

50 MPH: EPISODE 10

“A STAR IS BORN”

Transcript (00:27:13)



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

Don’t touch that dial. You’re in the right place. I mean, if you’re looking for an absurdly deep dive into the making of a 30-year-old action movie, yeah, you’re in the right place. Today, as we continue breaking down the development of *Speed* step-by-step, it’s time to cast a female lead. Someone to play bus passenger turned driver Annie opposite newly signed star Keanu Reeves. In fact, if you’ll recall, Fox had been playing around with the idea of casting this role even before they landed their male lead in Keanu. Here’s former Fox executive Jorge Saralegui explaining that one more time.

JORGE SARALEGUI

At one point we decide, “OK, what if we cast Sandy’s role big, OK, like Halle Berry, and then we can get somebody lesser for Keanu’s role?” And she turned it down. Which is funny because, like, a few years later, her manager, who I’m talking to about something completely different, says, “Yeah, you know, Halle Berry still beats herself up over having turned down *Speed*.” Now, the thing is, it wouldn’t have been the same thing, although it might have been really good in a different way, you know what I’m saying? But it wouldn’t have been the same thing because, I mean, that chemistry – I doubt it would have been Keanu Reeves, and not that you needed him, but the chemistry that they had was kind of miraculous.

KRIS TAPLEY

And, of course, he’s talking about Keanu and the actress who would eventually land the part of Annie, Sandra Bullock. And that’s the story we’re going to tell today. Remember, the character was originally called Darlene. Here’s how she’s described in an early draft of the script: “A woman runs for the bus. This is DARLENE. She’s attractive, she’s funny and she’s late.” Eventually, that description would read: “ANNIE, 20s, beautiful, the snap of wit in her eyes, springs toward the leaving bus and finally catches up to it one block later.” Now, just like the search for Jack Traven, the search for Annie – who would still be called Darlene all the way up until just before shooting, by the way – had its hands tied in the sense that the studio would have loved a name actress for the part, but there wasn’t that kind of money to throw at anyone. Not only that, but the belt on the film’s

slowly increasing budget was starting to get a little tight. And this search for Darlene-slash-Annie is literally lasting all the way up until the brink of production.

JORGE SARALEGUI

This entire time there's a lot of pressure on this, and as we rewrite the script and put in Jan's stuff, the budget keeps getting knocked up. So, even though we're not paying anybody anything, as you can tell from the cast, the movie ended up going off at 20, officially, which already made them nervous. Because now – you know, at 15, it didn't matter what happened. Like, we'd get away with it, you know, as an action movie. At 20, there was some concern, and there's no stars in it. We still don't have Sandra Bullock and no Dennis Hopper. OK, so, now we're getting right near the end, and we cast Sandra Bullock. We thought about a lot of different people.

KRIS TAPLEY

We heard from casting director Risa Bramon Garcia for the first time a couple of weeks ago. She's really going to play a big part in things going forward, though, because both the search for Annie and the search for all of those character actors on the bus in *Speed* would prove to be a difficult one. Here's Risa.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

Yeah, there were all, just, tons of actresses, and people who might have been name-y at the time, but we also auditioned a ton of people, and this was a hard part for audition for, as you might imagine.

KRIS TAPLEY

Here is director Jan de Bont.

JAN DE BONT

We were looking more at non-star actors who already had experience, but most importantly, had authenticity. Of course, a lot of the actors have star quality, but star quality was not really what I was after. Because I've worked on so many action movies, I could always already predict what they were going to do. Even if they were a good actor, I knew what they were going to do.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here is producer Mark Gordon.

MARK GORDON

There was every young actress that was available and gettable was on our list. We were running out of time. "Are we making this movie or not? Alright, who do we have to play this part?" "Well, nobody." "Well, who's the best nobody that we have?" "Sandy." "OK, Fox, can we make this movie or not?"

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

Sandy was amazing. I had done a movie with her called *The Vanishing*, which was a remake. Nancy Travis was the main woman in the film. Sandy was the dead wife. She

was so happy to have that part, but to me she was so amazing in that. I was so excited to bring her in for this.

