

50 MPH: EPISODE 9

“THE TAO OF KEANU REEVES”

(with Alex Pappademas)

Transcript (01:13:41)



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

Welcome back, everyone, and we’ve got another detour today. In the chronology of *Speed*, we have just cast our Jack Traven: Keanu Reeves, not an action star, but he’s about to become one, after an exhaustive search to find anyone who would say yes, and he was the one who would eventually say yes. And so, I’ve roped in another of our leading journalists and saps and critical minds, Alex Peppademas. He’s a contributor to *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Los Angeles Times*. You’ve also seen his work at *Grantland*, *Esquire*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, MTV News – this guy is everywhere. He’s also an author, which is why I’ve brought him in today. He’s the author of the 2022 book *Keanu Reeves: Most Triumphant – The Movies and Meaning of an Irrepressible Icon*. As examinations of star personas through their actual work is concerned, it’s second to none. So, if it isn’t obvious, we’re going to talk to Alex about Keanu Reeves today. So, Alex, thanks for doing this, man. I appreciate it.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Very glad to be here.

KRIS TAPLEY

And is that a fair assessment of the book and what it is? It’s less a biography and more a sort of critical dissection of a guy, right?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It’s a wild, close reading of everything that Keanu has ever put on screen, everything that’s ever been written about him, things that he’s said – it’s kind of everything that we can see through the lens of his public persona. But it’s not a biography. I met him one time for *GQ* – or I met him twice for *GQ*. I don’t know that I learned anything about him in that meeting. so much, except what it was like for me to meet him. And so, this is kind of – it’s about the persona and the screen persona and the interplay between the screen persona and the very private public persona of Keanu.

KRIS TAPLEY

There you go. And nobody's put somebody on a couch like this guy does with this book. It's an incredible book and we'll talk about it soon. But let me just start us on our way here with a quick assessment of this guy, Keanu Reeves. And Alex is the experts so he'll correct me if I screw anything up here, but Keanu Reeves was born September 2, 1964. So, he's a Virgo. He was born in Beirut, Lebanon, the son of a costume designer-slash-performer, his mother, and a geologist, his father, who abandoned him at age three. So, a quick jaunt through the early career here before we get to *Speed*, Alex. Keanu was a commercials guy. He was out there selling Coca-Cola and Corn Flakes in the early years. He did some TV work and then, you know, I just want to speed up to 1986 – no pun intended – which was a breakout year with, among other things, *Teenage Dream*, also known as *Flying*, with Olivia D'Abo. He was on TV in NBC's *Babes in Toyland*, and a couple of other things, but the one I want to drill down on here, Alex, is *River's Edge*. This is with his soon-to-be *Speed* co-star, Dennis Hopper, and I'm sort of fascinated by this movie in that way because their characters never interact, and they're actually on screen just briefly in one scene. There's, like, a rack focus from Keanu to Dennis in, like, a gas station. And it's just – it's kind of strange that they would come together eight years later in this action film, but, kind of an incredible movie, *River's Edge*. And I love your chapter in the book on it. It's, you know, teenage angst, ennui, sort of seminal for all of that stuff. A few years before grunge is the thing, isn't it?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. It feels like they're kind of inventing grunge in that moment. It has the look of – it's *Twin Peaks* before *Twin Peaks*. It's grunge before grunge. It's, you know, kind of dead-end lives in a small town. It's California playing some other place, but they never actually say what it is. And it's based on a very terrible true story about something that did happen around that time, and the screenwriter, Neil Jimenez, sort of, like, never forgot about it and kind of turned it into this story. And it's the first time that we get a sense of what Keanu is maybe capable of from the work that he's doing. He's been charming. He's been good-looking. He's been kind of, you know, delightful and up for anything in the previous work, and even in the previous work that year, but this is the first time that's, like, "Oh, here's what the application of this persona might be." And it's this, you know, stoner guy caught up in a situation where he is starting to feel things and where he's getting in touch with his emotions. And so, it's a prototypical Keanu movie, because it's about sort of, you know, someone who is sort of a low-affect persona, kind of starting to feel and, you know, the heart is starting to crack open a little bit, because it's about these kids who have – their friend has been murdered and they're all covering it up for their buddy who is responsible, and Keanu is the one who starts to feel a kind of a tug of morality and that sort of a, you know – like a pang of "this is this is not right." But it sort of has to fight its way through, you know, the stoned brain of this character. And it's where you start seeing him act for the first time. He gets a chance to do that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And it's sort of like – I mean, it's a horror story, in a way, because the horror story is the fact that – and this is what, I guess, newspaper articles and stuff at the time around the actual event, people were more horrified by the fact – not from the murder,

but by the – not even cover-up, but just, no one came to say anything to cops, you know? These guys went and looked at the body and stuff. Like, it was just really weird that these kids were like behaving in this way and that just freaked out the community. And so, it's perfect fodder for a movie and certainly to rope in a persona like his or a developing persona like his is very interesting.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. Well, it's weird to compare the stories in the way that this – the true story that was written about at the time, because there is this – yeah, this moral panic around what happened, because, as in *River's Edge*, as in the movie version, the kids all go to see the body of this young woman who has been murdered and they don't tell anybody about it. But it's really interesting, because those newspaper articles are all told in the voices of parents and authority figures kind of condemning this behavior, and they really don't talk to any of the kids at all, which might partly have to do with, like, the fact that it's an ongoing case and these are juveniles or whatever. But the thing that *River's Edge* does is it puts you inside the heads of all these characters and kind of shows you why they would behave this way. And, like, what was motivating them to do it, and they all have their own reasons for participating in it, and then, eventually, things start to break down in a kind of crime-movie kind of way. And then Dennis Hopper gets involved and things get very lurid very quickly, as they tend to do when Hopper's around. But yeah, there is a weird kind of connection, and I feel like it's – you know, this book is full of kind of half-baked conspiracy-theory-type resonances that I found very interesting, and one of them is that, you know, Keanu is the son of this errant Father, this kind of errant hippie father, who eventually gets, you know – he goes to prison for his involvement in a drug deal. And there is something about Hopper as, in *River's Edge*, this countercultural kind of bad-dad figure to all of these kids. He's a surrogate father, but he's a surrogate, you know, father who leads them all astray, especially Daniel Roebuck, who's the young man who's killed the girl and who ends up, you know, sort of pulled into Hopper's orbit. And so, it's really interesting when he shows up later in *Speed* and, you know, one of the first things that he says is, "Don't fuck with daddy." He sort of establishes himself as that guy, you know? Because it's also, it's like for Hopper, he's on the – we can talk about this – but Hopper is on the other side of – Hopper has been through the, you know, through the tunnel of everything, and he's come out, he's sobered up. Like, *Hoosiers*, *Blue Velvet*, like, that sort of resurgence after basically going off the deep end, like, by the early-80s and kind of, you know, like, doing stunts, like where he, like, tries to blow himself up in a dynamite chair in the middle of a rodeo ring. And that's the form that his art practice took at that moment, was dynamite. You know, he manages to not destroy himself and kind of has this resurgence at this moment, and he's the bad conscience of the counterculture. He's like, the lingering sort of force, you know, and so then it's, like, the *Speed* thing is fun, because you get to see them actually kind of go head-to-head. And on some level, it's all, you know, Keanu confronting a father figure once again.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. So, coming out of that year, 1986. You mentioned this, how kind of seemed game for anything. And that's certainly what I look at when I see *The Night Before* with

