





MINDY KALING

IS JUST GETTING STARTED

THE MASTERMIND BEHIND SUCH SHOWS AS *NEVER HAVE I EVER* AND *THE SEX LIVES OF COLLEGE GIRLS* HAS EXCELLED AT RAZOR-SHARP COMEDY THAT GIVES VOICE TO THE UNDERREPRESENTED. AND THE OPPORTUNITIES SHE'S HANDING TO DIVERSE, NEXT-GENERATION TALENTS AMOUNT TO A HOLLYWOOD MAKEOVER.

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Content queen.
In-demand actor.
Best-selling author.
Name-above-the-
title showrunner.
A burgeoning
brand unto herself.

In the 17 short years since she joined *The Office*'s writers room, Mindy Kaling's rise has been no less than startling, not to mention groundbreaking. She hits all the requirements of today's enlightened Hollywood. She paints fresh canvases as a storyteller. She gives voice to the voiceless. She pays it forward as a mentor. If she epitomizes new-school sensibilities, she got to where she is through old-school training and self-created opportunity, starting with "write what you know."

Like Shonda Rhimes and Ryan Murphy before her—who, like Kaling, stoke fascination and controversy in equal measures—she gained her strength and influence as a writer first, which has allowed her to create worlds American TV viewers have rarely seen until now.

Everything that bears Kaling's stamp reflects who she is. That's true of projects she initiates like *The Mindy Project* or *Never Have I Ever*, both with Indian American heroines at the center. And it's true of legacy properties that she puts her own stamp on, like her multi-culti take on *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. That reflection can be rosy or distorted, with the conflict between how she and her characters see themselves in the world versus the way they'd like the world to see them.

About that "brand" business? Kaling's not sure whether to embrace it or run the other way. "There is a part of me that thinks, 'When you



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start thinking about your brand, you're done,'" Kaling tells *Produced By*, though she acknowledges some consistent themes in her work. "I think some of the identifying characteristics of my shows are bright women and underdogs trying to break out from stereotypes."

The other part of Kaling embraces change and chooses the road less taken. "Part of the fun of my career has been to try to defy expectations whenever I can. I want to do things that are new to me. I think that's how I'm going to grow as an artist," she says.

Kaling cites Jordan Peele as somebody who broke out of their comedy roots to master another vocabulary entirely. "He has the most comedy cred," she says, "and now he's created this whole genre of horror that belongs to him. I want to do that too. I'm that ambitious."

Kaling's ambition, not to mention her abilities, are no surprise to the people she's worked with. Greg Daniels, the original showrunner of *The Office* who hired Kaling for the NBC sitcom's debut season in 2005, says she "mastered every department super fast"—writing, acting, producing, directing. "She has mogulized quickly, and with great taste."

That Daniels turned Kaling on to *I Love Lucy* is telling. In other words, Kaling's tastes and influences are not limited to her generation, and she still gets nostalgic for the traditional network model that caused viewers to wait a week in anticipation of what happens next, versus binge-watching an entire series over a weekend.

Her shows require an army of collaborators, but her production imprint, Kaling International, founded in 2012, stands as a lean-and-mean operation. Kaling, partner

and company president Jessica Kumai Scott, plucked from Hulu, and their two assistants make up the entire enterprise. But their track record is strong and their industry voluminous, with nearly two dozen projects in the works. Those include a *Legally Blonde* sequel and a comedy centering around L. A. Lakers owner Jeanie Buss.

Kaling International was recently featured as one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential Companies, while Kaling's deal with the Warner Brothers Television Group, inked in 2019, has paid dividends for both entities. *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, partly inspired by Kaling's experiences at Dartmouth, is considered one of HBO's most successful series to date.

Greg Daniels was first exposed to Kaling's work when he saw her off-Broadway play *Matt and Ben* (2002), which she cowrote and costarred in with her best chum from Dartmouth, Brenda Withers. Kaling's stage presence benefited from her experience in stand-up and improv, arguably the two most naked forms of performance.

