

To Whom It May Concern,

Hi! I'm Taylor, a genderqueer theatremaker based in New York City. I'm writing in regards to your recent complete casting announcement for Southern Comfort, the new musical you're producing which will open in March 2016. As you know, the musical is inspired by a documentary of the same name, which follows a transgender couple in rural Georgia as they battle disease, stigma, and poverty.

A few months ago, you put out a casting call for Southern Comfort, specifically seeking transgender actors. When I saw this casting call, I was thrilled! It gave me such joy to see that The Public was not only investing in a story about the experiences of trans folk, but was doing the legwork to make sure this story was cast accurately, with transgender performers. Even when I discovered that you were only seeking trans performers for two roles in the piece, I felt confident that The Public was casting the piece so that both trans stories AND trans actors would be at its center.

However, the complete casting announcement that you released this past Thursday, December 17, proves that I was mistaken. Yes, you did cast two transgender performers in those two roles. I am thrilled that you did this, and want to publicly congratulate Donnie Cianciotto and Aneesh Sheth. I'm so excited for the beautiful work they are sure to do in this piece.

But the protagonists of the story, the trans couple that form the emotional crux of Southern Comfort, have both been cast with cisgender, i.e. not transgender, actors. So has every other performance role in the piece, from the band to the acting ensemble. The writers and director are also cisgender. In fact, based on this announcement, the only two transgender people involved with this production, a musical that is entirely focused on trans experiences, are the two performers I mentioned earlier.

This announcement caused me to ask several questions which I'd like to put to you now.

Why did The Public choose to cast and staff a musical that overwhelmingly focused on trans narratives with an almost entirely cisgender cast and creative team? I have a hard time imagining it was due to a lack of appropriate or skilled trans talent for any of the roles or positions in the piece - there are now [entire agencies](#) dedicated to trans performance talent. And any trans theatre artist in this city - and indeed, many cisgender ones - can give you a list of talented, professional, transgender performers, choreographers, directors, and musicians.

Did The Public seek out any trans theatre artists for advice of this kind? If not, why not? Certainly The Public knows of the city's vibrant trans and queer theatre community, and knew that members of that community would be interested in the development of this piece. Why not consult them, then? Why not include trans folk in the process for a piece about trans experiences?

Is this production meant to serve NYC's trans communities? How can it, when those in charge of it only felt the need to cast two roles in it with trans actors? The past couple of years have been incredibly difficult for American trans communities on many levels. On a cultural level, more and more trans narratives are being highlighted in plays, movies, and television shows every year, but only a small fraction of the roles in those narratives are being given to trans performers. A quick Google search or, again, a conversation with almost any trans person or artist will give you an idea of how deeply insulting and disheartening this practice is. Every day, trans people the world over are told that their identities are not real, are invalid, are just a show. But our identities are not negotiable, and our collective ability to tell stories based in trans experiences and history shouldn't be either. Why would The Public further fuel this damaging notion that trans people aren't competent enough to tell their own community's stories?

Is The Public doing anything to support the potential trans audience base for Southern Comfort? Is it providing discounted or cheaper tickets to local trans organizations? Is it making sure that trans patrons will feel safe and well taken care of in the theatre space? Then again, how many trans people will want to devote time and energy to yet another story where trans narratives are put on display, but actual trans people are pushed to the side?

Perhaps contracts or arrangements were already in place that would make it impossible for The Public to produce Southern Comfort without hiring such a large number of cis collaborators. Why, then, did The Public choose to produce it in the first place? If The Public's aim was to create a theatrical experience that celebrated trans lives, why not commission a new piece about trans experiences and then cast and staff it with local trans artists? We already know that the Public is capable of conducting a nationwide search for trans actors. If it's capable of doing such big and important casting work, why artificially limit it to two roles? Why not create a piece in which every cast and team member can be trans? Then again, was The Public's aim to create a trans musical for the benefit of trans people? Is The Public really trying to do right by trans folk with this piece, or is it just jumping on the trans story bandwagon, producing Southern Comfort in an effort to stay relevant or on-trend, and not in an effort to empower or centralize trans experiences?

If you're going to produce a story at the expense of the community whose history its meant to focus on, why produce it at all?

