Wayland Flowers & Madame

An Exhibition Presented By Center for Puppetry Arts

July 7 - November 18, 1989
Wayland Flowers was a masterful performer who left an indelible mark on the art of puppetry. He brought to life many characters who cannot be easily forgotten. In this exhibition the Center for Puppetry Arts pays tribute to this native Georgian and celebrates his genius as a puppeteer.

The Center would like to offer special thanks to Marlena Shell, Wayland's longtime friend and agent. She provided valuable insight into Wayland's life and artistry and graciously loaned many figures for the exhibition. Her enthusiasm and generosity made this exhibit a reality. Special thanks must be paid to Frankie Van Cleave and Nicolas Coppola for their contributions of time, thought and figures for the exhibition. We also thank staff member Judy Anderson for authoring the text of the catalog. It is with great respect that we share with you the artistry of Wayland Flowers.

Kerry McCarthy  Vincent Anthony
Museum Director  Executive Director
Wayland Flowers & Madame

If a puppetry Hall of Fame were ever organized, Wayland Flowers would certainly be given a place of honor in its halls. In a career that spanned over 20 years, Wayland Flowers took the nightclub genre of puppetry to new heights with his most famous creation, the bawdy Madame. He and Madame headlined at plush niteries like the New York Copacabana as well as casinos and hotels in Las Vegas, Reno, Tahoe and Atlantic City. He became famous as an "adult" entertainer with live shows that were reliably shocking in their use of profanity and sexual innuendo. He carved out an equally unique television career with the duo's popular appearances on Hollywood Squares and Solid Gold as well as the short-lived sitcom Madame's Place. His other achievements include two Emmy Awards from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, publishing a fictional biography of Madame's rise to stardom, a Showtime special and, early in this career, an erotic puppet show.

With his death on October 11, 1988, Madame fell silent and the puppetry world mourned the loss of one of the field's unique talents, a genius, some have said.

From Georgia to New York

Named after his father, Wayland Parrott Flowers, Jr. was born November 26, 1939 in Richland, Georgia, the second of three children to Wayland, Sr. and Leila Horsley Flowers. His father owned a grocery store and was evidently an early proponent of integration, favoring a front-door policy for blacks in the community. Wayland, Sr.'s death during World War II deeply affected the family, particularly Mrs. Flowers and eldest daughter, Frankie. Wayland was only 5 years old at the time and said in a later interview that he had only vague recollections of his father, such as the time his father caught him and his brother in a pillow fight. "I remember him standing at the door as the feathers came floating down. I wish I could have known him. They tell me he was a wonderful man." His mother took over the management of the grocery, but after less than a year she moved the family back to her home town of Dawson.

Wayland's life with puppets began soon after the move. He asked for and
received a marionette stage and a set of fairytale characters (variably reported as being either Snow White or Cinderella) for Christmas when he was 7 or 8 years old. He was remarkably adept at manipulating the figures and endlessly creative with the storylines. He designed additional costumes for the figures, which he and his mother sewed, and repainted the faces as needed to create entirely new casts of characters to fit nearly any children's story. By the sixth grade he was regularly performing his shows for neighborhood children: admission was 10 per person. His curiosity and his fascination with puppets grew and led him to the library where he researched other techniques for building marionettes. He began carving figures from balsa wood but found this a difficult task, especially since the figures didn't last long.

He experimented with molding figures from clay and casting plaster of paris molds. He, like many other puppeteers, found this an effective method. To create a figure he would fill the molds with plastic wood, dry the sections and glue them together, then sand and paint the final figure.

Clown Fig. 5
Collection of Frankie Van Cleave

He continued performing throughout junior high school, and his mother encouraged his artistic education. He took lessons in ballroom dancing and tap, singing lessons so he could do musicals, and art lessons to improve his design skills and use of color. He also played flute and drums. With his sister and mother who played piano, he traveled throughout Georgia presenting song and dance shows at Lions and Rotary Clubs, PTA meetings and birthday parties. These shows would include Wayland performing solo with his puppets. He began writing his own plays and would record the dialogue on tape. This left him free to concentrate on manipulation. By the time he graduated from Terrell County High School, Wayland was a young veteran of the stage.