Lori Loughlin – Aunt Becky – *Prince of Pennsylvania*, *Dangerous Liaison*. Those are all in '88. It's kind of, like, in a good way, I can't figure out what kind of career this guy is trying to have, you know? He's certainly trying all kinds of different things. What's kind of your take on just the career he seemed to be trying to build in the late-80s before he's going to break out in *Bill & Ted* and eventually *Point Break* and all of that? But what does that feel like to you when you look at all this stuff?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I think everybody knows that this guy is going to be something, partly just because he's so God damn good looking and, like, that goes a long way at that moment, and people are trying to find a slot for him in all of these things. But he's in that weird window where you're a little old to play high school, but you're not too old, so you still kind of get slotted in there. *Night Before* is actually shot much earlier, so he is a little younger, and it kind of sits around for a minute, but it's in that kind of Neverland where you're not an adult actor yet, fully. People aren't going to by you, necessarily, as a grown man, but you're a little bit too grown to play a teenager, and it's almost like, you know, you kind of have to go through that – sort of get over that hump somehow. And I think they're slotting him into different things to kind of see how he's going to work. And, you know, I think he's really good in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Like, he gets cucked by John Malkovich, which is hilarious, and, you know, he's really fun. But, like, *Dangerous Liaisons* feels like, you know – I wrote this in the book, but it's a movie that has almost two ingenues in it, because it feels like it's Keanu as the ingenue alongside Uma Thurman as the ingenue, and they both sort of seem like, "Here's the young, beautiful person that, you know, we've just slotted into this story." But for me, it doesn't really – the moment that it comes into focus is '91. That's the key moment, and I think that's the moment that, you know, sort of will define him going into *Speed*, and in some ways, going into everything that is ahead. So, I mean, I think – unless I'm skipping over anything that you're sort of desperate to get to.

KRIS TAPLEY

No, let's take the journey as it comes. But I will say it's funny that you say that, because, yeah, that's the sort of definition of him coming into *Speed*, yet everyone still just kind of saw him as *Bill & Ted*, saw him as Ted, you know? It's like, that was the persona, so that was all of the kind of doubt around casting him in a movie like *Speed*. It was less, like, "Oh, well, we did *Point Break*," and more, like, "That's Ted, what are you talking about?" You know what I mean? So, it's weird that even though that year broke him out – and he's working with – I mean, look who he's working with, not even just that year, but pushing forward into '92, '93, he's working with Coppola, Kenneth Branagh, he's working with Bernardo Bertolucci, Gus Van Sant, and obviously Kathryn Bigelow with *Point Break*. I mean, it's like, he's putting together a nice roster of just collaborators, and certainly learning a lot along the way as well. So, I find that fascinating. But regarding '91 and *Point Break*, let me ask you this. And I think I know the answer, based on the book. Do you consider *Point Break* an action movie?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I do. Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

I don't. I don't.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

That's an interesting question.

KRIS TAPLEY

I don't. I don't.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Why wouldn't you? You don't? Do you consider it a romance? Like a romantic comedy between these two guys?

KRIS TAPLEY

No, I consider it – it's in the same way that I don't consider *Heat* an action movie.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Oh, OK. OK.

KRIS TAPLEY

You know what I mean? It's like, it has action beats. Look, part of this might just be me wanting *Speed* to be the movie that makes him an action hero so that people don't always say, "Well, what about *Point Break*?" That could be part of it. But I just kind of don't – I don't view it that way. I mean, there's the chase scene, the foot chase scene. There's some extreme sports in there. But as an action movie? No, I don't really – I've never really considered it that.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I mean, yeah, there's a skydiving – there's like a conversation, like, dialogue while skydiving. There's a lot of action for something that's not an action movie, but look, I see it. You're the guy with the *Speed* podcast, like, you want *Speed* to be the turning point.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's my hot take, I guess.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

You're coming at it from your own perspective. You know, and I'll take that. I mean, it's interesting, because, you know, is Kathryn Bigelow an action director or is she just a director who is always, you know, who's excited by those kinds of things and by that by that kind of material and drawn to filming action and filming, you know, people in action? Because, you know, like, is *Blue Steel* an action movie? Like, now you've got me questioning all of my-

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's keep going. Is this *The Fugitive* an action movie?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I mean, it's an action – there's a train. The train derails. Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

There's a great action sequence, but is it an action movie?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Well, but it's like, we're talking about it, and these are – you know, it's '93, '92, like, that whole era. It's like, the action movie means something different at that time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It's not so much – you know, it's funny. I watched *Speed* again last night and the thing that strikes me – we're skipping ahead a little bit, but, like, watching *Speed* again last night, it was like, I remember this being I couldn't breathe while I was watching this movie because it was so fast and so intense and so just didn't let up, and I was watching, I was like, "Eh, this is pretty calm. It's just like, the bus does a thing," you know? I think, like, our neurons have got – or at least, you know, for me, at least – it's almost as if the neurons have gotten burnt out and, like, we need more and more intensity to stimulate us now, and so, what an action movie looks like now versus then – but yeah, it's like asking, like, you know, is Peckinpah's *The Getaway* and action movie. I think that probably would have been back then, but would you consider it that now? Or is that much more, you know, sort of character drama or something like that?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, like, I watched *First Blood* last night again. And, you know, same thing. But the action stars of the era are the guys that are in movies like *Commando* and *Rambo: First Blood 2*. So, there is a certain sort of mold that Keanu and Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* is a part of sort of breaking when we get into it. But '91 – I want you to talk about '91. Whatever else you had to say there because it is it is a pivotal year. There's *Point Break*, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*, *My Own Private Idaho*, which I saw again recently for the first time in forever. A fascinating group of movies, for sure.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. All between July and September.

KRIS TAPLEY

Wow.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Which is crazy. Like, it's not even – I think of it as maybe the best year an actor has had that I can think of, but it's not even a full year. Like, it's like the best half-year. *Point Break* is, like, July, I think. So was *Bill & Ted*. And then *Private Idaho* is September,

around there. It's, like, right before *Nevermind* by Nirvana comes out, which I find to be a fascinating-

KRIS TAPLEY

I was just going to say, that's an incredible six, seven weeks of music. I mean, *Nevermind*, *Badmotorfinger*, *Use Your Illusions*, *Metallica*, *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*. Even, you know, Tribe Called Quest, *Low End Theory*.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yes! I was going to say Tribe Called Quest if you didn't.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's an incredible stretch of time for pop culture.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, something's in the water. Something's happening. Things are starting to shift. And I think we are shifting into, you know – we're shifting into, like – the '90s are really starting, right? Because the '90s do not start on January 1, 1990. Like, decades don't break like that, really. Like, it feels like they do. Just as I think the '60s kind of happened in the early-70s, really, it's almost like the '90s don't really start until, like, Nirvana and Clinton for me. It's that moment.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. Once he's playing that saxophone.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, exactly. He signals the start of the '90s. He blows the – brings us into it. But yeah, so, I love the second *Bill & Ted* movie. Keanu, I think does not. Keanu and Alex Winter, I think, both feel that it got, you know, diminished between the script stage and the shooting stage, that whatever they signed up for didn't happen. I still find it really fun because I love the idea of going back to these characters and doing something so dark where they literally die and go to hell. It doesn't all work, but I find it really enjoyable. And I find it enjoyable because it's, you know – all three of these movies are about two guys who have great affection for one another and the world kind of conspiring to keep them apart in some way. That's the plot of *Point Break*. It's the plot of *Bogus Journey*. It's the plot of *My Own Private Idaho*, is that, for one reason or another, these men cannot be together, whether sort of romantically or otherwise, platonically, like, whatever. It can't happen. But the key ones from this year, the two movies that are key, I think, are *Point Break* and *Idaho* because they demonstrate – it's not range, exactly, because he's Keanu in both of them. And like, that's not – you don't go to Keanu – and we're going to talk about what happens when you do this, but you don't go to Keanu for, like, a transformation, necessarily. What I think the two movies demonstrate, because they're so – even though, like I said, I feel like they have a lot in common thematically – they're so different tonally, and what they demonstrate is, like, almost the range of applications of Keanu. Like, what type of movie you can put Keanu into. That, like, yes, he is down for whatever. He will make a wild queer art film with Gus Van Sant. He's said

