

50 MPH: EPISODE 4

“PARAMOUNT HITS THE BRAKES”

Transcript (00:30:25)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hot shot!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

There’s a bomb on a bus.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Once the bus goes fifty miles an hour, the bomb is armed.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

If it drops below fifty...

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

...it blows up.

ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)

Oh, darn.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

You have a hair trigger aimed at your head. What do you do?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?!

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

What do you do?

KRIS TAPLEY

I’m your host, Kris Tapley, and you’re listening to an oral history of director Jan de Bont’s 1994 summer blockbuster, *Speed*, straight from the people who made it happen. Now, don’t forget to fasten your seatbelts. Let’s hit the road!

KRIS TAPLEY

Hello again and welcome back to another episode of *50 MPH*. If you are new, well, so are we. We’re only a couple of episodes into this so I encourage you to go back and knock out the last few to bring you up to, uh...speed. But anyway, to quickly catch everyone up, last week we got into the thick of writing *Speed* with screenwriter Graham Yost. He was toiling away at an early TV writing career when he first conceived his bomb-on-a-bus movie. At the end of that episode, we met Allison Lyon, co-producer of the film who was ultimately responsible for bringing the script to the attention of producer Mark Gordon, although at the time she met Graham, she was on her way out of another production company. So, let’s hear from her first today.

ALLISON LYON

He was pitching me a completely different project called *Suicide Hotline*, which I liked. You know, I said, “You know, I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be here.” He said, “It’s OK. I’m going to go home and I’m working on a spec script.” So, that’s basically where we had left it, and then he was one of the first calls I made when I started working for Mark. I never said I liked action movies, really, when I interviewed with Mark. I’m not sure it was a genre that I did particularly like, and Graham hadn’t written one. So, it was kind of surprising when it came across my desk, and it was so well-written. And I think that’s what was stunning to me, and I almost went in apologetically to Mark and said, “I know, you know, you’ve never done an action movie. I’ve never done an action movie. But the writing is so good. Please take a look at this.”

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, so who is Mark Gordon? Mark Gordon is the Oscar-nominated producer of films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Patriot*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *2012* and *Steve Jobs*. As if that weren’t enough, he’s probably best known for the television empire that he’s lorded over for the past two decades with series like *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Criminal Minds*, *Ray Donovan* and *Designated Survivor*. But like many involved with *Speed*, back in the early-90s, he was still finding his place in the industry. His biggest claims to fame were a handful of ABC after-school specials and the Dana Carvey comedy *Opportunity Knocks*, which is sort of an apt title, given the direction that things were soon to take.

MARK GORDON

I think that we all had a lot to gain by the success of the movie, but in many ways, we all had a lot to gain just by having the opportunity to make it. You know, I never saw myself as a producer of action movies, and as it turns out, I made a number of them. But it wasn't my intention. I think if you look at the movies that I've made, and the television shows that I've made over the years, they're very eclectic. You know, Jerry Bruckheimer makes a certain kind of movie. I think, at least in the old days, you thought of Brian Grazer making a certain kind of comedy. I never felt like I had a brand or a "kind of movie" that I made. I think because I was always interested in all films, to see them and appreciate them, that I became interested in all genres and all types of films as a producer. And I think sometimes, as opposed to you deciding what the definition of a movie that you want to make, oftentimes, the movie that you make that is successful defines you. And I think to some extent that happened with me, although I did continue over the years to make all different kinds of films. So, I wasn't really looking for anything except something good, something interesting, something that would entertain me, something that I would want to see in the theater.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now, Graham Yost mentioned last week that it was the opening elevator sequence of *Speed* that grabbed Mark's attention. We're going to talk about that sequence in greater detail down the line, but I should probably put it into context here. *Speed* has an interesting structure. It's sort of three movies. There's the bus section, which is basically the entire second act of the film. An hour of Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock navigating this speeding behemoth in and out of danger. But there's also a third-act subway sequence and an opening set-piece in a downtown LA high-rise. The latter is how Graham would ultimately introduce his villain, mad bomber and former bomb squad police officer Howard Payne, played by Dennis Hopper. Payne's opening volley is holding an elevator of passengers hostage after blowing its cables and rigging the brake system to explode if his ransom demands are not met. I mean, it's a full thirty minutes before Jack Traven even sees a city bus, but we get a crystal-clear view of what makes him tick right here in this sequence. Between him and his partner, officer Harry Temple, played by Jeff Daniels, Jack is by far the more compulsive personality.