Wayland was teased a great deal about "playing with dolls", but the power of puppetry was too alluring. A 1963 article in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine quotes him as saying, "When I started giving shows, I discovered that the puppets also gave me control of audiences. I could see that even kids a lot bigger than me would get so absorbed they'd look on the figures as being alive. By watching their expressions I could see how the show was going over, and change my routine accordingly. By this hit-or-miss method I learned the rudiments of drama long before I ran across them written out in books. I think the only way to learn much about comedy is through practice and letting the audience show you what's good and what falls flat."

The years following high school were shapeless and frustrating for Wayland. The family had moved to Atlanta where his sister was attending Agnes Scott College. His mother worked at Emory University where she hoped both her sons would attend. Wayland chose instead to go to Young Harris College, where over the next year and a half he participated in the College's drama productions. He then went to Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Though he took some acting classes, he still felt that
college wasn't for him. He returned to Atlanta and held a few odd jobs before enlisting in the Coast Guard in 1960.

While stationed in Connecticut, Wayland sojourned for the first time to New York City and saw the Broadway productions of Gypsy and West Side Story. He became convinced that musical theater was where he wanted to be, although he wasn't convinced that he would ever make it back to New York. After the Coast Guard, he returned to Atlanta and worked as an assistant manager at the Fox Theater and then as an assistant buyer at a department store. He was 24 years old and finally beginning to make some money, but he was far from happy. He was still performing when he could with his marionette stage and puppets, though he had yet to conclude that puppetry could be his profession. Finally in 1963 he reached the limit of his frustration. He packed his bags and told his sister that he was going to New York to see if he had any talent.

**New York City & Madame**

Wayland hitchhiked to New York, dreaming of making it in musical theatre. He arrived penniless and soon discovered that the competition for even the smallest roles was intense. In order to support himself he turned to his first love - puppetry. Nicolas Coppola, director of Nicolo Marionettes, remembers Wayland making the rounds to the New York puppet companies. With his excellent crafting and manipulating abilities and his obvious love of puppetry, Wayland soon landed a job with Dorothy Zaconick's Suzari Marionettes. During the next couple of years he honed his skills in puppet design and construction and learned about the commercial aspects of professional puppetry. He remained friends with Nicolas Coppola, who introduced him to other seasoned performers such as Pady Blackwood and Addis Williams.

In 1964 Wayland answered an ad for puppeteers to perform with Bil and Cora Baird in a marionette show at the World's Fair Chrysler Pavilion. According to his sister, Frankie,

Wicked Magician Fig. 6
Collection of Nicolas Coppola
and a release from the tightly scripted Chrysler show. At the end of the World's Fair, Payne presented the puppet to Wayland. "It looked like a frog," he said, "with yarn hair and a black velvet shroud. But the way he had painted it, the eyes had such depth. It really looked at you."4 Wayland took the puppet home and hung it in a closet. Every time he would open the door the puppet's eyes would startle him. He knew there was something there that had to come out.

While the unformed Madame hung in the back of Wayland's mind he spent the winter months after the Fair at Nicolo Marionettes Studio building figures for productions of Sleeping Beauty and Aladdin. His excellent carving and sculpting reflected much that he had learned from his time with Zaconick and Baird. Nick Coppola reports that his company still performs with these figures.

Wayland then began working for Aniforms, a company that specialized in industrial shows using a very clever television puppet technique, often seen on Captain Kangaroo. An outline of a character was cut from rubber and painted white. Ten rods were attached to the figure, which could then be operated by ten rings, one on each finger. The white figure was placed on a black velvet background. A television camera would transmit a picture of the character to a monitor where the audience would see a black 'drawing' against a white background. The hidden operator could not only animate the 'cartoon drawing' but speak to the viewer as well. One Aniform Wayland operated was Miss Temperetta, a chicken character used to sell an ALCOA product. His sister Frankie was working at ALCOA at the time, so for a while they were able to travel together. The quick-thinking improvisational nature of Aniforms was a great training ground which utilized Wayland's skill in puppet construction and performance.