"I didn't immediately want to hire her," recalls Daniels. "I just enjoyed her acting. Then her spec script came across

my desk and I loved it. I realized she could do both at a high level, and since I was looking for writer-performers, she was a perfect fit."

The Office began as a midseason replacement. Daniels, tasked with reimagining the original BBC series, maintained its mockumentary conceit, but brought his own spin. "I wanted *The Office* to feel more handmade and more of a comedy troupe like Monty Python," he explains. "So I hired a lot of writer-performers, and also encouraged the cast and editors to direct, and the cast to improvise."

It couldn't have been easy for Kaling to adapt to this new environment. She was the only woman in the writing room during that first season, and a woman of color at that. To make matters even more intimidating, fellow writers Mike Schur and B.J. Novak, like Daniels, were Harvard alums who wrote for *The Lampoon*.

"There's this really rigorous system that you come from when you do *The Lampoon*," explains Kaling. "It really trains you for these high-pressure environments." (Daniels, an *SNL* and *Simpsons* writer, would go on to cocreate *Parks and Recreation* and *King of the Hill*, while



Kaling, writer-producer-star of the film *Late Night*, and lead Emma Thompson bask in the spotlight.

COURTESY OF STARZ ENTERTAINMENT

Schur would end up cocreating *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Good Place*). Kaling, whose application to Harvard was rejected, called the experience “exhilarating” and “terrifying.”

“It was all the things that happen to you when you have this job that you wanted so badly,” she recalls, “and you think it could get ripped away at any time. I was on what was considered a doomed show that had only been picked up for six episodes, so I didn’t have the certainty that I would be in LA if the show didn’t come back.”

The show took off, going from six episodes in its first season to 22 in its second, with Kaling doing double, sometimes quadruple, duty as writer-actor-producer-director. (Her character was customer service rep Kelly Kapoor.) To demonstrate her commitment, she would show up an hour early and leave an hour later than everybody else. With 16- to 18-hour days the norm, Kaling would end up as the most prolific writer, earning 24 solo credits in her eight years on the series.

By the time Kaling spearheaded her own show, *The Mindy Project*, as part of an overall deal with NBCUniversal, she had played every leadership role in front of and behind the camera, including executive producer on *The Office*. It would earn Kaling six Emmy nominations, five as a producer and one as a writer.

And it was Daniels, she says, who laid the foundation for her future success.

“Greg is probably the single most important person to have helped me in my career,” says Kaling. “When I was coming up, if you were a person of color, you either had to make it on your own or you needed somebody to validate you. Greg was that person. He was also this incredible mentor who gave me access—to edit, to be on set. He wrote episodes with me to help me learn this format, which I didn’t know anything about. So he took a risk on me. I think about him all the time because I try to make the same kind of active choices now that he did because it had such a profound effect on me.”

Kaling not only became the poster gal for “just do it,” but her edgy sense of humor was evident from the get-go. In the final episode of season 1, called “Hot Girl,” which she wrote, Amy Adams guest starred as a salesperson who’s allowed to use the office to sell purses, attracting the unwanted attention of virtually every male on staff. The creepy, inappropriate behavior on display, particularly from manager Michael (Steve Carell) and lackey Dwight (Rainn Wilson), is cringeworthy, more than a decade before the #metoo movement might have put the clamps on such storylines in a comedy.

It also foreshadowed Kaling’s talent for tackling serious issues beneath the sitcom veneer of her subsequent shows. The at-times outrageous antics that characterize *The Sex*

“I’M REALLY, REALLY PROUD OF HOW MANY WOMEN, AND HOW MANY WOMEN OF COLOR, HAVE DIRECTED OUR SHOWS. A COMEDY DIRECTOR HAS TO BE GOOD AT SO MANY THINGS ... IF IT’S NOT FUNNY, IT’S NOT FUNNY, AND WE’RE GOING TO MOVE ON UNTIL THE SCENE WORKS.”

