


A person is seen from behind, sitting on a tall wooden stool on a stage. They are facing a group of people seated in rows of chairs, which are arranged on a tiered platform. The setting appears to be a theater or a rehearsal space, with stage lights visible in the background. The text "Last Hurrahs" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font, with "Last" in a cursive script and "Hurrahs" in a bold serif typeface.

# *Last* Hurrahs





Michael Douglas, center, as acting guru Sandy Kominsky, who grapples with the loss of his agent and best friend Norman (Alan Arkin, who decided not to return for the show's third and final season) in *The Kominsky Method*.

**PRODUCERS BEHIND THE KOMINSKY METHOD, INSECURE, OZARK, RAY DONOVAN AND BROOKLYN NINE-NINE EXPOUND ON THE LOGIC BEHIND ENDING A SHOW'S RUN IN A WAY THAT PROVIDES CLOSURE, OR NOT.**

WRITTEN BY HUGH HART

**T**ony Soprano getting whacked to the tune of "Don't Stop Believing." The cast of *Seinfeld* serving time in jail. Bob Newhart waking up to realize his entire six-season *Newhart* series was just a dream.

Memorable TV finales, even controversial ones, have the power to stir audiences who often feel strongly about how their favorite characters should fare. The choices that lead up to whether a show ends with a bang or a whimper often draw on time-honored storytelling traditions ranging from weddings, tearful farewells, death, villainy brought low, a shocking reveal, a mystery solved.

Beyond the plotlines, producers riding herd on a TV show's final run also need to navigate budgets, cast issues, locations and unforeseen circumstances.

So what does it take to craft a powerful swan-song season? *Produced By* checked in with five top TV producers who shared their approaches for bringing down the curtain on their most recent shows.

## ***Kominsky's Curveball***

For *The Kominsky Method* showrunner Chuck Lorre, closure is key. The comedy, starring Michael Douglas as the vain actor-turned-teacher Sandy Kominsky, ended its second season in limbo when costar Alan Arkin, who plays Sandy's sardonic agent Norman, decided not to return. "He was pretty clear, given the pandemic, his age, his vulnerability," says Lorre. "It was just not in the cards. So then the question became: Can we continue?"

Lorre made his case to Netflix for a third and final *Kominsky* season. "I felt very strongly that we should continue after the death of this beloved character Norman." Netflix agreed and financed a six-episode closer. "The story that came out of season three was really gratifying because we get to see Sandy walk through the loss of his best friend, and we also see his dreams come true late in life when he gets the starring role in *The Old Man and the Sea*."

A powerful addition to the cast helped buoy the final episodes when Kathleen Turner, famously paired with Douglas in *Romancing the Stone* (1984), joined the regular cast as Sandy's ex-wife, Rox. Lorre notes, "Our final season allowed Sandy to make things right with his ex-wife and grow into this caregiver role, as opposed to the narcissistic take-care-of-me, center-of-the-world person."

Logistically, Lorre faced the challenges of filming during the early days of COVID. "There was this cloud hanging over the whole thing," he says. Despite

*Insecure* creator and star Issa Rae, right, celebrates her birthday with Lawrence (Jay Ellis) and his son in the series finale.



COURTESY OF RAYMOND LIU/HBO

observing COVID protocols ("We were all wearing masks and then putting shields over the masks"), the production shut down numerous times due to scattered positive tests, causing a ripple effect. "We lost Paul Reiser for 10 days," recalls Lorre. "We lost Michael for a week because he was next to someone who had COVID and had to quarantine. A lot of stuff that we shot had to be pieced together with whoever was available. It became a daily thing: If the phone rings early in the morning, it's always bad."

Narratively, Lorre, who previously produced 12 seasons of *The Big Bang Theory*, followed his own muse without worrying about fan reactions. "I don't look at the social media stuff," he says. "Pandering is a slippery slope if you're trying to entertain or address some mythical audience in your mind. *I'm* watching the show. Do *I* give a shit about these characters? Am *I* hoping they find happiness or love or career success? Am *I* rooting for them? For me, that's the more honest path."

## Landing *Insecure's* Plane

When *Insecure* debuted in 2016 and quickly became a critically praised rom-com about Black professionals navigating single life in LA, showrunner Prentice Penny and creator-star Issa Rae knew *exactly* how many seasons—five—they envisioned for the show. HBO happily backed the plan. But when it came time to craft the final episode, Penny and his team got anxious about how to stick the landing.

"We didn't figure out the finale until eight episodes in," Penny says. "It's funny because we never approached any other seasons or episodes like we did the finale. When you're breaking episodes, you're just going, 'Oh, that's an interesting twist.' You don't agonize over it. So that paralyzed us for a long time."

According to Penny, the creative breakthrough came courtesy of *Insecure* writer-producer Amy Aniobi. "She said we're always talking about how we have to land the plane. But the lives of these characters in the fictitious world will continue after the finale. So let's think about it like, 'We're going to jump out of the plane right here, but the characters are going to continue. Don't worry about landing the plane.' That was such a huge fucking light bulb moment. It freed everything up."

