

50 MPH: EPISODE 5

“NEW LIFE AT A NEW FOX”

Transcript (00:20:34)



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!

MARK GORDON

I do believe that had we made it at Paramount, even if they took it back and made it, the cards would not have fallen into place the way they did.

KRIS TAPLEY

That’s producer Mark Gordon picking up where we left off last week. After a year or so of studio development, and despite the enthusiasm of executive Don Granger, the powers that be at Paramount Pictures have hit the brakes on *Speed* and put it into turnaround. Gordon gets screenwriter Graham Yost’s project back and seeks life for it elsewhere. Here’s co-producer Allison Lyon describing the mood.

ALLISON LYON

I think for Mark and me, it was still that same tenacity of, “OK, well, let’s take it back out and find another place to make it.” And if I remember correctly, I think every studio turned it down again, except for Fox. And, you know, once again, it took one person with passion to get it through.

KRIS TAPLEY

Here’s where I’m going to introduce one of the more colorful personalities on this podcast. Or maybe he’s just colorful to me. I just love the way he talks. His name is Jorge Saralegui and, in the early-90s, he was a junior executive within a brand-new regime at 20th Century Fox. But I should probably set this scene a little bit before we get to him.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, stay with me here. In November of 1992, two guys – Joe Roth and Roger Birnbaum, the respective Chairman and Production President of 20th Century Fox, the heads of the company, wildly successful guys in the movie business – left the studio to form a new production company together. In their wake, News Corporation CEO Rupert Murdoch, who owned Fox, brought in TV executive Peter Chernin to run the company’s film business. Chernin had been the head of Fox Broadcasting during a boom time for the network when the lineup included groundbreaking programs like *The Arsenio Hall*

Show, The Simpsons, Alien Nation, Cops, Beverly Hills 90210 and Melrose Place. Now, he actually comes in with a mandate to keep a lid on costs, while at the same time attracting top talent to the studio. Remember all of that, OK? So, this guy is going to come in and run Fox's film business. What's going on in Fox's film business? Well, not a lot. In 1992, they're sort of living in the afterglow of stuff like the *Home Alone* and *Die Hard* movies, while still enjoying the occasional star-driven hit like *Sleeping with the Enemy* with Julia Roberts.

[SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY CLIP]

KEVIN ANDERSON (as "Ben")

I'm sorry.

TRAILER NARRATOR

Behind her happiness...

KEVIN ANDERSON (as "Ben")

Are you OK?

JULIA ROBERTS (as "Sara/Laura")

I'm gonna be.

TRAILER NARRATOR

...is a past she can never forget.

PATRICK BERGIN (as "Martin")

Laura!

KRIS TAPLEY

Or, the very next year, *Mrs. Doubtfire* with Robin Williams.

[MRS. DOUBTFIRE CLIP]

ANNE HANEY (as "Mrs. Sellner")

Mrs. Hillard? The water's boiling.

ROBIN WILLIAMS (as "Daniel Hillard/Mrs. Doubtfire")

Hello!

ANNE HANEY (as "Mrs. Sellner")

screams

ROBIN WILLIAMS (as "Daniel Hillard/Mrs. Doubtfire")

Oh, I'm sorry to frighten you, dear. I must look like a yeti in this get-up.

KRIS TAPLEY

I should also add that as Chernin comes in, the studio's Executive Vice President, Tom Jacobson, bridges the gap between the two regimes and takes over as Production President. These names will matter. OK, you still with me? Now, let's get back to that junior executive, Jorge Saralegui. Here he is with a little more context on this turbulent time for Fox and how Speed ended up on his desk in the first place.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, the studio isn't – it's never been a big Hollywood studio. It's never been star-laden. In fact, it's been the opposite of that, a star-laden Hollywood studio, right? Almost if you think of Warner Bros. as one kind of studio, Fox would have been, like, you know, the opposite. And so, those guys wanted to do something, right? Get going and have some kind of success. But all you do is sit there and wait for things to come in, because it's not like the studio has relationships with Clint Eastwood or something, you know what I mean? Who is going to crank out his own mat- OK, so, I was a junior executive. I had been one for like, I don't know, a year and a half or something. And I only had one project that didn't even have a writer on it. So, in other words, I had a project that had a producer on it and zero money had been spent on my one project. Otherwise, I just assisted the vice presidents.