[SPEED CLIP]

JEFF DANIELS (as "Harry Temple")

Alright, pop quiz. Airport. Gunman with one hostage. He's using her for cover. He's almost to a plane. You're a hundred feet away...Jack?

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Shoot the hostage.

JEFF DANIELS (as "Harry Temple")

What?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

Take her out of the equation. Go for the good wound and he can't get to the plane with her. Clear shot.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

You're deeply nuts, you know that? “Shoot the hostage.”

MARK GORDON

Yeah, you know, I read the script and I was just so floored by the way Graham wrote action. It was so visual and visceral on the page. And I would say that, you know, over the course of the development of the script, a lot of things were changed, but the elevator sequence never really changed. And by the time I got to the end of that elevator sequence, the rest of the script could have been garbage and I would have still been interested, because that was so good. As it turns out, the script was good and I loved it. But that elevator sequence really just, right from the first page, it was just written so beautifully. Most of the time action is described and written in fairly utilitarian ways. This was poetry.

ALLISON LYON

We sent out the script, you know, to different studios, and people were like, “What are you thinking, Allison?” It's certainly not the type of material I was known for. People were like, “What do you mean they never get off the bus?” I'm like, “No, no, no, no. Please keep reading. Please keep reading.” When young kids getting into the business ask me, you know, what it takes, I say, “It takes tenacity.” And no matter how many no's you get, you only need one yes. And Mark and I really, really believed in it, and more importantly, believed in Graham. We had met him in person and just kind of fell in love with that relationship and we just kept at it. And usually when there's a spec script, you know, it gets divided up between producers. You get this studio and somebody else gets another studio, and we were so passionate about it that the agent let us run with it to all the studios. And we did get a lot of no's and we got a lot of “Are you crazy?” And Don read it and totally got it.

KRIS TAPLEY

And now we come to the first studio executive on the project. Allison is talking about Don Granger, who, at the time, was the Vice President of Production at Paramount Pictures. It's worth talking about him a bit. For 30 years, Don Granger has traded in the kind of big-canvas, tent-pole releases that *Speed* is included among today, though it certainly wasn't aspiring to at the time. The film was seen as a much smaller endeavor, which we'll get to. But with executive stints at Paramount, Touchstone Pictures, the Mutual Film Company, Cruise/Wagner Productions (as in Tom Cruise) and United Artists, Don oversaw franchises like *Mission: Impossible*, *Star Trek*, *Tomb Raider* and the Jack Ryan films, as well as other large-scale productions like *War of the Worlds*, *Timeline* and *Snakes on a Plane*. For the last 10 years he has presided over the film division of David Ellison's Skydance Media, and let me just rattle off some of these titles: Edward Zwick's *Jack Reacher* with Tom Cruise, Michael Bay's *6 Underground* with Ryan Reynolds, Ang Lee's *Gemini Man* with Will Smith, Gina Prince-Bythewood's

The Old Guard with Charlize Theron, Tim Miller's *Terminator: Dark Fate* with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton, Chris McKay's *The Tomorrow War* with Chris Pratt, and of course, director Christopher McQuarrie's on-going *Mission: Impossible* series, which has leveled up with each and every new entry. The first of the two-part *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning* hits theaters next week and I can tell you that it certainly continues that trajectory. Don's most recent and perhaps greatest success? Joseph Kosinski's *Top Gun: Maverick*, which I like to say is the kind of sturdy action film we used to get every three weeks in the 90s, but that we're so starved for today, to the point that, when we finally get something like it, boom, it's critically acclaimed, it scoops up \$1.5 billion at the box office and it lands an Oscar nomination for Best Picture. Anyway, that's a long intro but a necessary one, I think, because Don Granger was the one person in all of Hollywood who saw something in Graham's script for *Speed*. Here's what he remembers.