Penny, Rae, and company ultimately came up with a happy ending that fast-forwards through a year's worth of drama pegged to the main character's birthday. In the best rom-com tradition, Issa's best friend, Molly (Yvonne Orji), has a big wedding. The series closes on Issa as she quietly celebrates her birthday with Lawrence (Jay Ellis) and his son.

"Issa called Lawrence her soulmate in an earlier season, so that just seemed right," Penny says. "We also knew that at the end of the series, Issa needed to be secure in her insecurities. Throughout the whole show she'd been trying to rid herself of these feelings, but part of growing up is recognizing that those insecurities are not going to go anywhere. You need to ride the ebb and flow of them."

Shooting of the final season took place between January and June of 2021, so the *Insecure* team could not escape COVID's tentacles. "In our show there's a lot of specificity in terms of being in LA," says Penny. "That's one of our big trademarks—to not be generic location-wise. But some places were closing because they just couldn't stay open. The big thing I took out of it was, like, breathe. Just let it go. Which is not my default setting. My default setting is, 'Let's get it out!' But that final season on *Insecure*, there was a lot of 'Trust in the universe and something will circle back.'"



## NEW MEMBERS

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



Jessica Held was most recently the head of TV at Mark Johnson's Gran Via Productions, overseeing the launch of *The Immortal Universe*, AMC's supernatural franchise based on the writings of Anne Rice. She produced *Interview With the Vampire* and co-executive produced *Mayfair Witches*. She was also an executive producer on *Lucky Hank*. Prior to Gran Via, Held served as an executive at Awesomeness Films, where she developed and coproduced the features *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) and *The Perfect Date* (2019).

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

Anyone who thinks they don't need producers. Every project has its own unique needs, some more or less than others. But everyone needs someone in their corner advocating for and helping to protect the integrity of the story you're trying to tell.

### WHAT MOTIVATES YOU AS A PRODUCER?

A deep desire to support people and projects that make audiences feel seen, and to provide a window into other worlds that create a sense of belonging beyond their own environments.

### WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED ABOUT PRODUCING?

Don't ever be the loudest person in the room.

Jason Bateman as Marty Byrde and Julia Garner as Ruth Langmore experience a heated moment in the final season of *Ozark*.



## Ozark Stays True to Its Dark Tone

When *Ozark* debuted on Netflix in the summer of 2017, the principals didn't necessarily have an end game in mind, according to producer Patrick Markley. "We just figured we'd play out the show as long as the material was rich and we weren't repeating ourselves."

Markley credits showrunner Chris Mundy with mapping out the fourth and final season. Divided into two seven-episode story arcs, this "jumbo" season follows the final machinations of Marty Byrde (Jason Bateman), his wife, Wendy (Laura Linney), and their two kids (Skylar Gaertner and Sofia Hublitz). Relocated from Chicago to the Ozarks, the Byrde family over the years consorted with Mexican drug dealers, outsmarted the FBI, tangled with opium-growing locals and covered up murders. It's a lot of plot to keep track of, Markley acknowledges. "It was my responsibility to take this story off the page and get it onto the screen with all the collaborators, staying closely in touch with Chris as he monitored dailies to make sure we were keeping the story where he wanted it to be."

The *Ozark* finale stayed true to the show's dark tone when fan-favorite Ruth (Julia Garner) died in a nighttime ambush. "People were really upset that Ruth got killed," Markley says. "People liked her a lot, so to see her get taken out by 'Mama Cartel' was upsetting to a lot of folks."

Equally shocking: The final scene cuts to black after 14-year-old Jonah Byrde shoots a likable investigator who's cracked the case of Wendy's missing brother. "Chris crafted that ending over several seasons—how to get to the point of letting the Byrdes walk free when the investigator gets killed," says Markley. "I liked the fact that there wasn't a protagonist or antagonist or evil or good."



This was more subtle. They didn't lay it on with a trowel. To me, this was kind of an elegant way to say, 'Here's the world we created, this is where these people are right now, thank you very much, see you next time.'

## **Ray Donovan Earns a Reprieve**

*Ray Donovan* also focused on a dysfunctional family riven by violence. But where *Ozark* enjoyed 14 episodes to wrap things up, the Liev Schreiber series came to a screeching halt in 2020 when Showtime unexpectedly canceled the series after its seventh season had aired.

"It was disappointing, and we were a little disheartened," says producer John H. Radulovic. When the series moved after five seasons from Los Angeles to New York, Schreiber, showrunner David Hollander, and Radulovic had planned on three more East Coast seasons to bring down the curtain on fixer Ray Donovan and his criminally inclined family headed by the incorrigible patriarch Mickey (Jon Voight).