During his time with Aniforms he would occasionally play with the witch puppet, but it wasn't until he met a feisty elderly woman in a bar that a character for the puppet began to emerge. She looked like a sweet little old lady until the bartender got a rise out of her and she let loose with a stream of expletives. It was this raucous, yet straightforward, attitude that appealed to Wayland as something that would be just right for his puppet.

He began carrying this puppet to bars and pubs. He would set her on the bar or cigarette machine and tell jokes and chat with the clientele for tips. The clubs didn't book him, per se, but allowed him to perform whenever he wished because he was lively and entertaining. During this time he named the puppet 'Madame'. He added clay to make her face fuller and restyled her yarn locks. This Madame was still, however, a primitive version of her later glamorous incarnation. Wayland discovered he was very adept at the improvisation these settings required, and more of the character developed through this on-the-spot practice.

His first legitimate stage performance with Madame came in 1971 in an original Off-Broadway production called Kumquats. Billed (perhaps over-zealously) as "the world's first erotic puppet show", Kumquats was a puppet version of classic ribald jokes and stories as well as a satire on the public's fascination with erotica at the time. Wayland was creator-designer and co-produced the show with Cosmo Richard Falcon, who wrote the book and lyrics. Gustavo Motta wrote the music and Nicolas Coppola directed the show. Although the run of Kumquats at the Village Gate was met with mixed reviews, Madame and Wayland's skillful manipulation left a distinct impression. New York Times reviewer Howard Thompson described Madame as a "leering Phyllis Diller figure...with blast-furnace authority and candor."5 Reviewer Jerry Oster in the Daily News said, "Especially successful is the work Flowers does when he breaks down the traditional puppet-audience relationship and brings his marionette (Madame) beyond the
footlights..." Nick Coppola says that this 'fourth wall' break came during the reprise of Madame’s big number, *The Sensuous Woman*. The intent was to make the audience aware of the talent behind the stage. Though this is fairly common in puppetry today, it was a novel and exciting curtain call at the time.

When *Kumquats* closed, Wayland found himself without a job—but he had Madame. He further reworked her facial features, dressed her in sequined gowns and returned to the bars. Eventually he began to make a real name for himself working in small New York night spots, but it wasn’t until the summer of 1972 that he had the opportunity to fine-tune his performance style and brand of humor. He was booked to do a 15-minute pre-show act in the lounge of a Provincetown, Massachusetts hotel. Within a week, the crowds for Wayland’s show were so large the lounge couldn’t accommodate them. He and Madame became the toast of Cape Cod. When they returned to New York they were soon performing to packed houses in the city’s best nightclubs.

*Rise To Stardom*

Two very important events occurred in the mid-seventies which were catalysts for Wayland’s and Madame’s rise to stardom. In 1974, Marlo Thomas commissioned Wayland to design a baby puppet for her television special *Free To Be You And Me*. Wayland received an Emmy from the National Academy of Arts and Sciences for his puppet design. Around this time he traveled to Los Angeles to perform a show-stopping cameo appearance in Redd Foxx’s film *Norman, Is That You?* The film gave him his first national exposure. More importantly, while in Los Angeles he made his cabaret debut at The Backlot, a popular nightclub. This exposure opened up the West Coast market for him, and he was soon a popular fixture on the club circuit. Variety described his show as "highly entertaining and often hysterically funny...Madame, whom Flowers manipulates with amazing precision, is creme de la creme of high ‘camp’."

Other television projects kept Wayland busy and increased the team’s popularity. Regular appearances on *The Andy Williams Show* attracted the attention of *Laugh-In*’s producer, who booked Wayland in a revival of the television show. In her first special, *Old Is Somebody Else: Aging, Everybody’s Doing It*, Madame made a humorous exploration of how women age. Wayland received his second Emmy Award for this special. However, their best known early television appearance was on *Hollywood Squares*, where he and Madame replaced Paul Lynde in the center box.