KRIS TAPLEY

Here is screenwriter Graham Yost. First time hearing from him this week.

GRAHAM YOST

Specifically, it was a project called *Hamlet*, about a pig that's put into witness protection. So, he's asking agents, "I need someone who's funny and who also can do some action." And my agent said, "Well, here's this script. Because he's a comedy writer but he also wrote this."

JORGE SARALEGUI

I honestly forget now which one it was. I have a feeling it's *Hamlet*. There was a movie called *Turner and Hooch* and a movie called *Hamlet*. One was about a dog and one was about a pig, both in the witness relocation program. And I had - I think I had *Hamlet*, actually, except it was a dog at the time. It got turned into a pig. I'm pretty sure. Anyway – oh no, no, no, I had a dog one and it was a third one and they folded it into *Hamlet* when they bought that from whoever the producer for *Hamlet* was.

KRIS TAPLEY

This is all I mean by colorful, by the way. Just this studio-ese. It cracks me up.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Whatever it is, so, I'm looking for a comedy writer to write the dog movie, right? And so I'm getting a lot of writing samples. And I get a comedy writing sample from Graham Yost's agent, because he was working on some TV show that I guess was a comedy. I don't even remember what it was. And so, I read it and it's fine, it's funny, whatever, and then she says, "There's some action in your police dog movie." And there's not a lot, but

yeah, there is some. He says, "So, I want to show you the kind of action that Graham can write. And by the way, if you like it, it's in turnaround at Paramount."

GRAHAM YOST

So, Jorge read it and then said to my agent, "Well, what's going on with this?" But I didn't get the job on *Hamlet*.

JORGE SARALEGUI

First of all, I can't believe that I read it. I mean, think about it. It's kind of, like, who gives a shit if he's good at action? I'm trying to find a comedy writer for a police dog comedy, right? But because I was starting out, probably, or I because I was just vaguely curious about the beginning, I actually did read it. Or I started to read it. And while it's very different from the movie in detail, the broad strokes are the same, especially for the first two thirds, i.e., the beginning is the elevator sequence and then comes the bus stuff.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, I start reading it, and the elevator sequence is good and it's tense, but it's long, in a good way. It's almost kind of, like, "Huh, he's not writing this first act like most people do. He's just keeping you in the scene and it's really tense." You know what I mean? Like, you're used to reading a million scripts. Like, OK, I came from being a reader, right? I was promoted from reader to junior executive. So, my whole thing was reading scripts, and so you're used to, like, a certain structure, and the first act just felt off in that way, but off in a good way. And so, it just kind of caught my eye. But it wasn't like I was thinking, "Oh, this is worth buying," or anything. It was just interesting. And so, I keep reading, not knowing where it's going, and there's a bomb on a bus and it will blow up if it's under 50 miles an 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?" That was my first thought, I mean, you know, as I read it. And so, but I'm curious, and I read it, and it's good. The next five pages, 10 pages, it's still going, it's still going. And after a while I go, "If this thing hasn't – if that bus is still going by, like, page 70, then I'm in." Because I know that whatever happens afterwards, it can be fixed or finessed or whatever, you know? And I couldn't believe that as crazy as it was, I was buying it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, meanwhile, there are other gears in motion. Here is what producer Mark Gordon recalls of the submission process from his end.

MARK GORDON

I didn't know the Jorge story. My recollection, and they're probably both correct, is that I submitted the script to Tom Jacobson, at the time the president of the studio, and he read it and said, "I'm interested." I didn't really know Jorge until after we sold the project. It's just that things happen to come together in kind of an interesting way.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, Jorge puts the script up on what they call the weekend read. It's a stack of scripts that all the various studio execs take home with them to read or, more likely, scan over