DON GRANGER

I read it and I liked it because I loved the central concept. I believed the unique nature of being on a bus for the entire movie, for the energy and the opportunities that would give. That, in the action landscape of late-80s, early-90s, that seemed like a unique idea. But I was on the fence. And so, I remember getting a call from Mark Gordon and Allison Lyon. I can only remember this because they browbeat me into buying it. They literally were like, "You loved this. You loved this." Like, "Don't backtrack now. Don't be on the fence. Don't be equivocating about it. Don't be a coward." And they literally browbeat me into remembering the previous phone call I'd had with them about the promise of this. They were great producers. Just great. Because they literally would not allow me to say no. And I said, "OK, I get it. I know what I like about this. I think we've got a lot of work to do on the script, but let's go after it." And I bought it, Paramount bought it. We bought it, I don't believe - I think it was an incredibly inexpensive deal. And I don't think there was any competition because I believe everybody had passed.

KRIS TAPLEY

Here is screenwriter Graham Yost recalling this period.

GRAHAM YOST

I go on to *Full House*. The script is going around. *Full House* is not a good fit for me. The assistant would come in and I would be sitting there going, "Please come in and tell me I've got a phone call. Please tell me that the script has sold." And I would hear things like, "Oh, so and so passed, but there might be some interest here," and stuff. So, I would get called out of the room, and finally I just quit *Full House*. It was just too miserable for me. It was just the wrong fit. My line is they said they hired me for my edge, well, they didn't want any edge. But I quit on a Tuesday and that Thursday, my wife and I went up to Oregon for a friend's wedding, and that Friday I got the phone call that it had sold at Paramount. And that was one of those – my life just changed. But it's the movie business, so it took a year to finalize a deal with me and it was not for a lot of money.

KRIS TAPLEY

Just to put a finer point on it, Graham was paid \$75,000 for his spec script for *Speed*.

DON GRANGER

And I think I got, like, a couple of drafts for that. It was, like – it was a check that Graham should have on his wall somewhere.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, here we go. A studio has bit. Time for cameras to roll, right? Not so fast. As you heard Don say, the script needed work. While the project was set up at Paramount for about a year, and this would have been about 1991, it had to be developed and wrangled into a shape that Don felt he could go to his bosses at Paramount - which at the time would have included President of Production John Goldwyn and Chairman Brandon Tartikoff – and convince them that it was a project ready for a green light. So, with notes from Don, into the trenches they go to get it there.

DON GRANGER

I recall the first thing about the script was that it was way too dark. I believe, and again my memory could be wrong, but I believe that Jack Traven was – he had a limp the entire movie, because it was either he had a knee brace on or he had a bum knee, and that caused him to be popping pills almost constantly throughout the script. The driver of the bus was – I forget what her name was in the spec – was a recovered addict. So, there was a lot about addiction in the movie. And it was a lot of pain, just personal pain, physical pain, that was running through the script that was running counter to the popcorn aspirations of the plot.

GRAHAM YOST

I had Jack, you know, hooked on – he had a knee brace and he was hooked on pain pills. Because I loved Jeff Bridges in *Cutter's Way*. And, you know, stuff like that gets peeled out.

DON GRANGER

I wasn't scared of this. I was lucky enough to be a fly on the wall, a junior executive at Disney, when the spec *Three Thousand* got turned into *Pretty Woman*. So, I had seen a script go through a massive tonal shift, and Mark and Graham certainly embraced the fact that we had to be a little bit less dark about the darker, nihilistic [tone] over the course of the movie. So, that was the character changes that I believe we immediately sought out to make. The second was I just didn't feel that we – I felt that the bus overstayed its welcome, that by the time we were circling Dodger Stadium in the third act, I suffered just exhaustion as a reader. I wanted to get off the bus, but not in a good way.

