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Tennessee Bans Drag Performances for Children

Elaine Velie February 27, 2023

The state has just passed a bill criminalizing public drag performances as well as private shows if a minor could be present.



Vidalia Anne Gentry and other drag performers protested at the Tennessee State Capitol in Nashville earlier this month. (photo courtesy of Ray Di Pietro)

The Tennessee House of Representatives has passed a bill criminalizing public drag performances in the presence of minors as a wave of legislation targeting LGBTQ+ people, spaces, and culture sweeps the country. The proposal will now head to the desk of Republican Governor William Byron Lee to be signed into law.

The measure bars “male or female impersonators” who “provide entertainment that appeals to a prurient interest” from performing in private if a minor could be present. It also prohibits “adult cabaret” performers in public spaces. One offense would qualify as a misdemeanor, and a second offense would count as a felony

and send the performer to jail for one to six years. Republican Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson introduced the measure in November and the Senate passed it on February 9 along party lines — 26 to six.

“Proponents of the bill will tell you it’s about protecting children,” Vidalia Anne Gentry, a Nashville resident and drag performer for eight years, told *Hyperallergic*. “It’s not. It never has been.” (Tennessee House members also passed a bill on February 24 prohibiting gender-affirming care for minors. That measure will also go to Governor Lee to be signed into law.)



Kalup Linzy, “Resemblance 3 (Katonya 19)” (2019) (courtesy the artist and David Castillo)

“What this bill *is* about is restricting and choking out not only the Queer communities of these states, but also liberal and progressive ideologies,” Gentry continued. “They *want* us to leave our homes and communities to concentrate hateful rhetoric and manipulate the archaic and racist electoral college system ... I’m not going anywhere.”

Republicans in at least 14 other states are trying to legally restrict drag shows. Performers have also been targeted outside of state legislatures in recent months. Last September, a Memphis museum was forced to cancel a drag performance when armed protesters showed up, and in December, an alt-right group held a Nazi flag at a drag event in Florida. Earlier this week, members of the Proud Boys protested a Drag Queen Story Hour at a Maryland bookstore.

The onslaught of anti-drag legislation could affect artists outside of the traditional drag performance world as well. Kalup Linzy has incorporated drag into his video and performance art since 2002, drawing inspiration from figures ranging from RuPaul to Japanese Kabuki actors. Now, Linzy is afraid that his career in museums and college campuses could be rendered nonexistent “if things continue to progress.”

“My drag performance career has been heavily supported by the education departments at museums and art departments at colleges and universities,” Linzy told *Hyperallergic*. The artist explained that he thinks the public, especially in Red states, should be educated in the history of drag in American culture and beyond.

Gentry explained that participating in drag, as an art form that insists on self-expression, “saved [her] life.” She points out that drag performers frequently serve as community leaders, acting as mentors, advocates, and figureheads. Creating a drag show, she pointed out, is a community affair.

“When I put on a dress made by a local Queer design team, and a wig made by a local Queer wig stylist, and am documented by a local Queer social media assistant to an event I produced, where I pay multiple local Queer performers, and DJs and generate revenue through food and alcohol sales in various venues, you start to see that drag isn’t just the performer you see on stage,” Gentry said. “It’s an economy that redistributes wealth to the queer community.”

The American Civil Liberties Union has opposed Tennessee Republicans’ bill, which it called “a malicious attempt to remove LGBTQ people from public life.” During the House debate, Representative John Ray Clemmons pointed out that the bill’s vague language “would allow me to arrest Beyonce when she performs here.” The Democrat also called the bill unconstitutional, stating that “you cannot exclude individual classes of people because you do not agree with them or hate them.”

“I am a proud Tennessean, a proud American, a proud Queer person, a proud person living with HIV, and a proud drag performer,” said Gentry. “No person or bill will ever take that away from me or make me hate my home.”