By this time, Madame had a fully developed persona. Marlena Shell, Wayland’s agent and longtime friend, says that Wayland created an entire personal history for Madame. She was a Southerner of indeterminate age who became filthy rich through the discovery of oil in her backyard. She was loud, brassy, witty and well-traveled. She had expensive taste in
clothes, donning gowns by Bob Mackie, feather boas, and loads of jewels. The addition of shoulder pads, exaggerated eyelashes, and a little lift in the cheekbones gave Madame her polished glamorous appearance. She was uninhibited, eccentric, and always on the lookout for new experiences. Wayland said in several interviews that many characteristics of the women he grew up with—his mother, grandmother, and aunt—found their way into Madame’s personality in exaggerated form. “Not that they all necessarily talk like Madame,” Wayland said. “It’s just that they had that same kind of irreverent, slightly tainted sort of edge to them.”

Wayland was a ‘blue comic’ and Madame’s opening line—“Wayland is no ventriloquist and I’m no f—ing dummy”—set the tone for the raucous humor to follow. He always insisted that no one under 18 be allowed to attend his stage performances. He admitted in an interview, “Madame uses some dirty words. And there are complaints from time to time, but for the most part audiences aren’t offended because Madame doesn’t use the words for their actual meaning. They are interjections in her conversations about other subjects—they are not meant to be dirty.”

Wayland developed other characters for his stage show because there were stories and situations he wanted to present that weren’t really suited to Madame. Crazy Mary came on stage in a straight jacket, with a siren on her head and a perpetually dazed expression. She was very familiar with the ins-and-outs of the mental wards. She was a speed freak. This, combined with hospital tranquilizers, made her a very up and down existence. Madame’s comment about Mary was that everybody thinks about going crazy at some point in their life; it’s just that Crazy Mary has really gotten out there and done something about it. Jiffy was a sassy, Southern Black woman who emigrated North to a lower class section of an unnamed urban area. She was full of street smarts and had seen every kind of con imaginable. She was a sometime nightclub singer and would often allude to her experiences as a ‘lady of the night’. Her most prized possession was a 1950’s Cadillac. Mr. Mackelhoney was a worn-out vaudevillian who was never very successful, in part because he wasn’t very talented. He always had to read his lines from a card inside his hat. He knew Madame ‘from way back’, and she was generous enough to let him perform on her show. Baby Smedley (named after Wayland’s grandfather) presented his unique high chair view of the world. He was the least developed character and was only used in two or three performances. Of all the characters, however, Wayland was especially attached to Madame, and she was the focal point of the show.

By 1979 Wayland was busy with a hectic touring schedule. He was honored for his work that year by the American Guild of Variety Artists with the “Specialty Act of the Year” award. He and Madame made another television special for Showtime entitled Madame in Manhattan. They also began a four-year stint on the television series Solid Gold, first with Andy Gibb and Marilyn McCoo, and later with Dione Warwick.
Mr. Mackelhoney

Fig. 3
Collection of Marlena Shell

While working on *Solid Gold*, Wayland was signed by Paramount for his own syndicated series *Madame's Place*. This unusual comedy sitcom had Madame living with an eccentric suburban family. As with all his television work, Wayland cleaned up Madame's language for the show. Even so, her true bawdy personality was very much present through Wayland's deft use of sophisticated innuendo. A unique aspect of the production was that Madame moved about the set on the same plane with the other actors, rather than being restricted to a booth or podium. Wayland was not seen - he operated Madame while seated on a rolling cart with her raised above his head. This technique integrated Madame into the action, making her very life-like. The show ended after one grueling season with seventy-five shows taped in only fifteen weeks. The quality of the show and Wayland's performances are, however, some of his best television work.

Their popularity was soaring. In Las Vegas, Reno and Atlantic City he was playing to capacity crowds in hotel lounges, but he still hadn't headlined in any of the big showrooms. The hotel owners felt that a small puppet like Madame would be lost on stage. Finally the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas took a chance. With Wayland they created *Madame Goes To Harlem*, which starred Madame, Linda Hopkins and the legendary Nicholas Brothers. The show proved to be a huge success and ran for two years. A year later, the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas and Atlantic City revived their famous dance ensemble as a showcase for Madame. His work in these shows won him the 1981 Atlantic City Magazine's Entertainer of the Year Award and Las Vegas' 1981 "Jimmy" Award for best specialty act.