that basically, like, he and River Phoenix, they were not afraid to do that. But, like, it is ballsy to do that in 1991. It's long before *Brokeback*. It's long before anything, you know – like, it's a very different country and very different business in terms of the way that you know, sort of, like, straight actors in gay roles. It's like, that's a risk to take, and they seem like they don't care. But he can also carry what I take to be an action movie. He can also carry something that – or at least, like, a movie in which he's supposed to be a tough guy, you know, in that way. So, he can make point – like, *Point Break* works because of him. But what happens right after that in the movies that he makes sort of coming off that, when he's got that heat, it's not action, as you sort of pointed out. It's like, it's him taking that clout that he has from *Point Break*, which is a pretty big hit. It's pretty successful. And then *My Own Private Idaho* is, you know, a big critical success. What he does is he goes and works with Coppola, because who's going to say no to Francis Ford Coppola if you have that opportunity? And supposedly, it's like – I think that was supposed to be Johnny Depp in that part, right? And when Depp can't do it, Coppola is like, "Who should I get to do it?" And Winona Ryder is like, "Get Keanu." And I think Coppola said that he didn't really know what Keanu's whole deal was at that time. Like, he didn't know what the persona was, necessarily.

KRIS TAPLEY

Probably still doesn't.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

He's been asked about it and like, you know, about, like, why would you cast this guy, you know? This dude who's sort of, like – we'll talk about it in a second. But obviously, like – OK, what happens is that he works with Coppola. He makes *Bram Stoker's Dracula* with Francis Ford Coppola. He makes *Much Ado About Nothing* for Kenneth Branagh. He makes *Little Buddha* for Bernardo Bertolucci, all because I think like these are, you know – who's going to say no to these? Like, he's a Shakespeare guy from way back, so of course you're going to do Shakespeare with Kenneth Branagh. He's, like, a film nerd and a film snob and of course you're going to – like, if Bertolucci wants you, like, you say yes, no matter what, like, the guy made *The Conformist*. Like, forget it. Like, you're just going and doing it. And you don't ask, like, "Am I right for this," necessarily. And, you know, in all three of these, he's playing people from the past, and the specificity of Keanu is maybe a liability in this moment. There's the expression "smartphone face," which we have now, where it's like – it's been applied to people like Timothée Chalamet or Dakota Johnson, like, people who are good actors, but maybe just for some reason there's something about them that says, "This is a modern person." Like, "This looks like a modern person," and, like, it's hard to buy them in some context other than that, where they're supposed to be from the past. It's like, they said this about Camila Morrone from *Daisy Jones & the Six*. Like, it looks like she knows what Venmo is. Somebody tweeted that and there's something about – it's like, it's an intangible quality that you're, like, "No, that person's from today. That person's walking around now." Just, it takes you out. With Keanu, it's not so much a visual thing as, like, an affect thing. Like, he just seems like people find him hard to believe as anything but a dude from modern times. There's something about the voice and probably the face, too, but I think for him, it's more just, like, it's a vibe, and doesn't exactly work, even though

he really goes in – especially on *Little Buddha* – in a way that he kind of wouldn't in the future. It's like one of his few, you know – he's never going to be the guy who – he's not Christian Bale. He's never going to transform himself. He's not going to, you know, gain a ton of weight. There's one or two counter examples to this that I'm not going to get into, but like, pretty much he kind of looks like Keanu. He's not, like, trying to make you forget that he's Keanu. *Little Buddha*, he really does, like, look different. He loses a ton of weight. He's got sort of contacts and hair and everything. His skin's a little darkened, which is sort of unthinkable today but, you know, it's Bertolucci. Again, it's a different time. I kind of love that movie, honestly. It's very hard to see. You have to buy it, basically. I don't think it's streaming anywhere. It sort of feels like a lost film somehow, but I find it fascinating because it's like, he's playing this fairytale version of Prince Siddhartha, who's the Buddha. It's the story of the enlightenment of the Prince Siddhartha, and I find him kind of exactly right for it, somehow. Like, it's a very weird movie, and it doesn't all work, necessarily, and it kind of goes back and forth between this weird contemporary thing with Chris Isaac and Bridget Fonda and then, like, this kind of fairytale about the life of the Buddha. But there is something about him. My whole thing in the book, I go on maybe a little too long about this – and I'm probably going along a little long on it now – but it, in a lot of ways, predicts *The Matrix*. It predicts that story. It's a story that he's drawn to, for whatever reason, of this character who believed that the world is one way and then goes out on the journey and discovers that it is actually something else and that the suffering that is out there in the world is much greater than he could have imagined and sort of bears the weight of that. And you sort of see him kind of go through that and you see him go through the sort of Buddhist enlightenment, sort of seeing through the veil of the world and seeing through the falseness of it and all of that. There's a lot of weird resonances between that and the stuff that he would do in the future. So, I like all these films. I love Dracula.

KRIS TAPLEY

I love Dracula. I love the just kind of tactile quality of that movie and just the old-school techniques. It's awesome.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. That's Roman Coppola on practical effects, actually doing all the dry ice and stuff. Mirrors and dry ice and really doing it old school. It's one of my favorite Coppolas. It's top-five Coppola for me.

KRIS TAPLEY

And Coppola is still, to this day, firing entire art departments. So, God bless him.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I love that! When that was happening, it was, like, you know, people are like, "Oh, this movie is in trouble." I was like, "Do you not know the story? Do you not know Francis?"

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Baby, this is all cylinders. If he's firing-

KRIS TAPLEY

They made an entire documentary about this kind of shit. Go watch *Hearts of Darkness*.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Come on!

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

This is how it gets made. This is how the wine gets bottled. That's how it happens.