KRIS TAPLEY

But just like Keanu Reeves had, as production president Tom Jacobson put it, “no comps” for an action movie like this, well, just what do you think Sandra Bullock had? In the summer of 1993, she had been around, but even at 28 years old – about a month older than Keanu Reeves, actually – she was not anyone the audience knew. She had paid her dues. She showed up in TV movies like *Bionic Showdown*, which found her opposite the Six Million Dollar Man and the Bionic Woman themselves, Lee Majors and Lindsay Wagner. She had secured what might have been a breakout in a TV series version of the feature film *Working Girl* if the show had lasted more than one season in 1990. She started turning some heads with a sort of ugly-duckling role in *Love Potion No. 9* in 1992, and as a free-spirited country singer in Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Thing Called Love* a year later. And in fact, 1993 would serve as a bit of a breakthrough year for her with roles opposite Robert Duvall in *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway* and Jeff Bridges in the film Risa mentioned, *The Vanishing*. But one film in particular that year, which was still on the way to theaters when production on *Speed* was gearing up, was the one that somehow squared off the studio math for casting her in an action movie. Here’s Jorge speaking to that.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Lori Petty, I think, was going to do *Demolition Man* and then didn’t. Sandra Bullock does *Demolition Man*, and so, therefore, Sandra Bullock does an action movie, which is not who she is, and you’ve seen from her subsequent work, it’s not what she leans towards, OK, when you give her a choice. But she was up and coming at that point. And I met with her and she was great, and she definitely wanted to do it. And so, we tell ourselves, “OK, she’ll be fine in the role, and *Demolition Man* is going to be coming out. That will be a big movie so that will elevate her name.” So, today, it’s like hiring nobody. But tomorrow, it’ll be the star, the romantic lead, of that movie. Now, of course, that movie didn’t really do all that much, and it didn’t help our cause, in reality, at all, OK? But that was the thinking.

[DEMOLITION MAN CLIP]

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Lenina Huxley”)

Not bad for a 74-year-old. Simon Phoenix knows he has some competition. He’s finally matched his meet. You really licked his ass.

SYLVESTER STALLONE (as “John Spartan”)

That’s met his match and kicked – kicked his ass.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Lenina Huxley”)

Met? Met his match and kicked his ass. Met his match and kicked his ass.

KRIS TAPLEY

I love that movie. Like, so much. Don't tempt me, OK? We'll end up with another podcast here. Anyway, here is former Fox production president Tom Jacobson.

TOM JACOBSON

It was traditional casting. She came in. She was not at the star level, obviously, yet, where you just offer her the part. I don't remember conversations about did we go after people like that. Like, just offer them the part, you don't read. She read. I don't know whether she did a chemistry read with Keanu. I can't remember that. Maybe someone else remembers that.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

Keanu, I know he had issues with the film overall, you know? And so, he was in his own place of, "Is this going to work? Why am I doing this? Will this succeed? How do I make this happen?" I don't think his head was into the relationship between the two of them, but in the audition, it was magic between them and there was no question. And don't ask me why I do not have these VHS tapes. Like, why I threw every audition tape out, because I wish to God that I had kept all of them. But I remember it was really, really fun and lovely and magical between them and it was, like, a no-brainer. It was, like, he said, "Yes, it's got to be her." Everyone, we were just, like, "It's got to be her." And then it was just the fight to make it happen. And I just knew in my gut that she had to do this part, especially having been through all the people on all the lists in all the auditions.

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, now, as it pertains to Sandra Bullock and this podcast – similar to Keanu Reeves, I have one interview with her. Again, it's from a decade ago when I was writing about this film's 20th anniversary. What's worse, is it's not only much shorter than my already brief interview Keanu, but the audio is...less than ideal, let's say. But it's what I have to work with at the moment, and just like with Keanu, I hope to sit down with Sandra and go deeper into her experience on this film before the clock runs out on *50 MPH*. But for now, via crappy 2014 cell phone audio, here is Sandra Bullock recalling this period of time.

SANDRA BULLOCK

I mean, I know that during the auditioning process, I was the last person that Fox studio wanted. I mean, they wanted, understandably, a list of names. And Jan kept having me come back in and audition with the ever-so-beautiful Keanu with some fold-out chairs pretending I was grabbing the steering wheel, and that's what I remember. I just remember that process and knowing very well that I was chosen by Jan over what the studio wanted him to pick.

MARK GORDON

She was just so God damn appealing, and when she came in and auditioned, 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

Let's hear from screenwriter Graham Yost, and remember, by now he's seen this role shift quite a bit over years of development, first at Paramount and then at Fox. He had taken the character from a drug-addicted ambulance driver to a wise-cracking stand-up comedian. And even all of that would shift in due time. Here's Graham.