Lives of College Girls, which she cocreated with Justin Noble, are the series’ ostensible draw. But such themes as income disparity, gender bias, Greek-life elitism, and sexual assault—matters often swept under the rug—eventually rise to the surface in a more sobering light.

Matt Warburton, who worked with Kaling on *The Mindy Project* and several projects since, including cocreator on the *Four Weddings* reboot, was among the 20-something writers who palled around with Kaling in those formative days.

“We were a bit of a support group for each other,” recalls Warburton, who wrote for *The Simpsons* when Kaling joined *The Office*. “At the time, it was thought that

TV comedy was done with and reality TV was experiencing a boom. I thought, 'This person is really cool, and they're going through the same challenges of being the youngest person on the writing staff.'

When *The Mindy Project* was in its nascent stage, Kaling invited Warburton to a roundtable at her house, and they clicked immediately. "We wrote a lot of the jokes that ended up in the pilot," he says. "Then I happened to be available when the show got picked up. That was about 10 years ago, and we've been working together ever since."

On *The Mindy Project*, Kaling had gone from No. 11 on *The Office* call sheet to the star of her own series. She played Dr. Mindy Lahiri, an OB-GYN. The profession was a nod to her mother, a Bengali OB-GYN from Mumbai, India, who moved to Boston with her architect husband, a Tamil raised in Chennai, in 1979, the year Kaling was born. As "judge, jury and executive producer" on her own show, as she describes it in her book *Why Not Me?*, Kaling practically lived on the Universal lot, running back and forth between the writers room and the set.

"It was like, 'Great, let me just like stay here until 10 at night and come back at 6 in the morning,'" recalls Kaling. "I had an enormous amount of prep as an actor the night before, just making sure I knew my lines cold. I had gone through every scene to make sure there wasn't going to be rewrites, so that during the day I could be a really active participant onstage."

But wearing multiple hats took its toll, especially on what Kaling calls "a good old-fashioned network show," subject to ratings and the whims of viewer habits.

"We just lived in constant fear," says Kaling. "It was a Universal show for Fox, which already made it a little more tenuous because we weren't the home team; we were the farm team. I was terrified that if I didn't work hard, we'd get canceled. And then we *did* get canceled"—which prompted a migration to Hulu for three seasons.

If *The Mindy Project* didn't last as long as Kaling would have liked, the relationships she made were lasting. "I went on to collaborate with the writers on that show on all my subsequent shows," she says, including Matt Warburton, Lang Fisher, Ike Barinholtz, Chris Schleicher and Tracy Wigfield. Fisher calls them a "murderers row of great comedy writers."

Craig Erwich, president of Hulu Originals, insisted on keeping Kaling in the family by finding her a project after *The Mindy Project* had run its course. Jonathan Prince, a longtime TV writer-producer, found the 1994 hit *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in the MGM archives. He reached out to Howard Klein, Kaling's producing partner and manager at 3 Arts Entertainment, who brought it to his star client. Richard Curtis (*Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*), who wrote the original, and would surely have his bust carved into the Mount Rushmore of rom-com writers, served as a consultant on the redo.

Kaling and Warburton's mutual love of rom-coms made them the perfect match to reimagine *Four Weddings* as a 10-episode miniseries that aired on Hulu in 2019.

Curtis, who was largely hands-off, offered his professorial advice when prompted. "I was happy because he came to table reads," says Kaling, "and gave us input about the format. I'm such an admirer of him, and we loved and reference his movies so often (in all our shows). One thing I love about him is that people like to argue about his work." (*Love Actually*, anyone?)

NEW MEMBERS

PRODUCED BY TRAINS THE SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE GUILD'S NEWEST MEMBERS, AND OFFERS A GLIMPSE AT WHAT MAKES THEM TICK.



ARI LUBET

Ari Lubet is a literary manager and producer at 3Arts Entertainment. He was an executive producer on the Netflix series *American Vandal*, which won a Peabody Award. His feature producing credits include Sundance 2019 entry *Hala*, one of Apple's early forays into the feature film market. He is an executive producer on the original series *Players* for Paramount+, which premiered in June.

AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU DISCOVER WHAT A PRODUCER BRINGS TO THE TABLE?

An established healthy creative trust between artists and producers yields great communication, efficacy and results. I've found this to be true, and it has been reinforced on every project I've worked on, from student films to television shows and feature films. Artists need creative allies and fundamental support to do their best work.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK YOU WHAT A PRODUCER DOES, WHAT IS YOUR ANSWER IN A NUTSHELL?

Adaptability is the quintessential intangible skill required to excel.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT THE PRODUCER'S ROLE?

That anyone can do it well. It is a complicated and nuanced position that requires a steadfast commitment to incisive communication, complex decision-making and, most importantly, active listening. To me, the distance between producing and producing well is the difference between a noun and a verb.

Adds Warburton: “Unlike a lot of reboots, we just had so much respect for the movie that we did not want to remake something that was in our mind pretty perfect to begin with. We wanted to tell a story about a multicultural generation, which is something the original movie did not do, because demographics were so different when it was made. We wanted to see what London is like now.”

That London is populated by mixed-race couples, old money and new, American ex-pats, and dyed-in-the-wool locals. As with all rom-coms, casting was key. Warburton had observed on *The Mindy Project* that “we ended up punching way above our weight with guest stars,” whether it was Seth Rogan, the Duplass brothers, or Julia Stiles, “because Mindy had a way of making it a fun place to hang out and identifying something they don’t normally get to do.”

As cocreators and exec producers on *Four Weddings*, the two—along with the Hulu brass—had the first say and the last word on casting. “You had to take a leap of faith, because the way the show was put together, there wasn’t a spot for a big-name person at the top,” says Warburton.

The most recognizable actor was colead Nathalie

Emmanuel, fresh off *Game of Thrones*. But the big discovery was Nikesh Patel as Emmanuel’s love interest. “We knew we wanted a person of color from an Indian or Pakistani background who’s British,” says Warburton. “He was just so charming and handsome, and so good at the romance stuff.”

The chemistry between the two leads is touchingly established in the first episode when Emmanuel’s Maya, a political operative, and Patel’s Kash, an investment banker who’d rather act, find themselves thrown together in the lost-and-found luggage room at Heathrow. The scene is key because they are uncharacteristically honest with each other, despite being complete strangers, and the audience must invest in them, despite all the ensuing complications.

“That’s a scene we reshot a couple of times,” recalls Warburton, “because Mindy considered this such an important moment in the series. In an earlier version of that scene, we were still getting to know these characters and the actors, and it wasn’t working. Mindy said, ‘Whatever it takes, that particular scene has to be perfect.’ So we completely broke it down to the studs and reshot the whole thing.



From left, writer-exec producer Mindy Kaling observes as Poorna Jagannathan, Richa Shukla and Maitreyi Ramakrishnan act out a scene in *Never Have I Ever*.

COURTESY OF STARZ ENTERTAINMENT

NEW MEMBERS

PRODUCED BY TRAINS THE SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE GUILD'S NEWEST MEMBERS, AND OFFERS A GLIMPSE AT WHAT MAKES THEM TICK.



CHELSEA DEVINCENT

Chelsea DeVincent's feature credits include senior producer on Disney's *Hocus Pocus 2*, line producer on *The Old Ways*, and unit production manager on *Wildcat*.

AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU DISCOVER WHAT A PRODUCER BRINGS TO THE TABLE?

In my early 20s, I was working for a couple of producers who could fill any role on a production. Seeing how they were able to communicate with the rest of the crew because they knew how all the pieces fit together was inspiring.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK YOU WHAT A PRODUCER DOES, WHAT IS YOUR ANSWER IN A NUTSHELL?

Creative problem-solving.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT THE PRODUCER'S ROLE?

That our job is to say no. Our job is to work with the team to find the best solution for everyone involved.

Mindy is really good at being able to identify where that extra effort is going to pay off the most."

