

Madame

The story of a saucy old bag

By LAURA VOGEL

WHEN it comes to ornery hand puppets, Triumph the Insult Comic Dog has nothing on Madame. And the cantankerous mutt had better watch his back, because the wizened diva and her new puppet master have set out to put the comedy world on a short leash.

Clad in a feather-trimmed

gown, the snarky crone and her former partner Wayland Flowers kept vaudeville shtick alive and well into the '80s. First in West Village clubs and later on TV shows like "Hollywood Squares," "Laugh-In" and "Solid Gold," they peddled raunchy jokes with a gay sensibility decades before comics like Sean Hayes ("Will & Grace") and Mario Cantone ("Sex and the City") became mainstream fixtures.

Flowers, the warmblooded half of the duo, died 18 years ago. But over the past few months, the campy hag with the cutting one-liners has been spotted at local bars, parties and nightclubs.

Four decades after her debut, Madame tells The Post she's ready to make her grand re-entrance — setting out to retake her N.Y.C. hometown.

And like before, a dashing New Yorker has his hand up her skirt.

The story of Madame's rise, fall, extended hiatus and reanimation is a typical showbiz tale of humble beginnings, naive ambition, tragedy and zingers. Or as she puts it: "I'm just glad to be out of the box!" Adding, of course, a filthy riff on her confinement.

HELLO, DOLLY

Wayland Parrott Flowers Jr. was born in Richland, Ga., in 1939. His father, a grover, died when Wayland was 5. In elementary school, he got a marionette theater for Christmas and quickly immersed himself in creating stories, costumes and characters for his new friends.

By the time he was in the sixth grade, his shows had become a neighborhood fixture, and in high school he began making his own puppets and traveling around Georgia to perform.

Classmates teased him about playing with dolls, but he worked to win them over with showmanship.

"When I started giving shows, I discovered that puppets also gave me control of audiences," Flowers told the Atlanta Journal Constitution

in 1963. "I could see that even kids bigger than me would get so absorbed, they'd look on the figures as being alive."

After stints in college, the Coast Guard and a department store, Flowers hitchhiked to New York and got a job working for the Suzari Marionette troupe.

During a job at the 1964 World's Fair, a fellow performer, Bob Payne, gave Flowers a hand-and-rod-operated witch. She became the prototype for Madame.

Living in the West Village, he'd work the neighborhood bars, passing the hat for tips and improvising with his increasingly bawdy sidekick, who had a penchant for delivering lines such as, "These are my summer diamonds. Some are diamonds, some are not!"

"She was a real person to him," says Marlina Shell, who first met Flowers in the '70s and later became his manager and executor of his estate. She's also the mastermind behind Madame's comeback and a fierce defender of Flowers legacy.

"The puppet enabled him to interact with people, because it wasn't him speaking, it was his alter ego," she adds. "Wayland was a very dramatic person, sometimes over-the-top, but he was very, very shy, and he had very Southern manners — the puppet allowed him to break through."

I'M YOUR PUPPET

In 1971, Flowers and Madame made their stage debut in "Kumquats" at the Village Gate. The show billed itself as "the world's first erotic puppet show" and Madame's big number was "The Sensuous Woman."

That was long before "Avenue Q" put randy puppets on Broadway, but Shell says there's no comparison between "Kumquats" and the Tony-winning musical.

"Oh, no, it wasn't any good," she says. "It was terrible, in fact!" Post critic Jerry Tallmer agreed, calling it "a smirky little business" and singling out Madame as "an old fagbag puppet" who scolds her feather boa: "Now don't you be a bad girl or Mommy will send you back to Bide-a-Wee."

But "Kumquats" and appearances on "The Andy Williams Show" propelled

VILLAGE PERSON: Madame made her 1971 debut at the Village Gate in a much-maligned "erotic puppet show" called "Kumquats."