KRIS TAPLEY

Absolutely.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

So, I'm really – yeah, I'm so stoked for that movie. But, alright, so he makes these three films. He kind of takes advantage of the opportunity to work with these guys, because who wouldn't? All these directors. The movies are received, you know, to varying degrees, well. I think people really like *Much Ado*. *Dracula* is, like, I think gets more popular over the years. *Little Buddha*, people are like, "What the hell is this," mostly. Like, it doesn't exactly pan out. But he is singled out, particularly in *Dracula* but also in *Much Ado* as, like, the weak link. And, like, I remember going to see *Much Ado*, I remember people just laughing, because there's a part where he stands up and he's, like, shirtless in leather pants getting a massage from his, like, manservant, and, like, standing up and doing Shakespeare in that look. And it's very cam, and it's very, I think, sort of knowing and deliberate, because that movie is a very kind of sexed-up version of the material, you know, in a way that sort of feels – it feels predictive of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* almost. Like, it feels kind of like that's where it's going. There's that overwrought thing, like, we're going to make it a little hotter so that you can really feel what this was like, because this was probably the sexiest play intown when Shakespeare put it on. But he kind of gets laughed out of these movies because there's something about him that just does not work for people and that takes people out of the movie. Because, again, it's like, he seems like Keanu. He doesn't seem like he disappears into it. And obviously, like, *Dracula* is the real example where he's like, you know, "I've got to go to castle," and it's a little bit of a, like, "Yonder is the castle of my father," Tony Curtis, in that thing. So, there's a moment after all of this has happened where, like, the question of what kind of movie star he's going to be comes up again, because it's not been resolved by these three films. Because it's not like, "Oh, he's really connected in these type of movies, so he's going to be this type of actor." It's still like, "OK, but what is he then?" We know that he's got star power, he's got star quality. What is he going to do? What is he going to do with it? There's a moment he does an interview with, I think it's *Dazed & Confused*, the British magazine, where he's talking

about what he's going to do next. It could not be more, sort of, stark in terms of representation of this. He's like, "I'm either going to do this movie that my friend wrote where I'm going to play Apollo, Dionysus and Bacchus," you know, the mythological figures. Dionysus and Bacchus, by the way-

KRIS TAPLEY

Same thing.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

-I think are the same God, like, in two different Pantheons. Or he's going to play a SWAT team guy in a movie. He's got this SWAT team movie that he's thinking about. Obviously, we are here to talk about the SWAT team movie, that's the direction that he chooses to go in.

KRIS TAPLEY

All of that is the context, by the way, for – you know, the last episode, everyone heard about the exhaustive search for this actor, and they wanted people like Charlie Sheen and William Baldwin. And the comment was made that the action star of the time was typically a guy in his 40s. You know, you're looking at guys like Arnold. You're looking at guys like Stallone.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

They're in their late 40s by this point.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

They're both like 46.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, one comment was they're all men or men-plus, meaning getting older. And so, it's like, yeah, when you kind of think about it, there's a mold to be broken here. And really, Keanu Reeves is going to be the guy to do it? They didn't have anywhere near a list for this role at the start. Eventually, he's on the list and they're just, like, "Fuck it. OK, Keanu." And then he turns it down once. And then it becomes about convincing the guy that they didn't even want to begin with, because they just thought he was Ted, let alone these movies he's coming out of where he's being laughed out of the theater. So, it is such a sort of pivot point, I guess. I mean, obviously, because he's about to become a global superstar off of this movie. But I just want to, as we start to talk about it – the chapter on this in your book is fantastic. Because, and we'll talk about this, he was studying to do his *Hamlet* at the time, which is such a dichotomy. But you close by saying, "What *Speed* really tells us is how little actual acting Keanu has to do in order to be compelling in a movie, which cannot be a comfortable truth, but it's possible *Speed* understood Keanu better than Keanu understands *Speed*." I love that because, first of all, I do think he's sort of bemused by the fandom around this movie, and probably just

never got the movie beyond just the job of it all and, you know, not that he didn't take it seriously, but I do get the feeling that he would just be confused by a guy like me doing something like this. But this idea that, about the acting, you know, I've said that the movie is fascinating because there's no character arcs. Nobody learns anything. You watch a guy do his job for two hours. And who better to watch a guy try to put the pieces of a puzzle together than Keanu Reeves? I mean, he's got this passive quality, which really works for the character because he's playing a cop. He's very, just, observational, and trying to figure things out, and it's just a perfect visage to kind of stare at working through all of this. And so, you know, I'll let you take it from there, but that just struck me in your book, because it gets to what I think is so compelling about his presence in the movie.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, I mean, he doesn't – you know, there's a great old Chris Heath profile where Chris Heath asks him to – I think it's *Rolling Stone* – asks him to name his 10 best films, and he doesn't mention *Speed*, which is interesting because I think anybody, you know, if you're making a real sort of straight-down-the-middle list of the 10 best Keanu movies, like, you know, it would be odd to not put *Speed* on there. You as a consumer, right? But he doesn't see it that way. And I think you're right, that he's kind of like, "Really? *Speed*?" Like, that was, you know – because I think it feels like, you know, you've got to think, like, what he's coming off of. Like, it seems like, you know, it's a little bit of a — it feels like a market correction somehow, in terms of what he can do. And it does not ask that much of them, and like, he would, the way that he talks about it – and I quote this in the book – like he talks about, you know, "It didn't take up too much room in my head." There wasn't too much to think about. There's not too much character to think about. There's not really, you know – there's no backstory to this character. There's nothing. You're not kind of creating anything. You're just kind of doing. You're acting and you're being. So, as an actor, if you sort of imagine yourself as something kind of, you know, something more than that, I could see why he doesn't love this one as much as everybody else does. This is another one where he has to develop into a different kind of guy in order to triumph. Like, there is a journey that he goes on, and it's similar to *Point Break*. *Point Break* is a movie where he has to become a cool guy in order to do his job properly. Like, he has to get in touch with this sort of Patrick Swayze side and then, like, you know, what Swayze brings out in him, he cannot really sort of fully contain and he realizes that there's a bigger life than the one that he's been leading as this sort of guy who went straight into the FBI after football in college or whatever. And like, that's the arc of that character. And this one is about him having to discover a humanity, I think, beyond that machine- like quality. Because at first, like, he is very much – like, when he shows up, it's like, yeah, he's all business. He is sort of, like – there's something robotic about him. He's got the buzz cut, which was, you know, I think that's Jan de Bont, like, trying to make him look more adult and kind of get rid of the long hair so he doesn't look like a teen guy anymore.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's actually Keanu pulling something that they didn't know that he was going to do. Did you know that?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I've heard different things because, yeah, I've heard this version, too, that, like, there was something where, like, you know, he had the long hair because he was playing, he was playing Siddhartha, then he sort of shows up with the buzz cut and everybody freaks. I've heard that one, too.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, so that's what I've heard, and Jan is sort of, like, calculating, "OK, how long is it going to be when we start shooting." And so it grows out a little bit from where it was, but he definitely went full jarhead with it when he came in.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. It's crazy, yeah. Dennis Hopper has this quote that, you know, it's like talking about Keanu's kind of visual versatility, and he's like, you know, "In *Little Buddha*, he looks like a beautiful woman, and then he showed up for *Speed* he looked like a bulldog." And I kind of love that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Where was that?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It's in the book. So, I think it's cited. Or maybe it's not.

KRIS TAPLEY

I don't remember that in there. Well, I ask because it's so hard to find anything from Dennis of substance on this movie.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, it's the one guy you can't get for this, unfortunately.