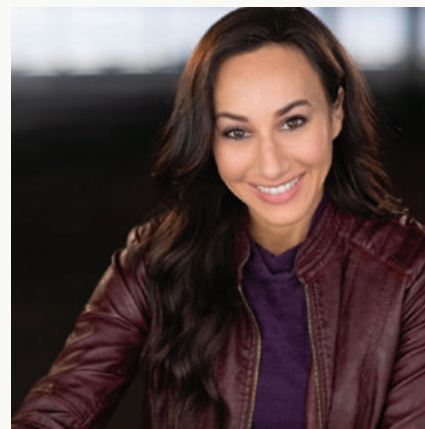
Instead, a new corporate regime deemed *Ray Donovan* too expensive. "At the thought of not being able to do season eight, we talked a great deal about the loose ends left at the end of season seven," says Radulovic. "Is daughter Bridget (Kerris Dorsey) going to make it out of the family business? Is Pooch Hall (playing Ray's brother Bunchy) going to go to prison for the rest of his life? Is Ray going to survive? Is Mickey going to pull another fast one?"

Fighting for a chance to answer those questions, Schreiber rallied *Ray Donovan* fans via his Instagram account, and showrunner David Hollander went public with his grievances. Negotiations ensued, and Showtime agreed to finance a two-hour *Ray Donovan* movie.

For Radulovic, the good news came with a complication: Since cast members believed the show was over, many actors took on new projects. Radulovic had to figure out how to wrangle the talent. "My wife says it's a good thing I like puzzles, because that's what this was like," he says. "You're trying to get all these kittens into a box. We shot the movie just

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### **EVA CEJA**

Ceja hails from Seattle, Washington, where she became obsessed with acting and musical theater. She studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London in the Foundation program, graduated from the Second City Improv/Writing Conservatory Program, and has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Although her background has been mostly as a performer, she has line producing credits on the feature *Blossom* (2023) for BET and *Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch* (2023) for Tubi Movies.

#### **WHEN DID YOU REALIZE YOUR CALLING IN LIFE?**

I was about 26 years old when I discovered producing. About five years ago I began training as a line producer, and the sky has been the limit ever since.

#### **WHAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE ABOUT THE PROFESSION?**

That there are so many different types of producers in all aspects of the industry.

#### **WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?**

Kathleen Kennedy was a huge inspiration, as well as my love for storytelling and the ideas I have that I would like to tell and produce as well.

#### **WHAT'S ON YOUR PRODUCING BUCKET LIST?**

To produce the six movies and two TV shows I have on my slate, and hopefully win an Oscar for one.



Andre Braugher and Melissa Fumero on the set of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

inside of 30 days in New York, Boston, and a little in LA. You've got all these working actors doing all sorts of things, so it was interesting to squeeze the schedule to have Eddie (Marsan, playing brother Terry) coming in later, or to get Pooch Hall in there sooner."

*Ray Donovan* the movie builds toward a death scene played to the hilt by Voight, but the final shot belongs to Schreiber's title character. Severely wounded, Ray Donovan gets hauled away in an ambulance. Will he live or die? "Through the years, this show has always respected the audience," says Radulovic, "so we wanted to leave a little bit of a question there. It's not about having a cliffhanger; it's about letting you make your own choice about how things are going to go. I think a bit of ambiguity makes for good storytelling."

## Current Events Reshape *Nine-Nine's* Finale

Sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* had already followed Andy Samberg's Jake character through 145 episodes of police precinct antics when NBC asked for one more season. "We saw that as a golden opportunity to really craft a final season," says showrunner Dan Goor. "But then two things happened: the pandemic and the tragic murder of George Floyd." With four episodes already written, Goor and company reworked the season from scratch. "We made some big changes, like having Amy (Melissa Fumero) and Holt (Andre Braugher)

work on a task force that would address police reform. This was an issue we really cared about, but we didn't want to let it eclipse the life of a show our audience had come to know already. And from the start, we knew that we wanted the finale to be a heist."

In the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* universe, heists involve elaborate shenanigans in which the cops compete to trick each other and capture a prized item. "We started doing Halloween heists that kind of became a trademark of the show," Goor says. "We wanted to make the finale as funny as it could be from start to finish, and we thought the heist would allow us to do that."

Alongside pranks that included a *Mission Impossible*-style rubber mask fake-out, the characters needed to experience heartfelt interactions, says Goor. "For the finale, we wanted to make sure that every single character had a satisfying emotional moment with another member of the ensemble who was important to them."

In producing *Brooklyn Nine-Nine's* final season during COVID, Goor powered through numerous obstacles. "How do you make intimate scenes in COVID when you want your characters to kiss, hug, say goodbye? I think we wrote the finale without a kiss between Jake and Amy, but on the day, it just felt crazy that there was no kiss. I asked the actors if it was OK, but then one of our producers said, 'Wait, wait, wait—we have to ask the COVID people.' Everyone had been tested, so we did the kiss, and it was a powerful moment. But as a producer, you worry. You're balancing the needs of the story, the needs of the actors, and the needs of the times." ■