

The Kominsky Method: The mostly comic challenges of aging

By Ed Hightower
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When it rains, it pours, and old age can be an unrelenting downpour. Knee replacement, indigestion, genitourinary problems, slowed metabolism, not to mention the death of friends and loved ones, the sense that the best may be over—and then, one’s own demise: these are so many guarantees.

The two seasons (16 episodes) of *The Kominsky Method* on Netflix consider the challenges of aging through the experiences of a pair of long-time friends: Sandy Kominsky (Michael Douglas), a once well-known actor and current acting coach, and his agent Norman Newlander (Alan Arkin).

Norman enjoys the fruits of Hollywood success, but struggles with the death of his wife and a strained relationship with his adult daughter, a frequent flyer at alcohol and drug rehab. Norman’s deceased spouse Eileen (Susan Sullivan) appears periodically to reassure and give the two men guidance on how to get on with their lives.

The road is bumpy. Norman customarily keeps people at arms-length, except for Eileen. “Civilized people,” he tells his old friend Sandy, “we keep our pain and suffering to ourselves.”

Learning to let Sandy help him move forward comes slowly, but artfully.

Norman also tests the waters of romance with mixed results. Arkin’s performance highlights not only the pain, loneliness and bitterness of loss, but also the excitement of rekindling a love with an old flame (Jane Seymour). His character’s evolution is that of a cold, hard Hollywood businessman thawing out in his later years.

As for Sandy’s world, his adult daughter Mindy (Sarah Baker) manages his acting school and, increasingly, his health. Sandy has a reputation for dating his younger female students, a propensity that

comes home to roost when Mindy introduces him to her garrulous, aging boyfriend, a retired teacher who is all too eager to share his prostate health secrets with Sandy.

Some of the better sequences in *The Kominsky Method* occur during Sandy’s acting class. The older teacher cares about the students and strives to sharpen their skills and prepare them for life. “Acting is an extension of living, exploring what it is to be human,” he tells them.

In a memorable scene, a “racially charged situation” develops when students experiment with playing characters of other ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations. What starts as healthy, and very humorous, stumbling through new territory escalates with retaliatory performances. The students’ eyes roam around the room as they wonder, silently, “To whom should I turn to see if this performance is offensive?”

The well-respected acting coach extinguishes the fire, showing the students their perceived differences amount to a pile of beans. In the prevailing atmosphere such a scene took courage and spoke the truth.

In another powerful sequence, Kominsky disabuses one student, Darshani (Jenna Lyng Adams), of her defensive, semi-ironic facade. She reveals severe childhood trauma before the whole class; Kominsky acknowledges this caringly and teaches her how to make her pain serve her in acting. Darshani’s in-class breakthrough deals with serious material sensitively while avoiding cliché.

Breaking the mold of Sandy’s typical romantic interest, a new acting student and recent divorcée (Nancy Travis, *So I Married an Axe Murderer*) asks him out. Both participants being a bit advanced in years, their relationship necessarily develops in haste: a hospital visit largely comprises the first date; a funeral,

the second. Here too the characters deal with life in living color, genuinely.

The Kominsky Method has enjoyed a warm reception from critics and audiences. Season 1 earned the Golden Globe for best comedy series in 2019, and Douglass won a Golden Globe, a Primetime Emmy and a Screen Actors Guild award in 2019, with more nominations in 2020. Arkin was nominated for several awards as well.

Season 2 features the same subject matter in much the same manner as the first. To the credit of co-executive producer Chuck Lorre and the others, *Kominsky*'s dialogue entertains, the characters fill three dimensions and the plot avoids cliff-hangers and unnatural twists and turns.

Still, there's a side of the series that feels a little absent, stale, one might even say passé. The workmanship tends to outpace the subject matter.

Amusing, but not precisely ground-breaking, neither the material nor the characters. Arkin and Douglas might even be said to specialize in this sort of thing. They do it well, but it's a little worn. Giving credit where credit is due, *Kominsky* still bears something of a date stamp on it.

With the familiar territory also comes a bit of self-satisfaction, rooted in financial well-being. As genuinely as the aging process comes across, one wants to ask, "Isn't this much easier when you are financially secure?"

Doctor visits comprise a significant portion of *Kominsky Method*. (Bob Odenkirk plays a cardiologist going through a divorce—contemplating suicide—with his usual dark hilarity, while Danny DeVito plays a snide urologist.) This material tends to capture the fear and uncertainty of ailment, but little of the economic and bureaucratic hell familiar to many households dealing with the same dilemmas.

Eventually, Sandy and Norman chat in the plush waiting room at Oncology of Beverly Hills. Norman's daughter undergoes equine therapy at drug rehab.

Over the course of several decades, creator Lorre has earned the moniker "King of Sitcoms" for his role in putting together such popular American television staples as *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire*, *Cybil*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*, among others. Despite the limitations of these works, Lorre and his colleagues have an ear for clever dialogue that finds a more developed expression in *The*

Kominsky. If Douglas, Arkin, and Method Sullivan and Travis can bring their characters to life, and they do, it derives in pertinent part from the strength of the writing. This is not just another sitcom.

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