KRIS TAPLEY

Exactly. Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

And yeah, it would be interesting to have his – I would love to know, like, what his take was. So, the interesting thing that happens – I'm not telling you anything you don't know because I know that you talked to Joss Whedon already. And so, I'm sure you got that version of the story. But I do think it's funny that, you know, he is he's coming in as the kind of, you know, somewhat reluctant successor to the Stallones and the Schwarzeneggers and all of that. He's incredibly ambivalent about doing that because he's this bookish, Bohemian Canadian guy and it's not ever the way that he pictured himself. It's not the kind of actor that he wanted to be. So, he does tailor *Speed* to himself a little bit. And like, that's supposedly what happens in the Whedon draft is a lot of it gets de-quippified, is what I've always heard.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it does.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

So, like there's – I've not read what it would have been like. Like, I've not read, like, the Graham Yost draft or anything. But you can imagine. It probably reads like a sort of late-80s, early-90s action movie with a lot of, you know, sort of-

KRIS TAPLEY

It does, and in fact, in your book, you opened my eyes to something I hadn't really thought of, which – I've read a few drafts. All of them in '93, but the March draft is closest to what it had been for a while before the kind of, with production imminent, before those rewrites started to happen. And there's a whole episode coming up about all of that. But regarding Joss, well, two things here. First of all, you mentioned how, like, the first act of the movie just feels like the kind of movies that came before, in a way. I'm paraphrasing here, but it does sort of feel like that elevator sequence and the chewing the gum and the, you know, "Yeah, a basement," you know, these quips and stuff – it does feel like the relic version of this movie before it becomes the sort of, "this is what this kind of movie is going to be going forward." And I found that interesting, because that is the one sequence that sort of never changed throughout development. And so, it remains that kind of thing in the movie.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

That makes sense. Totally.

KRIS TAPLEY

And the other thing is, and you were touching on this, you say in the book, "So, *Speed* is a perfect action movie for Keanu because it's about a tough guy who, in order to do his job and save the bus passengers and himself, has to learn to be cooler to other people and to be more Keanu-like." Regarding Joss Whedon and this, and this is coming up in an episode, but I'll just mention it now. He told me that, you know, he was sitting down with Keanu and the Keanu was, like, wanting to get rid of some of this quippy stuff, and he was like, having talked to the SWAT guys, they are only ever about defusing a situation. He was like, "They call everybody sir or ma'am." And Joss was like, "Once he said that, it was like a light bulb went off. Like, I know who this guy is now." And it really informs a lot of what you see in the movie. I mean, obviously the movie is so very much – the dialogue, almost all of it, is Joss. So, the attitude of the movie is Joss Whedon. But I just found that interesting, and then reading that passage in your book about it, it sort of connected to that, that that sir or ma'am thing, that sort of different kind of action hero. It's not about bravado. It's about – like, he doesn't want to pull his gun on the guy, Daniel Villarreal. He told Joss, "I don't want to put my gun on that guy." And he's like, "Yeah, I know, but you kind of have to in this movie. Let's just do it and then move on from it." And the way even that beat is handled, it's just a different kind of action hero. A more, I guess, empathetic action hero.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Right, and there's traces of it just being, you know, the cowboy cop who doesn't play by the rules, you know, in that early sequence. Like, you see it. He's crazy. He's going to do the crazy thing to get the situation resolved. Because that's what he's got going into it. That's what Jeff Daniels says to him, like, pretty early on. He's like, "Guts will get you so far. Luck will get you killed." It's in that bar scene. He tells him to start thinking. But really, what he has to do is he has to start feeling, right? He has to become more empathetic, because he's going to be in a situation that can't be resolved by you being that tough guy with the gun. Like, Clint Eastwood is not going to be able to – you know, Dirty Harry, in this situation is going to die on a bus. It's just not going to work because you can't point your big ol' gun at this situation and resolve it in that way. So, like, the first really important thing that happens is in that sort of initial thing in the elevator rescue sequence. It's the moment when he's got everybody off the elevator, so, he's rescued young Patrick Fischler, already, is off of there. And his friend Robert Mailhouse who will play in Dogstar with him, was playing the exec who says "what button did you push?" I'm sure you know that. This is trivia. But he's gotten everybody off. He gets Mailhouse off. And there's this one woman executive left in the back of the elevator who's petrified and, like, won't come up to do the thing because she has to crawl through this little window, and she's, like, if this elevator drops, like, I'm getting guillotined. I'm getting cut in half. And like, she recognizes that and she's not moving. She's pinned to the wall. And in that moment, like, the crane breaks and all of this stuff is happening, and it's, like, time is of the essence. But, like, Keanu doesn't know what to do, so he just yells, and then he just yells louder. He's just like, "Come on!" Like, he has nothing for this situation, and what it requires is, like, somebody has to, you know – you've got to really sort of reach this woman in a different way. And it's like, he doesn't know what to do. And so, they get her off there in the nick of time. The situation, you know, is resolved. It goes on. And what's going to happen over the course of the movie, there's going to be a few more of those moments where you see him having to use a different toolbox, a different skillset that he maybe needs to cultivate in order to become – so that's what he's becoming over the course of this movie, is that he's becoming, like, less of this person who is the cop identity and more of a human being who's part of a community. I think that that's the most profound thing that's happening in *Speed*, because the second big moment is Daniel Villarreal. It's the kid when he first gets on the bus. The guy thinks Keanu is there to take him in for some crime. We don't know what it is. And he has to be, like, "I don't care about your crime." Like, "I'm not here to" – basically he puts the gun down, right? He puts the badge down. He has to be a human being. He's like, "I'm not a cop right now. We're just two guys together." And like, that situation doesn't go south until somebody decides to be the hero and tackle the guy with the gun. And that's when the driver gets shot and everything, you know, goes to shit and the whole situation kind of ramps up and gets even worse. But in that moment, he's having to sort of think outside of the cop identity and think of himself as a human being and how to sort of connect with this person as a human being. And what it eventually builds up to, is, for me, it's the moment with Sandra Bullock, which is – we're fast-forwarding way into *Speed*, and if there's stuff in between that you want to talk about, we can totally do it – but yeah, so, like, the third big moment for me is when they're helping the woman off the bus. They've gotten the driver off. Hopper has agreed to let

them, you know, let the driver off. And then that woman tries to get off and she gets blown up. And Sandra Bullock, Annie, is dealing with her survivor's guilt in that moment, and he has to sort of talk her through that. And what happens, by the end, or at least by the end of the bus segment of this movie is, not only has he sort of had to tap into an empathy and how to connect with human beings in order to do this, because they're all in this together and the bus becomes this, like, microcosm of a community where he has to participate in that and they all have to work together and he's not – he can't, like, boss people around in that. He has to become something. But it's also like, he has to almost take on, like, the traditional female role in a movie. It's like, Sandra Bullock is doing the hard, tough-guy job of driving the bus and he's the one who's, like, "Are you OK? How are you doing?" Like, he's tending to her wound and stuff. It's an inversion of that, and it feels very modern and very, you know – it's an inversion of what screen masculinity would be in that moment. And I think it's where you can see, you know, Keanu sort of exploring, like, what that is. You can see movies exploring what the future of screen masculinity is going to be through the way that Keanu is used in this movie and through what he ends up doing and what they sort of – you know, sort of what kind of behavior is of value, and what is valorized in this film is being a certain way and kind of treating people with respect and empathy and kindness and all of that. It's such a Zen action movie in so many ways. I love it so much.

KRIS TAPLEY

It would be. Keanu's action movie would be a Zen action movie. But speaking of that scene, it's worth bringing up just the chemistry with Sandra Bullock here. It's a huge part of why the movie works. I think she deserves a ton of credit for that. I mean, they make an interesting tandem, and it's a shame that, you know, 12 years later, they'll come back together in this movie that I still have no idea what the hell happened, in *The Lake House*. But yeah, just the chemistry with Sandra is just a huge part of what makes everything you just talked about the kind of work, I think.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

And I think they're playing what's written there, which is these are two people who would probably never have connected in this way, but they connect under extreme circumstances. I think that's all there. Yeah, but it is one of those things where, yeah, these people would not fall in love, probably. But, like, just as, you know, people in LA probably don't know their bus driver by name, which is a thing that both Keanu and Sandra Bullock – I mean, maybe they have that connection because they're really close to their public transit people that they see every day. Like, they both have that connection, because Keanu is also like, "Hey." I forget his name but it's the guy-

KRIS TAPLEY

Sam.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

-who, they go to the same coffee shop. "Hey, Sam."
but like Sam drives or if they they go to the same coffee shop. And then RIP Sam.