GRAHAM YOST

The basic big note was, "Yeah, enough with the bus." In the sort of development process with Mark, you know, he had a deal at Disney and we would just hang out in his office and just kick things around. At one point, because *Passenger 57* had come out –

they're on the plane, they land, then they go have this big action scene at an amusement park and then they get back on the plane and take off again. And I was watching and I said, "That is nonsense. That is a bad studio note." And at one point Mark said, "Is there any point where the bus could stop for a while?" I said, "Yeah, yeah. I mean, it'll blow up and they'll all die, but it can stop." And he said, "Oh, right, right, right." So, I've held that against him for years. It used to be that the bus went all the way to the end, and also the ending was – the solution to the bus was not at the airport, it was at Dodger Stadium, driving the parking lot at Dodger Stadium. The bus then had to leave Dodger Stadium. It ended up – actually I still think this is cool – by dint of circumstance, they're funneled up into Beechwood Canyon and they end up crashing through stuff and they end up on the road going above the Hollywood sign, and you know that the road is running out. They're heading toward a dead end, and I can't remember how it resolved, but they didn't die. But Paramount said, "Yeah, too much bus. We need a different third act." And it was pretty simple. I said, "What about the subway?" I said, "We've got an elevator, we've got a bus – subway. It's all public modes of transport. That would be something that would work with the bad guy." And they said, "OK," and so I came up with the subway sequence. And to this day, when I watch the movie, I feel that the emotional ending is when they come out from under the bus. The whole subway sequence is a nice dessert, but it's really not the meat of the movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, a year or so of development at Paramount. And you're probably saying to yourself, "But wait a minute, *Speed* isn't a Paramount movie." Indeed. Mark, Allison and Graham would eventually hit the skids at the studio and enter the dreaded world of turnaround. Turnaround happens when a company decides, for whatever reason, that they aren't going to continue developing a project and they let it walk out the front door and find life elsewhere if it can.

DON GRANGER

I don't believe we had any attachments, ever, at Paramount. The way it worked at Paramount, and the way it kind of still works as a studio, is you've got to get your boss's permission to go out to talent, which means they have to read the script and say, "Yes, I want to make this movie." I never got that far at Paramount. I lost the project because, you know, the powers that be at Paramount decided they didn't want to make it. The decision-makers at Paramount at the time decided that they just, they didn't respond to the script.

MARK GORDON

They probably thought it was kind of a goofy idea. You know, when you think about the idea of a bus, if you drop below 50 the bus is going blow up, that could be really silly, you know? And I think that ultimately the thing that made it kind of silly was the thing that made it terrific. It was not grounded completely in reality. The characters were grounded, but it was also funny. Graham is a very funny writer. I think it had just the right level of fun and sort of popcorn-ness, but also, it was brutal. There was violence in it. So, we never got to the point of budgeting or having any real conversations. It was

just put into turnaround and they just said, you know, “Here you go, we’re not going to make this film. Good luck with it.”

KRIS TAPLEY

Don Granger was not going to go down without a fight here, though. Now, I don’t know if this next piece of information has ever been reported. I had certainly never heard it until Don brought it up, but here is, in his words, his final attempt to get a yes from his bosses on *Speed*.

DON GRANGER

I really wanted to try to mount the movie, and my last-ditch effort was I pitched it at our chairman’s lunch as a possible script for *Beverly Hills Cop III*.

[“AXEL F.” by Nile Rodgers & Richard Hilton]

DON GRANGER

I got about 15 minutes of traction before it was dismissed, because that was back when the mandate was to find a *Beverly Hills Cop III*. So, I was like, “Let’s put Axel Foley on the bus.” It was a Hail Mary, man. I might maintain it would have been a better movie than ultimately what we got for *Beverly Hills Cop III*, but that was my final Hail Mary.