Lastly, I question why The Public didn't follow the leads of other artistic production teams who have already, successfully, cast all the trans roles available to them with trans performers. The casting process for Taylor Mac's HIR, which is now in its third extension at Playwrights Horizons, recently created some wonderful protocols for finding and casting trans performers, all within the last year. That casting process was almost certainly more difficult than most, but it clearly wasn't impossible. Why would The Public not follow Playwrights' lead? Was it not willing to take on that added difficulty in casting? Why was it easy enough to seek out and cast two trans actors, but not five or six? Who made that call? Who drew that line between "enough effort put into equitable casting" and "too much effort put into equitable casting", a line that, as far as I can tell,

is inherently arbitrary and unjust? Why cut corners when it comes to representative storytelling in Southern Comfort?

These are not rhetorical questions. In fact, I would love for this letter to serve as the starting point for a conversation between The Public and the NYC trans artist community, and the trans community at large, one in which The Public can answer all of these questions and more. I'd love to hear how The Public plans on collaborating and interacting with these trans communities. And, more than anything else, I would love to hear how The Public plans on being an ally to these communities, both inside and outside of the theatre.

I love The Public. It's been crucial to my growth as an artist and person for many years now, and I can't wait for the next Under the Radar Festival to kick off.

But when someone asks me if The Public is an ally to trans people, I want to be able to answer with a resounding 'Yes!'

And right now, I can only answer that question with a cautious "Yes. Occasionally. Only if it's easy enough."

What are you going to do about that?

Sincerely,

Taylor Edelhart
Theatremaker
tayloredelhart@gmail.com

THE SENTIMENTS EXPRESSED IN THIS LETTER ARE ENDORSED BY THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS OF THE NYC TRANS ARTIST COMMUNITY AND THEIR ALLIES:

1. Kyle Rogers - *I want to see people living their authentic selves onstage and I want the right people to reap the economic benefits from that. level the playing field please.*
2. Sebastian James Dillingham
3. Sarah Esser, Artistic Director, era Dance Collective
4. Cassidy Dawn Graves, writer and performance artist - *Doing the bare minimum in regards to hiring trans artists is no longer impressive. This just comes off as lazy, uncaring, and disappointing. If you are going to produce a piece that centers around telling trans stories, that's awesome, but please also do the legwork.*
5. Jon Cicoski
6. Corynne Peters
7. Daniella De Jesús
8. Beth Pagano

9. Courtney Price
10. Holly Kristina Goldstein - Non-Binary Theatre Maker
11. Sofia Montgomery
12. Frankie Placidi
13. Kelly Venable - *There is no reason to not cast Trans actors in Trans roles. There is just no reason. Please help those who are not represented be able to represent themselves, rather than someone who has no real understanding as to what it means to be Trans represent the whole community.*
14. Michelle Herring
15. Elizabeth Stewart
16. Sadie Trigg, Actor and Ally
17. Noah Jackson
18. Alexandra Hoover
19. Hayley Barnett, Student, Beloit College
20. Brooks Fowler
21. Jo Chiang - *The Public Theater, with its platform and reach, must engage with artistic processes and projects in a respectful, intentional, and responsible way. The erasure and misrepresentation of marginalized communities is a form of violence, institutionally, bodily, and artistically. It is shameful for The Public Theatre, with its resources and capabilities, to help perpetuate these destructive acts.*
22. James Stuart
23. Allegra Leal
24. Madeline Zechar, student at Barnard College, Columbia University
25. Christine Aucoin - *It's wonderful that The Public wants to increase trans representation onstage. The next step is making sure they do it correctly.*
26. Sarah Wang, production stage manager
27. Mackenzie Rollan Brown
28. Corynne Peters
29. Emma Dolhai
30. Casey Llewellyn, Playwright
31. Jennifer Baker, Theatre Patron - *There are trans actors in NYC and they deserve to be recognized in plays regardless but especially ones representing their community. Please reconsider the casting and put trans actors in lead roles.*
32. Andrew Dahreddine
33. Gina Femia
34. Julia Finch
35. Freddy Padilla
36. Lhana Ormenyi - *As a theater company which purports to have "a long history of giving voice to under-represented talent," it is utterly inexcusable that you have failed to include trans people in a show which centers on the lives and experiences of trans people. There is a burgeoning world of trans talent in NYC, and the only way to support under-represented communities and set an example for other theater artists it is to include members from that community. By ignoring the real talent and experiences of trans people you are actively hurting the recent strides that have been made in trans representation.*
37. Ciaran Shannon, Theatre Student
38. Taylor Plas
39. Molly Lang
40. Alesha Kilayko, Theatre Artist