The series was shot completely in London, with 40% of the writing staff from the U.K. and all four directors British citizens. That approach paid off in verisimilitude. "We were really scared that we were going to sound like a bunch of Americans stomping around in London," says Warburton. "Having British directors was enormously important—just as important as having some (U.K.) writers. Because on the day (of shooting) they can say, 'This just does not sound realistic at all.' And we could tailor it. We were on their turf and tried to be really respectful."

In *Mindy World*, nobody expresses shock or dismay if a key character comes out of the closet, Facebook is for geezers, verbal zingers and pop culture references fly fast and furious, and no comic detail is too small. In a blink-and-you-missed-it text exchange between Maya and her married politico boyfriend—just exposed for having an affair with his dog walker—you see the almost buried line "We bonded over dachshunds and it went a little nuts!" on her iPhone.

Slanguage is also par for the course, like "try-hards" (ultracompetitive whiz kids obsessed with being at the top of their class), "chuckle fuckers" (frat boys who have sex with a woman because she's funny and not necessarily sexy), and "catharcism" (the desire by media figures to publicly confess their sins to achieve absolution).

Movie titles are often employed as verbs or adjectives, as when Whitney (Alyah Chanelle Scott), the Black star soccer player in *Sex Lives*, surveys the scene at a Kappa sorority mixer and says, "This is some *Get Out* shit right here."

Never Have I Ever, entering its fourth season on Netflix, might be Kaling's most fully realized project. Like *Sex Lives*, it centers on a group of ethnically diverse gal pals, mostly nerds obsessed with romance.

Lang Fisher, who cocreated *Never Have I Ever* with Kaling and who was a showrunner on *TMP*, describes their three-step writing process, during which scripts are workshopped to perfection: from the story pitch ("like improv where you bounce ideas off each other") to the actual writing by the anointed staffer to the "punch-up" phase. "Usually the showrunner is sitting at the keyboard," she explains, "and everybody's watching on the monitor what you're typing. You're going through it line by line, with everybody pitching jokes to make the lines funnier. Then the showrunner decides what jokes stick and you put them in the script."

The whole process takes about three weeks. "In that third week you usually do a table read to see what things land and what things need work. Then you do a second rewrite. Then it's usually ready to go."

Although it takes place in Sherman Oaks, California, the concept for *Never Have I Ever* was inspired by Kaling's experiences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where, says Kaling, "there were only two other Indian kids in my entire childhood growing up." *Never's* central character is Devi Vishwakumar, a whip-smart 15-year-old Indian American played by Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, torn between being too Indian and not Indian enough. Like Kaling's character in *The Mindy Project*, Devi vacillates between a love interest who's her intellectual equal and the unattainable dreamboat of her fantasies.

"It's the classic conundrum of who is right for you," explains Fisher. "Is it somebody exactly like you who challenges you and you feel a little bit competitive with? Or is it somebody who isn't like you at all, but is kind of how you wish you were? That's fun TV, too. Whenever you see a slo-mo of a hot person walking toward the screen, I think everyone gets excited."

Adds Kaling: "Indian American girls on my shows want to do something that is unconventional or surprising. I'm always debating two sides."

The word "surprising" also comes up when Fisher talks about the series, whether it be the narrative format—the VO is by veteran tennis bad boy John McEnroe, playing *John McEnroe*—or the overall concept. "We wanted a show that felt familiar but also was surprising," Fisher explains.

"Mindy did this in *The Mindy Project* back in the day when she was the only South Asian lead of a romantic comedy television show," adds Fisher. "I think she wanted to do the same thing for the teen genre, showing this young Indian American girl and having all the trappings of a YA comedy, because you just hadn't seen that before. It was important for both of us to show a story about an immigrant family with nuance to all these characters, that they have many different sides to them."

To achieve this, Kaling and Fisher thought it crucial to have diversity in the writers room and behind the camera. "If you have a director who sees our story and recognize themselves in it, it really helps their directing," explains Fisher. "Then we obviously had to have a large number of South Asian writers, because these are stories only they can tell."