the weekend. The next week, he got some good responses, including from a young Chris Meledandri. Today, Meledandri is the head of Illumination Entertainment, the animation company responsible for the *Despicable Me* franchise and most recently my kid's first-ever movie theater experience, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. At the time, like Jorge, Meledandri was a young studio executive at Fox.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And he was Mark Gordon's ex-partner, by coincidence, but he was also a very straight-up guy, so if he said he liked it, he meant it, and he did like it. But a lot of other people – not a lot, but, two or three others were, like, really negative about it. And part of that, I took it personally, in the sense of, "I'm a junior executive. Fuck you," kind of thing. "Your action scripts aren't good enough." And they made a point that I thought was valid, which is kind of, like, "*Die Hard* on a bus' sounds like a joke." In fact, if you think about it, it sounds a little bit like that Ruth Gordon movie, *The Big Bus*, whatever it was called, which I never saw, but that's what it was. I think that was more like a disaster movie or something, but it was on a bus. Because it's silly.

KRIS TAPLEY

But Jorge was seeing way past the doubters. He knew there was potential in what he had read on the page. He could already see the movie trailer coming together in his head, selling audiences on the many cool moments that Graham had woven into his action script. And that was his argument to everyone at the studio as they waited for Chernin to chime in.

JORGE SARALEGUI

But then we get to *Speed* on the weekend read, and he says, "OK, so, what's this," and Tom Jacobson says, "Well, it's a blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and it's Jorge's," and so he asked me to talk about it. And so I said whatever. But it's not like I did any kind of brilliant, you know, sell job on it. I just said what I thought was strong about it. And he goes, "What how much does it cost?" And I said whatever it was, \$75,000. And he shrugs and goes, "Buy it." Which is typical Peter Chernin, by the way. He was – I mean, there are a lot of good things you can say about him, but one was that he had more courage in that way than the typical executive. He was good in that way. I mean, he was good in that way in other aspects of *Speed* down the line, and he was good in that way with, you know, later parts of my career. You know, buying *Independence Day*, for example. I mean, I brought that in and he just said, "I get it. Let's buy it. No matter what, we're going to get this." You know what I mean? That kind of a thing.

KRIS TAPLEY

Since we've been talking about him, we should bring in Fox Production President Tom Jacobson. Jacobson was the producer of films like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Uncle Buck* and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* when he took his Fox post in 1989. Remember, this is the guy who bridged the gap between the two regimes, which I find kind of funny because, if you recall, every studio in town originally said no to *Speed* except Paramount. That included Fox. Now, here's Jacobson with a new Fox ready to

say yes. Although to be perfectly fair, I mean, it was a much better script after all the at Paramount and whatnot, so, you know. Anyway, here's Tom.

TOM JACOBSON

Mark and I had been friends, sort of grew up in the business together. My memory is that we didn't have a lot of action projects in the works at the time, for whatever reason. And we brought the script forward. It was sort of early in my regime, so Peter was sort of paying attention to the decisions that were being made by the creative group and we pitched it. And Peter said, because Peter's a very smart guy, said, "Well, let's buy it. We don't have enough of this. We need to make some action movies." So, I just remember that sort of overview, being smart about, like, "We need to make a little of this and a little of that and," you know, "we need to, like, have a full slate."

KRIS TAPLEY

Now, let's back up for a second. Remember Murdoch's mandate to Chernin about keeping costs low. That's going to be key, because nobody under the sun saw this as a tentpole summer blockbuster. Let's get to that truth right now. This was a B movie at best, something to dump into the spring or August and maybe make a little money on the farther outskirts of summer.

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. Yes, it's got a lot of action in it. But it's not a franchise." And even then, franchises, I mean, *Die Hard* was already a franchise, but it wasn't - there weren't that many of them. And I don't even know if we called it a programmer. Often, we talked at studios in those days, in terms of release and distribution strategy, of looking for a single or a double or a triple, right? What's good enough, right? So, if you're making, you know, the next *Star Wars*, you're looking for a home run, right? But if you're making - and this was true of *Home Alone*, too, which I was sort of lucky had a similar situation like that - like, "That's a good movie. We're looking for a single or double." Because we're making it at a price that a single or a double, it's getting on base. It's getting a hit. Not an outsized hit. And that's what this was intended as.

GRAHAM YOST

You know, they needed something that was sort of ready to go and didn't cost too much. But it was, you know - it's a reasonably big film, but it was in good enough shape that they felt the bones were good enough that I think they thought, "Well, it's ready to go and we need something."