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh, at the beginning. You're talking about the beginning?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, he's friends with a bus driver, too. So maybe that's what they have in common. That's what their relationship would have been based on.

KRIS TAPLEY

What's his name? What's his name. Capodice plays him.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Oh, Keanu's friend. Yeah, Sam is the driver of our bus, of 2525.

KRIS TAPLEY

Sam is Hawthorne James. Yeah. I'm trying to remember the guy's name. I feel so shamed for this. Anyway, yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

No one will shame you for not knowing that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Hope not. Coming out of *Speed*. I mean, what do you make of his, like, post-*Speed* career? I mean, one of the reasons I think he's sort of, like, "Really? *Speed*?" – is that he probably has a complex relationship with it, because it blew up his star in a way he maybe wasn't super comfortable with at the time. So, what does he do with that star, is sort of the question. I mean, what do you make of what he seemed to be trying to do with his career now that he has such global success with *Speed*?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, I think there's two things. Phoenix dies while he's shooting *Speed*. It's early in the shoot. And, ultimately, it's a personal tragedy for Keanu more than it is anything else. But I think it probably changes the direction of the career a little bit. Like, would they have made more films together? Like, Damon and Affleck didn't, but like they might have. They seemed to really love working together and there's a, you know, parallel universe to ponder where they work together again, and that probably launches him in a different direction, you know, that's if that's there. But because River's career is just amended at that moment, you don't know what would have happened. But also, by the time he does *Speed*, he's made this decision to do *Hamlet*. Like, he's had conversations, you know, with Branagh and with Kevin Kline, and they've said to him, basically, you know, this is the age where you should play *Hamlet*. If you're going to do it, you should do it now. Then he gets this, you know, this opportunity to do it. With Robert Baumander, who's somebody he's worked with way back in Canadian theatre in the old days, who he has, like, I think, done Shakespeare with before. And so, it's this weird homecoming. He goes to Canada. He goes to Winnipeg, of all places. There is apparently the option on the table to do, like, a big sort of, like, New York kind of debut, like, some kind of thing that would be very high-profile. And he chooses not to do that.

He chooses to do it almost in a place that's, like, hard to get to. And people go anyway, and, like, obsessive Keanu fans show up and, like, the run sells out, the whole thing. But he's trying to do something that's away from all of this craziness. It's this lifelong dream because he's, like, a Shakespeare guy, but it's also an escape hatch from everything that is happening. And it's like, to go and do this at this moment, rather than kind of striking while the iron is hot with whatever, you know, kind of thing you're going to go and do is, I think, a calculated decision. And I think it's an attempt to kind of bring the temperature down on everything and kind of postpone, again, the question of what he's going to go and do. And, you know, he goes and does this thing. They try to keep a lid on it as best they can. So, it's not, like, filmed or anything, and, like, they don't allow any, like, press to come in and sort of review it until, like, the last kind of possible moments and everything. But yeah, I think it's the beginning of him not quite knowing what to do next, and I think he will – ultimately, he is in a position after that that he's going to be in, probably, like, up through *The Matrix*, maybe in some ways, where I think what he sort of wants for himself, his idea of himself, and his idea of what he should be doing and the thing that I think studios and maybe even audiences want from him is very different, and I don't know that he really resolves that quandary in any, like, really satisfactory way until something like *The Matrix* comes along, which is almost, like – it's almost like if you could do *Speed* and *Little Buddha* at once, there's never been a movie like that when the movie comes out, like, when it happens, that combination of the existential journey and the crazy bullet time kung fu action movie, you know, that's a unicorn in that moment for movies, and for Keanu, for a project to be presented to him like that. But that stuff doesn't come along, and he gets one, like, every decade or so. Because I think *John Wick* is also, like, a sort of unique use of the thing that is of action Keanu and sort of, you know, emotional Keanu, vulnerable Keanu, spiritual Keanu, whatever it is. I think like those that allow him to be both of those things – but it's hard. It's hard to find movies that let you kind of do that. You could kind of wander in the desert looking for them, and I think he sort of does. And there's also the other problem, which, I mean, we talked about a bit before we started recording, but that often he will set out to do something that's a little left-field, that's a little weird, and the people in charge, the people with the money will look at that project and sort of say, "Yeah, but with a little, just, nudge here or there, could be a Keanu movie. It could be, like, you know, something bigger, has the potential to be huge." And the first time that really happens, I think, is *Johnny Mnemonic*, which is supposed to be you know, like, William Gibson and Robert Longo talking about it like it's going to be *Alphaville*, like they wanted to make, you know, like a new-wave-

KRIS TAPLEY

The movie you describe in the book that it would have been sounds amazing.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, I mean, it doesn't exist, supposedly. Like, Longo, sort of said, like, they didn't ever – it's not like there's the movie on the cutting room floor somewhere.

KRS TAPLEY

Yeah. Right.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

There's no director's cut, because by the time – like, it got sort of messed with enough, early enough, that we don't really know what it would have been. Because, like, Dolph Lundgren is foisted upon them, and, like, there's all kinds of things that sort of go awry, but that movie is still super fun. And you can see the movie that they were trying to make there. It's an amazing kind of, like, you know, downtown arty kind of cast. You know, you've got Henry Rollins and Udo Kier and all that, you know? So, that starts happening, too, that people are like, "Well, but we've got the star of *Speed* in our movie. And so this movie could be, instead, you know, they want it to be this, but it's our money, so, we can tell Robert Longo, like, what kind of movie we want it to be. And we want it to be an action movie starring Keanu Reeves as, like, you know, a cool guy, like, you know, having an adventure." And I think that sort of will be a problem for him, too, like, that his involvement will shift the type of movie that it is. And it's almost as if he can sort of, like, just by his presence in the cast, it ceases to be the thing that he wants it to be, or it's harder to make it the thing that he wants it to be. So, I mean, I guess this really – we've explained why he thinks about *Speed* that way. I think you're right, that it sort of proves that this can be done. Like, that he can sort of really make an action – like that he's totally viable, that people buy him as an action star in a way that they don't really buy some of the people that they're trying to slot into this sort of, like, Stallone, Schwarzenegger successor position. And, I don't know, it doesn't ruin his life, necessarily, but it makes it harder, because there's suddenly this expectation. Why wouldn't – if you can do that, why wouldn't you keep doing it?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

And nobody really understands why he doesn't want to keep doing it, and in the absence of wanting to keep doing it is when you get to the weird kind of wilderness years of Keanu, which I spend a lot of time on in the book, because he's still doing fascinating things all the time in those movies.