His touring schedule was not just limited to nightclubs and showrooms. During the early 1980's he performed at Radio City in New York, the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, and the Warner Theater in Washington, D.C. Perhaps his most important engagement was at Symphony Hall in Atlanta. His mother attended the show and saw him perform with Madame for the first time.

In 1982 he was honored for his creation of Madame with the Sebastian International Fabulous Imagery Award, which was presented to them both by Bette Davis. To round out Madame's persona, Wayland co-wrote the book *Madame, My Misbegotten Memoirs*, a totally fictitious retelling of her rise to stardom. Despite all of this success and recognition Wayland's star began to descend. The years of a hectic lifestyle began to tell on him. Somewhere along the line some bad management also led to financial trouble. He took a couple of years off to clean up his personal life, though he didn't stop creating during that time. He was busy working on material for a new act that he eventually took back out on the road in 1986-87. By then he had hired Marlena Shell as his agent. He also began writing a musical for Madame called *Madame and Me* which he hoped to have produced on Broadway. He was coming back strong when, in early 1988, he underwent surgery for
a cancerous brain tumor. After the surgery his right arm, which he used to give Madame life, was paralyzed. With painstaking work he gradually recovered most of the movement in his arm and continued to perform. He was on stage at Harrah's Tahoe when he collapsed and was hospitalized until his death in Los Angeles on October 11. In his memory Ms. Shell has organized the Wayland Flowers Foundation in Los Angeles.

Madame & Me
Wayland's genius as a puppeteer, artist and comedian centered around Madame, who was seemingly not a puppet at all but a very real, living, breathing person. Marlena Shell shared some thoughts on Wayland's unique ability: "Wayland was a fantastic storyteller with an insight for people. He was brilliant with his puppets, particularly Madame, because he could communicate with them and had such an intimate knowledge of who they were. It was innate with him. He could have Madame talk on the phone and wiggle her fingers...it was incredible. When he and Madame would sing together - such as "Just The Way You Are" - that was never just a puppet singing, that was, in a way, a real person singing. I've never seen anyone do that and I don't believe that anyone out there will ever be able to duplicate what he was able to do with his puppets."

Wayland described himself as an illusionist. "People come up to me and say, 'I don't want to offend you, but when I watch you, you disappear from the stage.' Well, I hope so, or else I'm not doing my job. My thing is to make her live."

Essay written and compiled by Judy Anderson.

The Editor thanks the following individuals for sharing their thoughts and remembrances of Wayland Flowers for this essay:
Frankie Van Cleave, Wayland's sister;
Marlena Shell, his agent;
Gary Simmons, his musical director;
Nicolas Coppola, The Puppetworks, Inc.
PUPPETS

1. Madame
Hand and Rod Puppet
 c. 1980 h. 47"
Collection of Marlena Shell

2. Crazy Mary
Hand and Rod Puppet
 c. 1980 h. 30"
Collection of Marlena Shell

3. Mr. Mackelhoney
Hand Puppet
 c. 1980 h. 61"
Collection of Marlena Shell

4. Jiffy
Hand and Rod Puppet
 c. 1980 h. 49"
Collection of Marlena Shell

5. Clown
Marionette
 c. 1962-63 h. 16"
Collection of Frankie Van Cleave

6. Wicked Magician from Aladdin
Marionette
 c. 1966-67 h. 32"
Collection of Nicolas Coppola

AWARDS

7. Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Craft on Old Is Somebody Else: Aging, Everybody's Doing It
National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, New York Area Awards 1974-75
 h. 11"
Collection of Marlena Shell

8. 10th Annual American Guild of Variety Artists
"Specialty Act of the Year"
1979 h. 17"
Collection of Marlena Shell