JORGE SARALEGUI

I think we got it in, like, I don't know, late - you know, like, November or December or something. And the plan was for it to be, like, a \$15 million low-budget action movie. Back then, \$15 million wasn't as low as it is now, but it's still low. And so now it becomes a matter of doing a bunch of rewrites.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's a little hard to get a lot of detail on this early development period at Fox. There is, of course, a major rewrite still to come, but at this point, Graham says *Speed* just became a much simpler and more driven story. Jorge, meanwhile, pegs the bulk of the changes around the end of act two on, once we're off the bus. Which is notable because – and this is something I'm frankly still trying to nail down in the timeline with 30-year-old faulty memories – but throughout this whole process, Howard Payne isn't a character. In a jaw-dropping third-act twist, Harry Temple, Jack Traven's partner, is revealed as the mad bomber. That later ends up not working and is written out of the script, and we'll come to that, but again, at this point, I just get the idea that there's just a lot of honing going on.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, it wasn't like anything was really wrong with it, and it kept getting better and people kept getting happier with it. But it was that kind of stuff, because the basic story worked. But it was more, like, as you put more pressure on it, it would be, like, "Well, how is this going to happen here?" So, it was more like tightening the tension.

KRIS TAPLEY

As this process is happening, remember, this is active development. There's no green light yet. Everything could go south just like it did at Paramount. But things are progressing, and as the script is being tightened up, they start going through cast lists, imagining how they might package this movie.

JORGE SARALEGUI

The first top name on our list was Charlie Sheen.

[RECORD SCRATCH]

KRIS TAPLEY

Hang on. "Tiger Blood" was up for *Speed*? You bet. We'll get to the casting of the film and the desperate search for the movie's Jack Traven in due time, but yes, not only was Charlie Sheen up for the role, he was the studio's top choice. Or at least, the top choice of the executive tasked with developing the project. At this point, Sheen was coming off of the Top Gun spoof *Hot Shots!*, which was a pretty sizable hit for the studio and had a hotly anticipated sequel around the corner.

[HOT SHOTS! CLIP]

CHARLIE SHEEN (as "Topper Harley")

It seems no matter what I do I end up hurting someone.

JORGE SARALEGUI

He was the top of the list. One of my assistants framed for me - after the movie came out – framed for me my kind of, like, memo to Tom Jacobson titled "10 Reasons to Buy *Speed*," and one of them was, "And we can put Charlie Sheen in the lead role."

Because she knew by then how silly the actual memo looked. Almost everything I said ended up having nothing to do with the movie. But anyway, we wanted a million people who we couldn't get for every single role. For all three big roles, and even the fourth role, the Jeff Daniels role. All of those roles were incredibly hard to cast. We are, in the meantime, looking at directors. We're making a \$15 million action movie. All we want is a serviceable action director.

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh yeah. A director. You kind of need one of those, don't you? We're entering a stage now where things will start to feel a little bit messy, if they don't already, as the studio goes back and forth looking at casting and directing choices, hoping for the right spark on one side of the line or the other. At this point, though, their eyes indeed turn to filmmakers. Who could come in and take the reins on an unusual production like this? Do you play it safe with a journeyman director? After all, you don't want anything controversial here. You're trying to keep costs down, right? Or do you roll the dice on someone with a bold vision, someone who maybe – just maybe – could knock this thing out of the park?

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on 50 MPH...

KRIS TAPLEY

As Fox is looking for an actor to say yes, they're also looking for a director. But it's slim pickings in the A-list set.

MARK GORDON

Let me tell you, I couldn't give this thing away. No director who you would put at the top of any of your lists was interested in doing this movie at all.

KRIS TAPLEY

We'll cut through some of the mythology that has built up around this over the years as the studio has its eye on a few journeymen possibilities, one in particular.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And he was the one we were going to go with, but there were a few, as you might imagine. Like, if you're, like, a B-level action director, then why wouldn't you want to direct a movie that's going to go?

KRIS TAPLEY

But in the end, on a wing and a prayer, they roll the dice on a cinematographer-turned-first-time-director.

JAN DE BONT

I think I was totally ready for it. I mean I had worked on some really big action movies already. And really, I knew how to handle that part of it.

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.