KRIS TAPLEY

What do you consider this period of time?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I mean, I think it's the – it's everything. It's certainly, like, between *The Matrix* and *John Wick*, almost, like feels like it's really trying to figure it out.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'm looking now. Like, *The Replacements* is bad. *Sweet November* is bad. I never saw *The Watcher* but what happened with that movie is quite a story.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yes. That's a great example of one where, like, you know – that's one where he gets sort of tricked into making a movie. He's, like, *Bowfingered* into this movie, and, like it's happened more than once to him where he will shoot, you know, a little bit for something, like, he'll shoot some scenes, and then suddenly, like, he's the star of the movie, like, which was not his intention. But, you know, if you have Keanu in your movie and you can make a Keanu Reeves movie out of this movie, like, you're going to do it. And that one becomes, like, a legal situation, because he claims he was, you know, sort of falsely kind of dragooned into doing this. And I think that's probably true, but it seems like it's between friends.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's also funny. I mean, I'm sorry. It's funny, that this has happened to him a couple of times at this point, too.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, and that's the one – because that's the guy, *The Watcher*, I forget the dude's name, but his previous credit is, like, he shot the EPK for the Dogstar album, you know? And, like, he was the guy who's, like, on the tour bus, like, "Maybe I'll make a documentary about this." And then, like-

KRIS TAPLEY

Joe Charbanic.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Joe Charbanic. It is alleged – I mean, it seems like it's one of those things where he's, like, "Hey, could you sign this?" And they're on the tour bus having beers or something, and then suddenly, he's like, "I seem to have committed to starring in *The Watcher*. I didn't mean to do that. Directed by Joe Charbanic." That movie is hilarious. It's a terrible use, misuse, of Keanu. It's absurd. It's Keanu and James Spader playing the roles that the other person should have played, basically. So, like, Keanu should be the cop who's, like, kind of going after the serial killer, and Spader should be the weirdo because Spader is a great weirdo. And yet, instead, it's like, Spader is the cop. And it's all wrong. But, yeah, anyway. I watch that so you don't have to. But there's a lot and there's a lot of things, you know, you can see what he's trying to do. He's trying to do sort of different things in all of them. There's always something interesting, I find *Sweet November* to be fascinating, because he plays Don Draper, basically, like, you know, trying to grow a soul.

KRIS TAPLEY

I picked this up in your book, man. I feel like you might have had to convince yourself that there was something fascinating about all of these. *Sweet November* – no. No to all of that.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It's – I mean, look, I will say it was a pandemic, and the way that we all kind of dissociated in our own ways and found our own kind of escapes from what was going on around us and not thinking-

KRIS TAPLEY

That's what this has been for me.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. I mean, look, we all need it. And for me, it was diving into the kind of, you know, dark period of Keanu and sort of finding things to love about it and finding things to, you know – seeing him trying to do something, because he is always – I think there is an internal story that he is telling. There is something that he's been drawn to, and something that he's trying to bring out. And I think, like, the real theme of this book, as I look back on it – I don't know that this was exactly what I set out to do, necessarily, but when I sort of read it back and think about what I'm doing, it's like, it sort of demonstrates how hard it is to make good movies. Like, even if you are in a great position, even if you're a huge movie star, that it's how miraculous it is when a movie is good. Like, how much you are up against in terms of – even, like, if you read a script, and you're like, "This is great. I'm going to make this one because I believe in this project over another project," there's so much that can go wrong in between those two points. And he's talked a lot about, you know – he's like, "I like the version of *Feeling Minnesota* that's not in the movie." So, whatever he shot and whatever ends up on screen, and it's just, what you realize is how powerless an actor is unless you really become somebody who is producing and direct. Unless you do, like, a George Clooney where you're, like, "I'm a producer. I'm a director. I'm creating works for me to star in. I'm sort of in charge of that whole process. I've taken control of the thing." If you're just Keanu, who's only directed one film. It's like, he's not – like it doesn't seem like he's really drawn to that. He doesn't seem like he's drawn to those other sides of the process. You are at the mercy of the process, and you are at the mercy of the business, and you are at the mercy of just things that go wrong on everything. And I think it's weird to think about him as powerless, but I do think that, like, there's something about – this book is about powerlessness, and even Keanu Reeves cannot control his destiny, can only be as good as what's out there to do,

KRIS TAPLEY

Which is wrapped up in – and I'm not meaning to blow through all this, although there's, you know, things to be said – but, like, that's all sort of wrapped up in the *John Wick* package a little bit, too, isn't it?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Totally. Yeah, I think that's what *John Wick* is about. Absolutely. In some ways, whether he knows it or not, it's about – I mean, I find *John Wick* really interesting because they're so glorious as action movies, but I feel like they're also, on some level, about, like, having to make action movies, having to keep making action movies. Because what is the sort of the arc of John Wick? It's like, John Wick wants to stop being John

Wick and everybody's like, "No, no, no. We need you to keep being John Wick. And if you want to survive now, you have to keep being John Wick and you have to go deeper and, like, you have to sort of – even though you can feel your soul, kind of like you're losing your soul each time you do it, you have to keep killing people." And I think there's something like that about Keanu, too. It's about, he's kind of wandered, he's going away from what he ultimately sort of wants to be in order to do that. You know, I feel like he's probably, you know, made his peace with that on some level, but I think when you're sort of younger and maybe a little more – I don't want to say pretentious, but maybe you're drawn to some kind of higher goal than selling on movie tickets, I think that's a hard thing, you know, for some people to figure out, how you're going to rationalize that, how you're going to carry that and live with it. Again, it's like, what the audience wants and what he wants are very different, and they line up occasionally, but the part where the two lines kind of go out away from each other is pretty long, where the two trains diverge.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. So, there's this passage in the book, by the way, where you talk about "bad Keanu," quote unquote. It's where he's sort of playing not-so-great guys, kind of a spring-off of *The Gift*, in a way, which he did, you know, 15 years prior.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Which might be the best. Yeah, that's the best evil Keanu movie, still, I feel like. That's one of his greatest performances. There's something there that he didn't tap into for years later.

KRIS TAPLEY

We're talking about *Man of Tai Chi*, which he directed, and *Knock Knock* and *The Neon Demon*. I actually haven't seen *Knock Knock*, but I've seen the other two. Talk about that and just, again, a guy, still, all these years later, seems like he's a guy trying to peg down who he is on screen, who he can be. And that's probably, to an extent, what all actors always do, and you never quite figure it out. But that's the journey. So, go ahead.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I mean, it's him cutting against the persona. It's him almost, like, flipping the persona around and saying, like, "Oh, what if this was a mask for some real evil and creepiness? What if there was something – What if I was really a terrible guy?" And I think it's interesting because I think those movies kind of unfold in the context of #MeToo and the sort of, like, cultural reckoning around kind of male evil, pretty much like masculine badness and all of that. And he's right there as that's happening and kind of dramatizing it and saying, like, "Oh, what if I was a terrible person?" And these roles, they feel close to him in some way, but then it sort of pivots and becomes something different and shows, like, a dark side of him. I don't even know if it's – I don't think it's him showing a dark side that he possesses. It's him just investigating, like, what it would be like to be one of these guys. *Knock Knock*, which you should really see, actually, is worth-

KRIS TAPLEY

It sounds incredible. I mean, I've known the premise for a long time and everything. I just never saw it. And there's a bit earlier in the book where you talk about how he's kind of a guy who – what did you say? Like, no one has been – no one has had so many forced blow jobs or something like that?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It's a lot! If you watch all of these movies, you start to see themes that, like, no one would ever think of as a theme. But he is very often – I can't think of another actor, certainly not another famously sexy male lead actor, who is made love to as often in movies in various ways, in various sort of non-consensual or just a sort of, like – either a position where the woman is taking the lead – it's consensual and the woman has taken the lead – or where it's non-consensual, in the case of, of *Knocked Up*, where he is – I'm sorry, *Knock Knock*.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now that would have been quite a project. *Knocked Up* with Keanu Reeves.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

OK, so, who is he in *Knocked Up*? Like, is he sort of – is he the Paul Rudd character?