41. Mike Campbell - *I believe that when content is written about particular types of people, the creators should include as many people as possible who identify as such.*
42. Diz Foster - *In order to highlight the struggles and experiences of a people it is exceptionally important to be inclusive above and beyond what is expected.*
43. Caroline Kittredge Faustine, Co-founder, Undiscovered Countries
44. Karla Alvizures
45. Griffin Allensis
46. Joshua Bastian Cole, Ph.D. student in Performing and Media Arts, Cornell University - *I'm a trans man and a theatre historian. I am watching the evolution of trans dramatic literature and dramaturgy as well as the corresponding production efforts, among which casting has so far left much to be desired by actual trans people (though the performances are frequently adored by cis people). This letter already said it all, but be aware that there are not only trans audiences, there are trans critics.*
47. Kayleigh L. Stewart
48. Rhys A. Roffey
49. L.T., queer theatre fan
50. Maggie Rothberg
51. Daniela Rivera
52. Katie Looney, Theater Artist
53. Mark William Lindberg, Writer/Performer/Educator
54. Aditi Luthra, Student - *Discrimination shouldn't be tolerated.*
55. Liz Gorinsky
56. Ellen Winter, Performer/Composer/Playwright
57. Isabella Sazak
58. Samantha Brown
59. Joel Charles Yates
60. Zachary M. Cohn
61. Kev Berry, Playwright and Director; Artistic Associate at 3-Legged Dog
62. Anonymous
63. Sarah Maher
64. Christian Appel
65. Logan Davidson
66. Samuel Sainthil - *I would like to think The Public does not just seek to put on plays for the sake of revenue, but to make the world a better place through theater. To tell the stories of a marginalized community, but not let the members of the marginalized community tell their story is to practice in the continued erasure of people who are rendered invisible. This erasure only contributes to the violence that that community already experiences. I think Spivak said it best when she warned allies/turncoats that it is better to use our privilege to let the voiceless be heard rather than exacerbate our privilege and their oppression by talking over them:*
http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf
67. Max Binder - *As if there weren't enough phenomenal trans folks in new york theater looking for work.*
68. Alisha Litman-Zelle
69. Ari Pollack
70. Sam Riedel - *Pop culture is entirely too comfortable with telling trans stories through cisgender lips. Please, help us reject this trend!*
71. Claire E. Mosteller
72. Yonit Friedman

73. Zoe Kamil, Playwright, Student
74. Sylvan Oswald, playwright
75. Will Wallace, actor - *Don't be "relevant". That's a vague notion. Be change.*
76. Neo Cihl - *Trans representation is so much more than having the bare minimum trans people to draw attention. We can all do so much better.*
77. Colleen R. Toole
78. Megan Hayes, theatre artist - *WE can do better!*
79. Luisa Hoffmann
80. Gwendolyn M Aume
81. Jessica Goodman
82. Kat Spallone, Co-Director, Actor's Workshop of Ithaca
83. Grace Smith, Actor
84. Eric Foster
85. Stephanie Johnstone, Composer/Theatermaker
86. Mallery Avidon
87. Thomas Rabuano
88. Eric Meehan
89. Hannah Johnson-Walsh
90. Sarah Bedrick
91. E.B. Hinnant
92. Jeremy L. Yocum
93. Alexa Adderley
94. Tegan Ritz McDuffie
95. Amy Rebecca King, Actor and Writer
96. Rebecca McLaughlin, Stage Manager/Ensemble Member, Goat in the Road Productions
97. Karen Eilbacher
98. Olive Williams, trans actress
99. Nicolas Benacerraf
100. Shan Leigh & Willow Laverne
101. MJ Kaufman
102. Sam Sheppard
103. Ethan Hardy
104. Emma Pliskin
105. aubree lynn - *this will never change until we change it.*
106. Anonymous
107. Jenna Dioguardi
108. Mariah MacCarthy - *Dear Public, I love you. I love the work you do. You are one of the bravest theaters in town, and your visibility allows you to keep being that. As such, you were uniquely qualified to do something revolutionary: an Off-Broadway musical cast entirely with trans performers - that is, cast entirely authentically. That this didn't happen begs a lot of questions that this letter asks incredibly eloquently. I would love to know why, precisely because I love you.*
109. Anonymous Transgender Actor - *As someone who auditioned and made it to callbacks, I am saddened that only two trans actors were cast out of the many talented performers I met during the process. I thought it was a coincidence that everyone was reading for the same parts. At no point did The Public make it clear that every other role had been cast. Knowing that the rest of the cast and crew are cisgender is devastating. Once again, the trans community is robbed of an opportunity not only to be employed, but to tell a true story in our own words.*
110. Kay-Megan Washington, actor