9. Entertainer of the Year
Atlantic City Magazine
1981 h. 7"
Collection of Marlena Shell

10. Sebastian International Fabulous Imagery Award
1982 h. 12½"
Collection of Marlena Shell

11. Appreciation Plaque
Shomrim Society of Southern California
1983 h. 9"
Collection of Marlena Shell

COSTUMES

12. Kimono
 c. 1970's h. 28"
Collection of Marlena Shell

13. "Miss America"
 c. 1970's h. 34"
Collection of Marlena Shell

14. Fox Boa
 c. 1970's h. 62"
Collection of Marlena Shell

PHOTOGRAPHS

15. With Bette Davis receiving the Sebastian International Fabulous Imagery Award
1982 Color 8"x10¼"
Collection of Marlena Shell

16. With Joan Rivers
B&W 10"x8"
Collection of Marlena Shell

17. With Robin Williams
B&W 7 5/8" x 7 13/16"
Collection of Marlena Shell

18. With Frank Sinatra
B&W 9 7/16" x 7 3/4"
Collection of Marlena Shell
19. **With Henry Fonda**  
   B&W 8" x 10"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

20. **With Mae West**  
   B&W 8" x 10"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

21. **Cast of Madame's Place**  
   B&W 8" x 10"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

**SKETCHES**

22. **Mechanics of Marionette**  
   **Leg & Arm**  
   Pencil c. 1964 8 1/2" x 11"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

23. **Mechanics of Marionette**  
   **Buttocks & Chest**  
   Pencil c. 1964 8 1/2" x 11"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

24. **Mechanics of Marionette**  
   **Body**  
   Pencil c. 1964 8 1/2" x 11"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

25. **Nightclub Puppets**  
   Ethel Merman and Mary Martin as Birds  
   Singing Woman  
   Female  
   Man In Tux  
   Male and Female  
   Pencil and Watercolor  
   c. 1965-66  
   Collection of Nicolas Coppola

26. **The Wizard of Oz Puppets**  
   Lion  
   Scarecrow  
   Pencil c. 1964-65  
   Collection of Nicolas Coppola

27. **Madame**  
   Markers c. 1975 14" x 10 3/4"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

**MISCELLANEY**

28. **Madame**  
   Markers c. 1975 14" x 10 3/4"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

29. **Madame**  
   Cartoon Cel h. 12 1/2"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

30. **Jiffy**  
   Cartoon Cel h. 12 1/2"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

31. **Madame: My Misbegotten Memoirs**  
   Fictional autobiography inscribed to Marlena Shell  
   c. 1983 h. 9 1/4"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

32. **Songsheet**  
   "Madame's Place" Theme Song  
   c. early 1980's h. 12"  
   Collection of Marlena Shell

33. **Kumquats Poster**  
   c. 1971 h. 18"  
   Collection of Nicolas Coppola
ESSAY NOTES

1 Garland Reeves, "Brush with Death has given new view of life", Birmingham (Alabama) News (May 15, 1988)
2 Irmgard McLendon, "He Became A Puppeteer At Seven", Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine (January 27, 1963)
4 Armistead Maupin, "Madame", Interview (December 1982)
5 Howard Thompson, "Kumquats, Erotic Puppet Show, at Gate", New York Times (November 16, 1971)
6 Jerry Oster, "Erotic Puppet Show Proves Papier Tiger", Daily News (November 16, 1971)
7 "Terrill Boy To Debut On National TV Monday Nite", The Dawson News (March 7, 1974)
8 Mark Faris, "Flowers and Madame go hand in hand", Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal (November 15, 1985)
9 Mikla, op. cit.
10 Reeves, op. cit.
The Center for Puppetry Arts was founded in 1978 to provide the public with an opportunity to experience all aspects of puppetry. It is the only major arts institution in the U.S. devoted entirely to puppetry and each year 350,000 children and adults visit the Center to participate in performances, educational workshops and museum activities. The Museum features one of the largest private collections of puppets from throughout the world and is open Monday-Saturday throughout the year. Visitors may take a Guided Tour as well as see video tapes.

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