

TRANSADVOCATE

Gender Nation: An Oscar Win while RuPaul Fails

By Gwen Smith

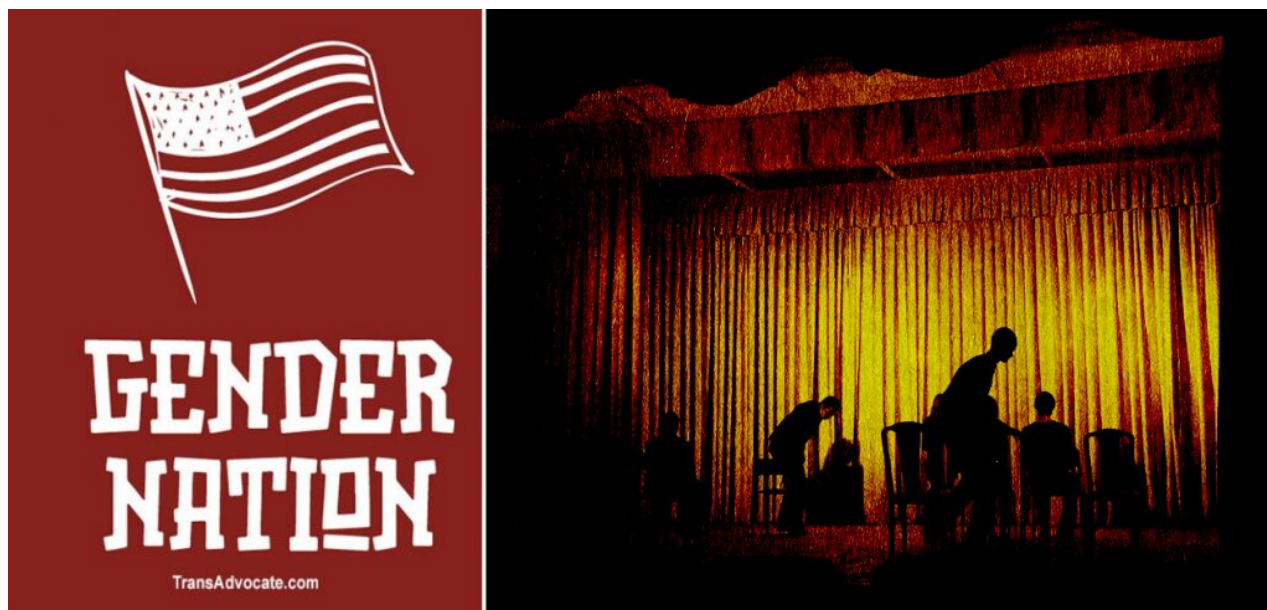
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Abstract

Gender Nation is a bi-weekly column by Gwendolyn Ann Smith, the founder of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, reviewing news affecting the trans, intersex, and genderqueer community. An Oscar Win The Academy Awards, which has been beset with calls for greater diversity in recent years, was nevertheless the site of a landmark victory for a transgender [...]

Article



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An Oscar Win

The Academy Awards, which has been beset with calls for greater diversity in recent years, was nevertheless the site of a landmark victory for a transgender Chilean as the movie *A Fantastic Woman* won for best foreign language film. The movie is the first to feature a transgender story and a transgender actor in a lead role.

The movie stars Daniela Vega, a 28-year-old actress from Chile. In it, Vega plays Marina, a waitress whose relationship with a divorcee turns tragic, leaving the police to probe her involvement in his death.

Daniela Vega also was the first openly transgender person to present at the event, introducing Sufjan Stevens' performance of *Mystery of Love*. The song was featured in the movie *Call Me By Your Name*. It won in the Best Adapted Screenplay category.

Also nominated this year was black trans man Yance Ford for directing the documentary *Strong Island*.

In recent years, the award ceremony has come under fire due to a lack of representation of people of color and women in films, and this year was no exception. While the ceremony has made some steps to be more inclusive, issues were still raised over screeners' response to *Get Out*, a film by Jordan Peele, not being "Oscar-worthy." Additionally, recent issues with sexism in Hollywood, most notably disgraced producer, and accused sexual predator Harvey Weinstein, were a notable sidebar to the evening.

This would not be the first Academy Award winner to explore transgender themes. While not a transgender storyline, *Some Like It Hot* was nominated for six academy awards and won one in 1960 for its tale of a pair of men who escaped the St. Valentine's Day Massacre by joining an all-female musician troupe, inadvertently creating the fodder for decades of "cross-dressing to deceive" storylines that helped lay the groundwork for any number of stereotypes around transgender people. *Tootsie*, which continued this "man dressed as a woman to deceive" trope continued to be an Oscar favorite in 1993, with seven nominations and one victory in 1983, followed by a Best Makeup win for 1993's *Mrs. Doubtfire*. None of these three films truly explore transgender characters, treating the subject as little more than a gag.

In more recent years, storylines featuring actual transgender characters took to the forefront, including Hilary Swank's best actress win in 2000 for portraying transgender male Brandon Teena, Jared Leto's 2014 best-supporting-actor Oscar for his portrayal of a trans woman named Rayon in *Dallas Buyer's Club*, and Eddie Redmayne's 2016 nomination for Best Actor for *The Danish Girl*, a highly fictionalized retelling of the life story of Lili Elbe. None of the above featured were transgender actors, with Leto in particular criticized for his insensitivity towards transgender people. The win for *A Fantastic Woman* also follows the 2016 loss for *Tangerine*, which featured black trans woman Mya Taylor in the lead role, portraying a trans woman.

RuPaul Fails

The eponymous host of *RuPaul's Drag Race* once again showed a startling insensitivity towards transgender people in a recent interview featured in *The Guardian*. In it, RuPaul was asked about whether women should be a part of *Drag Race*, with RuPaul put off by the idea, replying, "Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it's not men doing it, because at its core it's a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So, for men to do it, it's really punk rock, because it's a real rejection of masculinity."

When pressed about having transgender contestants on *Drag Race*, RuPaul remained reluctant, saying, "You can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing. It changes the whole concept of what we're doing. We've had some girls who've had some injections in the face and maybe a little bit in the butt here and there, but they haven't transitioned."

Facing criticism, RuPaul doubled down on Twitter, comparing trans women competing on the show with

Olympic athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs. This plus the initial comments led to an outcry, including from past Drag Race contestants. In the show's run, five contestants have come out as transgender, including two -- Monica Beverly Hillz and Peppermint -- during the show itself.

In response to the continued controversy, RuPaul finally backed down, posting on Twitter, "Each morning I pray to set aside everything I THINK I know, so I may have an open mind and a new experience. I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers." He then followed it with a second tweet, saying, "In the 10 years we've been casting Drag Race, the only thing we've ever screened for is charisma uniqueness nerve and talent. And that will never change." The latter tweet was accompanied by an image later noted as "Train Landscape," a painting by Ellsworth Kelly, perhaps chosen by accident when attempting to find a trans-specific image to accompany the message.

This is not the first time RuPaul has shown to be critical of transgender people. In 2014 RuPaul was under fire for having a "Female or Shemale" game on Drag Race, as well as using "You've Got She-Mail" as a recurring catchphrase on the show. The term "Shemale" is widely viewed as a slur within the transgender community. RuPaul had also defended the use of another term, "tranny," saying that "fringe people" were upset over the use of the term, and were "looking for story lines to strengthen their identity as victims." The term has caused a lot of consternation in trans circles, with many considering it a slur. The term was also dropped from use on Drag Race. It remains to be seen if this current apology will lead to real change for RuPaul, or if we will once again see further issues down the line. Only time will tell.

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