KRIS TAPLEY

Can you imagine? Anyway, it was not meant to be as Don would ultimately lose his valiant battle to make *Speed* at Paramount.

ALLISON LYON

He was heartbroken. Complete heartbreak for Don, and you know, we always – I think looking back, we always think of him as such a big part of the movie, but ultimately, they didn’t make it. But we did develop it there for a long time and he was the first champion of it. You also know the story about Jan being attached to another movie and that movie, I believe, was being supervised by Don also, so he not only lost *Speed*, but he lost Jan and, you know, saw it all go to Fox.

KRIS TAPLEY

And we’re jumping ahead a little bit, but Allison is referring to director Jan de Bont, and he’s coming, I promise. But at the time, Jan was developing the movie *Drop Zone* at Paramount. That film would go on to be directed by John Badham with Wesley Snipes, and soon enough, the separate fates of *Speed* and Jan de Bont would become intertwined at another studio. But there would be a long-lasting, *Speed*-shaped scar at Paramount as a result of all of this.

MARK GORDON

This is a great story. So, I get the script in turnaround and right around this time, the regime changes at Paramount and Sherry Lansing becomes the chairman of the studio. And I wasn’t privy to the Paramount side of it, but the way I hear it, she starts at Paramount, she’s given a big stack of scripts to read, somehow, by accident, *Speed*

gets on the pile. She comes in and says, “The only thing I liked is *Speed*,” and they said, “Oops, we don’t really have it anymore.”

DON GRANGER

Yes, that’s true. Sherry Lansing came in, read the script. To this day, I don’t quite remember how it ended up in her stack or who had given it to her, because it had already been placed in turnaround. She immediately responded much more positively than the previous heads of the studio and wanted it to – the project to remain at Paramount. A last-ditch effort was then obviously made to try to get it back out of turnaround, and we had placed it into turnaround, and Mark had already set it up at Fox.

MARK GORDON

So, at that point, Paramount tried to get me to bring it back to them, and it was a really difficult decision because they were offering me a lot more money, and money that was guaranteed, and at the time, I had had no successful films. I had made a few. I had made some television. But I was hardly at the top echelon, or anything close to it, of regular working producers. I was faced with this dilemma, which is, “I’ve agreed to let the script go to Fox and Paramount wants it back. What is my ethical and moral responsibility here?” Anyway, to make a long story short, I wouldn’t let Paramount have it back. They were really fucking angry.

DON GRANGER

That led to a very, very concrete and stringent and no-exceptions policy at Paramount under Sherry’s regime of no turnaround. There was a certain amount of vindication, I will tell you, through my perspective in that last sort of Hail Mary effort to reverse the turnaround, but I don’t begrudge Mark because he already - it was already gone. And let me just say, vindication for my maybe taste in script. I certainly can’t take a shred, iota or atomic particle of credit for the movie that followed. I didn’t have anything to do with that, nor did I hire Jan de Bont or anybody else.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, yes, why not, I reached out to Sherry Lansing about all of this, and she confirmed the story.

SHERRY LANSING

It just was, like, “Oh my God, this is gone.” It had been put in turnaround and I was devastated, and rightfully so, as it turns out. I mean, I’m wrong as much as I’m right, but, you know, it was a massive hit and a wonderful movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

She did also clarify that it wasn’t as simple as a “no turnaround” policy, because they did have to let things go from time to time. Rather, going forward, any project that Paramount would put into turnaround and was then picked up someplace else, the studio would have the right to partner on that project 50/50.

SHERRY LANSING

And we maintained that throughout my whole term. And some we partnered, and some we didn't.

KRIS TAPLEY

Suffice it to say, *Speed* is one she would have been partnering on. But, hey, this is all water under the bridge when you consider she would go on to lead the studio's biggest heyday in 60 years. During her tenure, Paramount produced a string of successes, from the wildly popular *Mission: Impossible* franchise to star-driven hits like *The Firm*, *Runaway Bride* and *What Women Want* to prestige award-winners like *Forrest Gump*, *Braveheart*, *Titanic* and *The Truman Show*.