KRIS TAPLEY

No, he's got to be some new character that's almost something like out of the – what's the movie he did where he was the boyfriend?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Always Be My Maybe.

KRIS TAPLEY

Something like that.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah, he can only play Keanu Reeves in that. I guess the only part for him in *Knocked Up* is the James Franco part, the guy who's being interviewed by Katherine Heigl while she's throwing up. There's no other place where he would make sense. Yeah, I find these movies to be really interesting and another kind of under-explored area of his career. And in a sense, what happens is he makes *John Wick*, and then it takes a while for *John Wick* to percolate into the franchise that it becomes, because everybody, they just think this is another one of these – he's making a lot of pretty much, like, straight-to-DVD movies, straight-to-video, whatever it is. Straight-to-streaming, in this time, and I think there's not an expectation that *John Wick* is going to be anything other than that. And once it really connects, they then have to spin back up the sort of genre – like, there was no plan to make another *John Wick* until it sort of, like it – clearly, there's a reason to, and so they have to spin that up. And in the meantime, these movies come out that feel of a piece with *John Wick*, because *John Wick* is, you know, he's the Baba Yaga. He's the sort of Grim Reaper. Like, he's a dark figure and he deals with dark shit.

But I love what he's doing in all of these films. I love the way that Refn uses him in *Neon Demon* as this, you know, almost like the sort of seamy spirit of Los Angeles that takes advantage of these, you know, young women who come into his space. He runs the motel where she lives in *Neon Demon* and clearly, he preys on these people. And I do think it's interesting, too, that, like, this is somebody who's been – you know, we're talking about powerlessness. He is dramatizing – in a lot of these cases, these are all sort of Hollywood-themed movies, and he's dramatizing the exploitation and the powerlessness and he is portraying someone who is preying on these people. It's what he's doing in *Man of Tai Chi* as well. He's the guy who's manipulating this martial arts star to, you know, kind of kill for money and he's stealing his soul in some way, and I find all of that stuff, really fascinating.

KRIS TAPLEY

It really plays into what we were just talking about with *John Wick*, and how he's, you know, at the service of a machine that he feels uncomfortable being at the service of, and so in *Man of Tai Chi*, he's, playing the guys who want to turn *Johnny Mnemonic* into a Keanu Reeves action movie, right?

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Yeah. Think about him – it is the one time when you have him as the auteur in some way, and you can sort of see that, you know, he has things to say and this is how he's saying them. And I think *Man of Tai Chi* is absolutely about his relationship with Hollywood, and I think that part of the lure of doing *Neon Demon*, even though that's not exactly what he's playing. He's just kind of an ancillary sort of antagonist. There's the whole of the business, but I think that has to be what drew him to that story, because that's about basically Hollywood eventually literally chewing somebody up and spitting them out, in a sort of terrible, you know, darkly comic Nicolas Refn sort of way. And then there's also *Bad Batch*, where he's playing, you know, the gross Tony Clifton version of himself. Like, he's playing himself as a cult leader and he's thinking about, you know, again, the kind of poisonous nature of charisma and the way that it can be used to control people and all of that. I think all of this is on his mind. I don't even know if he's thinking about it necessarily. But I think, you know, sometimes, and certainly-

KRIS TAPLEY

That's the nature of art.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

It's the nature of art. It's certainly the nature of this book is to assume that, like, sometimes there are hidden intentions that the star is not even aware of. And to assume that that's, you know – it doesn't matter what the poets thought about whatever they were saying about the Grecian Urn. Like, I think he's doing this, whether he knows it or not. This is why he's drawn to it. This book is me being, like, "Keanu, let me tell you what your movie is about." Which is why we're not friends!

KRIS TAPLEY

Hey, who knows? You said in the book, by the way, that you assumed he would never talk to you again. Has that proved to be the case? Maybe not willfully. I don't even know if you've had a reason to cross paths again. But just curious about that.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

You know, I have no idea what he thinks of this book. I have not heard anything. Yeah, I have no clue. There was a moment, like, somebody – I'm not going say who it was, but I got a DM from somebody who was working with him. And I was like, "Say hi for me." And then I was like, "Maybe don't say hi for me, if you kind of know what's good for you." Because I sort of feel like, there is a little bit of, you know – well, you could say, this book feels a little stalker-y in terms of, like, the way that he's sort of being looked at. Like, I do a lot of, like, real sort of intense looking at Keanu in this and kind of at his behavior and, like, his body and his movement and all of those things. And like, I don't know if I'd want to talk to me after that, but I also don't, you know – I have no clue what it feels like to be on the other side of something like this. Just like I don't know what celebrities think about the people who interview them. Like, does he remember our conversation? Like, did he even put that together? I do think – he is a reader. You know, he does read books. I bet he hasn't read this book, because why would you read a book about yourself? He might sort of feel like, "Oh, that's about someone other than me. Like, that's not who I am." Because I feel like there's, you know-

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

My sense has always been that the version of him that you get in any kind of professional celebrity-to-journalist interaction, and the version of him that, like, Alex Winter knows, or any of those other people, it's probably very different, and I think there's a self-protective aspect to that where you just kind of show up. He's got that great quote, where he's like, "I'm like Mickey Mouse at Disneyland. Nobody knows who's inside the suit." And he's sort of like, "I like it that way." And, yeah, so I imagine – I don't know.

KRIS TAPLEY

I don't know the guy. I mean, I've interviewed him a couple of times. But, like, I feel like he would appreciate it. There's certainly an element to the book that is all about how he's sort of caged in by people's perceptions of him, or by the Keanu that they want him to be. And you give that a lot of – you deal with that a lot in the book, and I think he would appreciate someone recognizing that. He seems like a guy who would appreciate someone recognizing that, anyway. But that's just my take. I don't know.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

I would love to have the conversation. I think he would be nice about it.

KRIS TAPLEY

I think we've done a lot of damage here and we can probably wrap it up, but I will say everyone should read this book. *Keanu Reeves: Most Triumphant - The Movies & Meaning of an Irrepressible Icon*. Alex Pappademas. I truly mean it. It's one of the best books I've read of this nature, and I don't even know if there are really many books of this nature, but this is just – it's fucking great, man. So, well done.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Thank you very much. I appreciate it. As the leaf blowers fire up outside of my door, as if on cue.

KRIS TAPLEY

On cue. Los Angeles just knows how to keep you on track.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Hollywood, baby.

KRIS TAPLEY

Thank you so much, Alex, for doing this. I really appreciate it.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

Kris, it has been my great pleasure. Thank you.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's Alex Pappademas.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH...*

KRIS TAPLEY

We've signed our action hero, now we need an action heroine. The search is on for an actress to play Annie.

MARK GORDON

There was every young actress that was available, and gettable, was on our list.

JAN DE BONT

We were looking more at non-star actors who already had experience, but most importantly, had authenticity.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'll cover both the enthusiasm and the trepidation that led to casting rising star Sandra Bullock.

GRAHAM YOST

There was this sort of sense of, like, “Oh, no, she’s going to be a star. Let’s get her now while we can.”

MARK GORDON

We were all, like, “Oh my God, this woman is magnificent. Let’s hope that we can cast her. That they’ll let us cast her.”

KRIS TAPLEY

And we’ll talk about the palpable chemistry she was able to generate with co-star Keanu Reeves.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

In the audition, it was magic between them. There was no question. And then it was, like, the fight to make it happen.

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.