111. Ashton Muñoz
112. Thomas Muccioli
113. Jack Doyle, Artistic Director, Transgender Shakespeare Company (UK)
114. Amy Peters
115. Anna Neumaier
116. Kate Bishop, playwright - *We know better, we MUST do better. Come on!*
117. Laurie Ascoli
118. Ben Miller, Writer and Ally
119. Jay Owen Eisenberg, Trans Actor
120. David Henninger
121. Julia Klavans
122. Nikki Vega
123. Isaac Zerkle, student and trans theater artist
124. Eric Farber - Percussionist / Designer
125. Gabriel Levey
126. Gloria Toon, student
127. Russell Sperberg
128. Alexandra Van Horn - *Representation matters.*
129. Victoria Sun - *Regardless of intention, casting cis people as trans people is an actively violent action. We know you can be better.*
130. Alex Holden
131. Lyndsey Bourne - *Let's stop REPRESENTING representation. Truth in theatre is the only way to create change.*
132. Nicholas Bourgault
133. Savannah Thompson, non-binary actor and writer
134. Starbuck
135. Frey Kwa Hawking
136. Katie Lindsay
137. Samy el-Noury
138. PatnStephen Mosher-Dwyer - *The Married and Counting grooms APPROVE THIS F'ING Message!!*
139. Quinn Willer, trans human - *Here lies an opportunity to raise the voices of some of the most marginalized voices in our country. Trans characters should be played by trans actors. Please, you must practice what you preach.*
140. Derek Smith
141. Emily Faye Oakley - *I'm so disappointed in The Public. I was really hoping they wouldn't do exactly what they've done. It's so sad to see a theatre company you love do something that is such a slap in the face to the community it wishes to include and represent. I was so excited to see this show but now I'm uncertain I will see it.*
142. Patrick Daly - *The Public has always been a bastion for change, inspiration, and growth. Don't kill your own reputation.*
143. Catrin Lloyd-Bollard
144. Conor Sullivan
145. Dana Levinson - Composer/Lyricist
146. Eh-den Perlove
147. Dillon Slagle, Freelance Dramaturg - *There are no longer any viable reasons or excuses for a lack of parity on our stages, in our creative teams, and in our audiences. The only possible*

explanations are bias or laziness, and neither is acceptable from such a fine institution as the the Public Theater.

