



## Flowers, Wayland (1939-1988)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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The complex relationship between the puppeteer and his puppet, an inanimate object that he has invested with a life and a personality of its own, can take many bizarre twists. Such is the case of Wayland Flowers and his puppet "Madame," who, arguably, was far more famous than her creator.

Indeed, a decade and a half after Flowers's death, there is little biographical information available about him and he would seem a mostly forgotten minor celebrity of the 1970s, while a search of the internet reveals that "Madame" still retains a cult following.

Wayland Flowers was born in Dawson, Georgia, on November 26, 1939. He began to practice puppetry at an early age, drawn, perhaps, by a puppet's license to say and do in public a wide variety of things forbidden to its human operator.

In the 1960s, Flowers moved to New York, where he was an assistant puppeteer for a number of children's television shows. But while he entertained children during the day, he also developed "Madame," an "adults-only" puppet, a grotesquely ugly and flamboyantly ribald old crone festooned in outrageous evening gowns, tiaras, and rhinestones.

Flowers performed with "Madame" in nightclubs and gay bars, where her frank and often acerbic observations about sex, men, and life in general, similar to those expressed by drag queens in their acts, gained the "dirty old lady" and--by extension--Flowers a following that led to frequent television guest appearances on variety and talk shows.

By the late 1960s, Flowers and "Madame" had become regulars on the comedy program *Laugh-In*, one of the most popular television programs at the time and known for its cutting-edge topical humor that frequently challenged network censorship. In this context, Flowers was able to present a campy gay point of view mediated through his puppet.

Naughty old ladies have long been a staple of bawdy comedy, able to indulge sarcastically in *double entendre* and sexual innuendo and yet be found amusing rather than offensive, if for no other reason than the audience perceives older women, no matter how stereotypical, as being past any serious sexual interest.

This comedic incongruity, then, could be taken to even greater lengths by means of an old lady who was not only extraordinarily ugly (though pretending to be a great beauty) but who was also, in reality, wood and wire rather than flesh and blood.

In this way, Flowers was able to express on prime-time television the attitudes and desires of many gay men in the early days of gay liberation--views that would otherwise have been regarded as pointedly offensive to mainstream audiences--without censure.

Throughout the 1970s, Wayland Flowers and "Madame" appeared frequently on television, as the hosts of *Solid Gold*, a weekly popular music show, and on the game show *Hollywood Squares*, where, after nearly a decade of guest appearances, they succeeded Paul Lynde, a gay comic as bitchy and queeny as "Madame," as the all-important "central square."

By the early 1980s, the puppet/human relationship had taken a strange turn in Flowers's career. "Madame" became the star of her own sitcom, *Madame's Place*, in which she played the lead role, interacting with the other actors as if she were human.

Flowers, ironically, remained completely out of sight, his function as "Madame"'s voice the only outward evidence of his presence. Indeed, she seemed to take on a life of her own, eclipsing Flowers until he became invisible--both literally and figuratively--behind her.

As a result of his invisibility, very little attention was drawn to his personal life, and thus it was a surprise to many when Flowers died in Hollywood on October 11, 1988, a victim of the AIDS epidemic. "Madame" was buried with him.

### **Bibliography**

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[www.jumptheshark.com/m/madamesplace.htm](http://www.jumptheshark.com/m/madamesplace.htm).

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