KRIS TAPLEY

In the middle of all of that, by the way, Graham would ultimately work with Don and Paramount down the road with another spec script, *The Flood*. It eventually made its way to screens in 1998 as *Hard Rain* with Christian Slater and Morgan Freeman - directed by, oddly enough, like Jan de Bont, another cinematographer-turned-director, Mikael Salomon.

DON GRANGER

Yeah, I told him he owed me. He had to give me his next pitch. And, man of his word, you know, he came in and pitched *The Flood* and we bought the pitch.

GRAHAM YOST

Yeah, us going back to Paramount after they put *Speed* into turnaround? If we said we wanted to make a movie about a dog with fleas, they would have gone, "Absolutely." And that didn't turn out great. I think it's good enough. It's a good movie. It lacks what *Speed* had. When I ran into Morgan Freeman years later, I said, "Morgan, I'm Graham Yost. I wrote *Hard Rain*." And he looked at me and said, "Eighty-eight days underwater."

DON GRANGER

I've had a lovely relationship with both Graham and Mark since then. That's the best thing that came out of it for me, was getting to know – and eventually we had a deal with Mark and that led to *Saving Private Ryan*. So, you know, I would have liked to have made *Speed* at Paramount. I have no idea what version of the movie we would have made with what director or what actors, so I can't begrudge the fact that it got made in its very best form at Fox. And Mark Gordon gets all the credit in the world because he literally browbeat got me into buying it, or it might still be an unsold script in Graham's drawer. And then he got a second studio to step up and take it out of turnaround and make it, which happens rarely in Hollywood. You know, all kudos to those two.

KRIS TAPLEY

Quick fun fact here. Sherry Lansing actually did have a filmmaker in mind, according to one source: Peter Hyams, director of *Capricorn One*, *2010* and *The Monster Squad*. At the time he was coming off of the John Ritter fantasy comedy *Stay Tuned* and the Gene Hackman neo-noir *Narrow Margin*. So, go ahead and add that to the trivia pile, but to

catch us back up in the timeline here, we've reached a cliffhanger. *Speed* has been shown the door at Paramount and it's looking for renewed life in a town full of studios that have already said no.

MARK GORDON

The odds of a movie that you're developing at a studio getting made, it's always slim. So, I think that it's always disappointing when you develop something and you do a series of rewrites for a studio and they don't want to make it. It's disappointing, but it's not a surprise. So, it was just, "OK, who's gonna – how are we going to get this movie made?"

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

Speed is resurrected across town as a new regime takes hold at 20th Century Fox.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And so those guys wanted to do something, right? I mean, get going and have some kind of success. But all you do is sit there and wait for things to come in.

KRIS TAPLEY

Another hungry young executive, Jorge Saralegui, stumbles onto Graham Yost's script and has to convince his bosses to gamble big.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And I keep reading, not knowing where it's going, and, you know, there's a bomb on a bus and it'll blow up if it's under 50 miles per hour, and my thought about that right at the moment is, "Well, how are you going to keep that going beyond five or 10 pages?" And I couldn't believe that, as crazy as it was, I was buying it.

KRIS TAPLEY

We'll also hear from former Fox production president Tom Jacobson, who saw some promise in mounting *Speed* at a smaller budget.

TOM JACOBSON

Jorge and I both said, "We think we should make this. We think it's one of those movies that can be made for a price."

KRIS TAPLEY

All of that and more next week right here on *50 MPH!*

KRIS TAPLEY

Thanks so much for listening. *50 MPH* is written, produced and edited by yours truly, Kris Tapley. You can find us on Twitter @50MPHPod. I'm @kristapley. That's Kris with a K. You can also catch every episode and more at our website 50MPHpodcast.com. If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.