditionally worn by members of and are meant to 4 exaggerate the gender identity of the performer's opposite sex; and 5 (ii) Sings, lip-synchs, dances, or otherwise 6 performs before an audience of at least two (2) persons for entertainment, 7 whether performed for payment or not; and 8 (B) That is intended to appeal to [...] prurient interest

And this is where the above description would be made illegal: "(d) An adult-oriented business shall not be located: 17 (1) On public property; or 18 (2) Where a minor can view what the

adult-oriented business is 19 otherwise offering to the public that qualifies it as an adult-oriented 20 business” (Stubblefield). While this is from Arkansas’ bill, it echoes the sentiments of every other state that is working to ban drag. One of the glaring issues with this bill is the use of the word “prurient.” Suggesting that all drag is inherently sexual in nature indicates a clear misunderstanding of the art form and suggests an ulterior motive for the bill as a whole. Since drag is not inherently sexual and since most drag shows (especially those that do include sexual themes) require a ticket to view, then we must acknowledge the danger that this bill poses to transgender people who simply appear in public dressed in the way that they choose to appear. Further still, we must also bring note to the countless classic pieces of media that would be affected by this bill. By this, I mean mainstream shows on the stage including various Shakespeare plays, *Peter Pan* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* as well as public screenings of television shows and movies like *White Christmas*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, and *Mulan* (Nossel) would not be allowed (Nossel).

When we take a step back and ask why these types of bans are still being drafted and signed into action, and from the lawmakers we receive variations on the response “to protect our children,” we then must consider what else aside from glitter and self expression is a danger to American children. 5.8 million children between 3 and 17 years old in America have anxiety. 2.7 million have depression (Data and Statistics). There are over 365,000 missing children in America and about 109,000 of them have been trafficked (Missing Children). 11.6 million children in America are suffering through poverty (Child Poverty). 3 million children are exposed to gun violence yearly and it is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 19 (Everytown). It is amazing to me that these children are living long enough in America to even have the opportunity to view a drag performance.

With all of this hate and fear glaring at us from the high seats of the law, it is becoming increasingly easy to lose hope. But this is simply not an option. The queer community has been relentlessly oppressed and discriminated against throughout history and yet we persist, survive, and fight to continue creating love. A queer theatre group in Memphis by the name of Friends of George's, Inc. is a fantastic example of the undying willingness to advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. They have sued over the law passed in Tennessee on the grounds of it being unconstitutional, and they will have their day in court (Helsel). In the meantime they will continue performances, unyielding in the face of fear and hate. They are not the only ones who are capable of pushing back against these laws. People all across the country are holding rallies, donating, writing, performing and speaking out against these laws. We all have the ability to ensure that love wins every single time.

## Works Cited

- “Child & Teen Gun Safety.” *Everytown Research & Policy*, Everytown Research & Policy, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://everytownresearch.org/issue/child-teen-safety/>.
- “Child Poverty in America - Facts, Statistics.” *United Way NCA*, United Way NCA, 22 Mar. 2023, <https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/child-poverty-in-america/#:~:text=How%20does%20poverty%20impact%20a,impact%20on%20a%20person's%20life>.
- “Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 8 Mar. 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>.
- Helsel, Phil. “Tennessee Drag Ban Law: Judge Temporarily Blocks Law.” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 1 Apr. 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/judge-halts-tennessees-drag-ban-law-rcna77743>.
- Nossel, Suzanne. “The Drag Show Bans Sweeping the US Are a Chilling Attack on Free Speech.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Mar. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/commentisfree/2023/mar/10/drag-show-bans-tennessee-lgbtq-rights>.
- Rogers, Kaleigh. “Republicans Lawmakers Are Trying to Ban Drag. First They Have to Define It.” *FiveThirtyEight*, FiveThirtyEight, 14 Mar. 2023, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/republicans-lawmakers-are-trying-to-ban-drag-first-they-have-to-define-it/>.
- “Missing Children Statistics.” *Saved In America*, Saved In America, <https://www.savedinamerica.org/stats#:~:text=There%20are%20more%20than%20365%2C000,trafficked%20children%20are%20foster%20youth>.
- Sears, Clare. “This Isn't the First Time Conservatives Have Banned Cross-Dressing in America.” *Jacobin*, Jacobin, 15 Mar. 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2023/03/cross-dressing-law-united-states-history-drag-bans>.
- Stubblefield, Senator G., Representative Bentley. *A Bill: Senate Bill 43*. State of Arkansas, Jan. 5, 2023, <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/FTPDocument?path=%2FBills%2F2023R%2FPublic%2FSB43%2FSB43010920231251.pdf>. Accessed May 12, 2023
- “What Is Drag? A Primer on Drag Queens in Popular Culture - 2023.” *MasterClass*, MasterClass, 7 June 2021, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/a-primer-on-drag-queens-in-popular-culture#3IIFXSJeNhCy7MVH73EDac>.
- “Why Lawmakers in Idaho Want to Ban Public Drag Shows.” *Morning Edition*, Jan. 2023. *EBSCOhost*, [ezproxy.montclair.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsghw&AN=edsgcl.732701647&site=eds-live&scope=site](https://ezproxy.montclair.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsghw&AN=edsgcl.732701647&site=eds-live&scope=site)