Adds Kaling: "I'm really, really proud of how many women, and how many women of color, have directed our shows. A comedy director has to be good at so many things, like how to get a comedic performance out of



Nathalie Emmanuel and Nikesh Patel earn their long-simmering romance in the miniseries reboot of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

actors. If it's not funny, it's not funny, and we're going to move on until the scene works." As for diversity, Kaling is simply following her mentor Greg Daniels' model of nurturing young new talent. "Whether it's writers, actors, directors," she says, "I want to stick them into that ecosystem where they learn and not be so scared of failure, so that they'll stick with me and create new shows with me." Pay it forward, indeed.

With *Sex Lives*, Kaling upped the ante in the risqué department. The depiction of hookup culture in the series'

fictional Essex College is maybe the worst nightmare for protective parents sending their daughters off to a university. Amrit Kaur, who plays Bela among the show's quartet of soon-to-be-besties, might be the closest to a Kaling alter ego. Bela aspires to be on staff of the school's humor magazine, *The Catullan* (Kaling contributed to Dartmouth's *Jack O' Lantern* for a year), and impresses one of the editors by identifying Sid Caesar on a wall of photographs in the magazine's hallowed offices.

Bela, like her roommates, is obsessed with washboard abs and casual sex. But according to Kaling, their bark is bigger than their bite. "Like the girls on a lot of my shows," she says, "it's a lot of talk and not as much action. This was definitely not my experience (in college). I was like a shy theater nerd, a prude. I feel more like Kimberly (played by Pauline Chalamet) on the show."

But Kaling's phalanx of young writers saw things a bit differently. In other words, the naked party that's depicted in season 1 did not come out of thin air. "We went to Yale and Dartmouth and stayed there for a week, interviewing tons of young women about their experiences," says Kaling. "The naked party is a real thing at Yale."

The explicitness of certain scenes was such that an intimacy coordinator was added to the staff. "That was a big learning curve for us," says Warburton, a writer on the show.



COURTESY OF HBO MAX

From left, Reneé Rapp, Alyah Channele Scott, Pauline Chalamet and Amrit Kaur form an unlikely bond as roommates and eventual besties in the HBO series *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, cocreated by Mindy Kaling and Justin Noble.

Going forward, Kaling, with the help of Dan Goor (*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*) is still hard at work writing the screenplay for *Legally Blonde 3*, at the personal request of Reese Witherspoon. She was also endorsed by Jeanie Buss and Linda Rambis, the Lakers' executive director of special projects, for the so-called *Lakers Project* for Netflix. "Buss's experiences as president of the Lakers are absolutely incredible," says Kaling, who enlisted Ike Barinholtz and David Stassen, both from *The Mindy Project*, as cowriters.

"As a writer, you couldn't dream of better stories," she adds, "coming from a wildly dysfunctional family, and then to be this beautiful blonde in LA who made the choice not to get married, not have kids, and to run this team in this male environment with these huge personalities that at times can be very sexist."

Kaling is also moving away from her comic comfort zone toward drama. She optioned a book called *Playing Dead: A Journey Through the World of Death Fraud*, by Elizabeth Greenwood, a *New York Times* bestseller that explores the notion of disappearing without a trace. "It's not naturally

comedic," explains Kaling. "People who fake their own deaths are inherently fascinating for obvious reasons."

She credits her manager Howard Klein for opening up new vistas in her career. "I've always been an ambitious person," she says, "and he was always the person who helped me articulate that ambition."

It was Klein who convinced her to parlay her 11.4 million Twitter following into personal essays drawn from her own life that would engage readers, resulting in three *New York Times* bestsellers, beginning with 2011's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*.

At the 34th Annual PGA Awards in February, Kaling will be honored with the Guild's Norman Lear Achievement Award, recognizing her extraordinary work in television. She'll be following in the footsteps of such lofty, brand-name vets as Shonda Rhimes, Amy Sherman-Palladino and Lorne Michaels.

"I am never surprised by Mindy because I know and love her talent and her work ethic, modesty, and values, and I have always expected great things," says Daniels. "I believe she is just getting started." ■