148. M. McGee - Trans Femme Lighting Designer
149. Kayla Sklar
150. Maxwell Cosmo Cramer
151. Stella Boonshoft
152. CJ Byrd
153. Carolina E. G.
154. Sam Tucker-Boyer, queer playwright and screenwriter - *I love the work that you do, I really do. But there comes a time when "just enough" is no longer enough. You can do better.*
155. Danny DeVito
156. Pia Marchetti
157. Morgan Auld
158. Mwalim *7) (MJ Peters), Playwright/Director/Composer/ Producer; Playwright-In-Residence, New African Company, Boston, MA; Assoc Prof. of English & Director of Black Studies @ UMass Dartmouth - *I offer my support and solidarity, hoping that the same will be extended to the Black, First Nations and Latino Theater communities as we struggle with proper representation and inclusion in the telling of our tales. Just as the late, great August Wilson insisted on all black casts and a Black director for his tales of the Black experience, the same should be applied to works that speak to the Transgender experience.*
159. Becca Blackwell
160. Dominic Russo
161. Ariana Hirsh
162. Emilyn Kowaleski
163. Jess Katz
164. Raymond Arnold, Director-Brooklyn College Theatre Department
165. Jordan Schulze
166. Nina Andjelic
167. Carli Rhoades, Actor - *As a theatre artist, as a cisgender person with a trans partner, and as a human being I feel deeply hurt by the decision to not allow trans actors to bring their unique narrative and experiences to the stage for parts which demand these experiences.*
168. Irene Pañeda Fernández
169. Angela Kay Pirko
170. Eric Sturm
171. Ethan Grossman
172. Azure D. Osborne-Lee, Theatre Maker
173. Charlotte Seelig
174. Allison Lyman
175. Eric Marlin
176. Katherine Sanderlin
177. Shanna Brown
178. Colby Bleicher
179. Emily Shortt
180. Seth Tankus - *I'm a genderqueer/transfemme playwright based in Seattle, who has been encountering similar issues. If you have the resources, you should use them. The Public Theater has these resources, and had an opportunity to not tokenize transgender folks in their work. They need to be held accountable.*
181. Sydnie L. Mosley, Artistic Director SLMDances

182. Chavie Weisberger
183. Cat Mahari, movement artist - *I am a being that loves truth, honesty, and great art. The Public Theatre has unfortunately decided that false representation is better than none. I support my brother and sisters in the trans community being participants, leaders, and innovators of works that come from their own imagination and lived experiences.*
184. Jillian Jetton
185. Yi Zhao
186. Gary Goldstein
187. Nikki Patin, MFA, Community Engagement Manager, Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, IL
188. Allison Ciuci, Theatre Artist
189. Cait Weisensee - *I want to believe in you more than I believe in Netflix.*
190. Hudson Krakowski
191. John Moletress
192. Winter Miller
193. David Harrison
194. Lucas Olscamp
195. anon trans theatremaker
196. Anna Needham
197. Itamar Segev
198. Andrea Ciannavei
199. Sophie Edelhart
200. Amy Winn, Public Theater member - *The Public (in all its arms) is so good at telling stories, even challenging ones -- but theater can also change lives. As an ally, I support including those who work from lived experience, to help them tell their own tales.*
201. Clint Blakely
202. Irene Lazaridis
203. Miranda Cornell, Artistic Director, Semicolon Theatre Company
204. Karen Kohlhaas
205. Padraic Lillis, Artistic Director, The Farm Theater
206. Alexa Derman, Playwright
207. elliot colbert
208. Izzi
209. Amelia Cook
210. Briallyn Mansell
211. Ellen Kaveevittayakun, HIR Wardrobe Supervisor
212. A. James - *While I'm sure the performers are excellent actors, the years just steep my distaste for cis people recontextualizing our lives and tragedies by casting themselves in them over other trans people. Trans actors would have very specific and personal ties to the characters and narrative that would likely lend a greater emotional depth to the performance. Without giving us work or supporting our communities with that work, it feels quite gauche to mine our oppression for entertainment, money, and the feeling of being "enlightened".*
213. M. Sharkey, trans ally and advocate
214. Taylor Mac
215. Erik Ehn, playwright
216. Grant Chapman
217. Michael Comlish, former theater director and producer with American Opera Projects - *How is it that nobody thought this lack of insight into the very subject you are dealing with might garner a bit of controversy?*

218. Chris Tyler
219. Crichton Atkinson, Director
220. Deborah Sandblom
221. Taylor Schulze
222. J.P. McLaurin
223. Roland Carette-Meyers, Theatre Artist (Seattle)
224. chelsea moroski
225. Cat Crowley
226. Charles Dennis
227. Jeremy Bohmstein
228. Alma Carranza, screenwriter and actress
229. Axel Keating
230. Lex Santana
231. Andrew Butler, performer
232. Eliana Gottesman
233. Annie Pardoe - *Looking forward to the day that a letter like this isn't necessary. Until then, I applaud Taylor and pledge to make and participate in art with this cause in mind.*
234. Lillian Reszel
235. Faith Alana Alastair, F/P/CEO of Family Transcends
236. Tabitha Diaz
237. Dan Fishback, playwright, director of the Helix Queer Performance Network
238. Isaiah Price
239. Bryan Austermann
240. Lilia Rubin
241. Ayelet Schrek
242. Tyler Edwards
243. Matthew Bantock, queer stage manager
244. Brandon Weber
245. Negi Esfandiari - *Representation matters and the people who do not see that are those privileged enough to be able to ignore it. Do justice to trans* lives and create an inclusive and representative environment to their experiences! The theatre world has always been one of amazing expression and social movement, do not let this fall to its feet because of this casting decision.*
246. Trevor Newton
247. Aaron C. Rutherford
248. Catherine Espinal - *@The Public, to use Trans narratives, but not Trans people is also a form of erasure. Stop the injustice.*
249. Louise Oliver - actor/producer - *The people most equipped to tell the stories of a marginalised or disenfranchised part of society are the members of those communities. There's the capacity to do so much good work here. Don't just tick a box.*
250. Attilio Rigotti
251. Charissa Ruth
252. Joella Debra Tepper, Theatre Producer, Boston, MA, Ally
253. Kyle Geissler
254. Hunter Goetz
255. Ben Pagano
256. Jay Fondin
257. Justin Perez

258. Adam Glucksman
259. Danielle Guido
260. Ruby Wolf
261. Julian Mesri
262. Presley Oldham
263. Jessa Brighton
264. Katya Stepanov, Creative Producer/Actress
265. Ru-Lee Story
266. Brent Eickhoff - *A Chicago-based director, playwright, and educator whose understanding of trans issues in theatre (and beyond) greatly benefited from reading this letter.*
267. Keara Benton
268. John A. Wiggins
269. Claire E. Mosteller
270. Eleanor Philips
271. Ashley Lauren Rogers
272. Sydney Blaxill
273. Michaela Neville, friend and ally
274. Francis Weiss Rabkin, trans* playwright
275. James Johnston
276. Callan Hughes
277. Josh Smith
278. Colleen Bradford
279. Samantha Levine
280. Alex Diaz-Hui, educator and poet - *We can not create successful narratives of trans lives without the representation of trans artists.*
281. Julia Fletcher, actor/director, ally, and mom of trans actor
282. Sydney Rae Chin, Emerson College Student and Mediamaker - *Media needs to reflect real world experiences and be created by those who face those experiences.*
283. Sophia Tupy
284. Tiffany Vega
285. Katherine Poulsen Grad Dip Voice (NIDA);BA Theatre (UWS Nepean); ATCL - *Token transgender actors perhaps?*
286. Jenna Antoniadis
287. Erik David Rogers
288. Billierae Engelman
289. Mykel Mogg
290. Dillon Dong
291. Eleanor Aspinall
292. Joshua Simon
293. Lauren Wong
294. Alexa Andreas
295. Took Edalow
296. SK Kerastas
297. Maggie Burke, Theatrical Designer
298. Linnea Mikkelson Gregg - *QUEER REPRESENTATION MATTERS ALLOWING QUEER ARTISTS TO REPRESENT THEIR OWN COMMUNITY ALSO MATTERS*
299. Hannah Goldman
300. Romina Julian

301. Thomas Hedlund
302. Nicola Sampair
303. Katherine Guenther - *Theater must be inclusive. I am very disappointed in the Public Theater---please rectify this situation. Thank you.*
304. Carlos Pérez Segarra
305. Kadence Neill
306. Lily Ali-Oshatz, Queer Writer/Performer - *The Public Theatre gives me faith that brave and untried theatre is produceable. Please uphold this belief by allowing trans artists to represent themselves.*
307. Jennifer Vargas
308. Emily Hecht
309. Casey W Seeley
310. Madison Smith
311. Keyana Hemphill
312. Dan Rider, writer and musician
313. Emily Edmond, Past Patron and Potential Future Patron
314. Ashley Chang, MFA Yale School of Drama
315. Anna Tolen
316. Jesse Geguzis
317. Mashuq Deen

SIGN THE LETTER HERE: <http://goo.gl/forms/nhPTg20E11>