GRAHAM YOST

Everyone knew Sandra was the right choice. There was sort of no question about that. There was this sort of sense of, like, "Oh, no, she's going to be a star. Let's get her now while we still can." She had been in three movies and just had gotten great reviews every time. Everyone knew that she was something.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

And her manager didn't want her to do this, so when we got down to it the manager was asking for an incredibly, bizarrely huge amount of money and the studio didn't want her, and I don't know why, but I remember exactly where I was sitting in the production office at a desk on the Fox lot and arguing with everybody. And Jan, I would say, "You and Mark have to go fight this fight. I can't do this by myself." And they were like, "Let's look at other people. Let's go back." And I go, "No, she's tested with Keanu and they were rolling around on the floor of the office together and it was fun and they really liked each other." She had told me, Sandy, that she did want to do it, but her manager was really blocking it from my end, but I think in the end, trying to just get her a really good deal, because the money wasn't great. But kept saying, "There's no reason for her to do this movie other than a payday," yada, yada, and I would even say to the manager, you know, "They don't want her at Fox." And she'd go, "Fine. Then we're done." And so, I remember sitting there that day and thinking, "I'm going to lose this battle. There's no way to win this thing." And I don't know how or why it turned around. I think we had a meeting with them or Jan and Mark went to the mat for it, but it was tough to make that deal and to make that happen. I will take credit for fighting the fight on both sides, meaning, the studio didn't want her because she had been in *Love Potion No. 9* and it was a flop and she was blamed for it, for some reason, or she took some of the blame, and so they were like, "We are not putting her in this movie. She did really badly in *Love Potion No. 9*, which was not a good movie, and we're just, you know, no."

KRIS TAPLEY

This thing about *Love Potion No. 9* being a sticking point for the studio rings true based on my other chats. Just for the uninitiated, it's not a good movie. It's basically a riff on the song. Sandra and co-star Tate Donovan, who was actually her fiancée once upon a time, get ahold of a little funky cold medina, if you will, a potion that makes people of the opposite sex infatuated with you. And the movie bends over backwards to make Sandra unattractive, but of course, that's futile. Anyway, the movie did bomb and the stench apparently lingered at Fox. One of the people I've talked to on this journey is Thomas Grane. Tom runs a company today called Mob Scene, which is a full-service Hollywood agency specializing in, among other things, producing behind-the-scenes materials for electronic press kits, or EPKs, and other content used to promote filmed entertainment. I mean, there's more to it, but that's the quick and dirty explanation. But 30 years ago,

Tom was the senior vice president of promotional programming at Fox, which is the kind of position you find at every studio today. But at the time, he was one of if not the first to have this kind of in-house gig. Anyway, we'll hear a lot more from Tom down the road, but he did mention one thing about the casting of Sandra Bullock that sort of struck me. Here's Tom Grane.

TOM GRANE

We had done *Love Potion No. 9* with Sandy beforehand and I remember actually one of the people in business affairs complaining to me. I'm pretty sure he was pissed off and upset that he had to pay her \$400,000 for *Speed*. He thought that the studio was overpaying, that she was a nobody, but again, in retrospect, that was one of the best \$400,000 they spent on the movie because she came out of it such a huge star.

TOM JACOBSON

We, on the creative side, really liked her in *Love Potion No. 9*, which was not a successful movie for us, which is why the accountants and other people were like, "Well, she was in a movie that was, if not a bomb, not a success. "So, why are we..." And it's not her fault. She's good in the movie.

MARK GORDON

I don't remember what we paid her, but I will tell you, more important than the \$400,000 or whatever they may have paid her, is her lawyer got us to pay her two-and-a-half or some net points. And of course, net points are never worth anything, except on *Speed*. And so, she did very well on the movie, better than she might've had she not had an incredibly aggressive lawyer. And so, he did very well by her on that deal. In the end, whether it was retroactive or otherwise, she deserved it.

KRIS TAPLEY

And Sandra, by the way, really gives Jan de Bont a lot of credit in this.

SANDRA BULLOCK

He chose me over so many people that probably would have helped that movie get kicked off in a bigger way, but he gave me the opportunity. So, I've got to say, he had some pretty big balls, and I'm grateful for his large balls. And you can quote me on that. And if you can get a visual to go along with that quote that would be great.

JAN DE BONT

I have to believe that that woman actually would ride the bus regularly, and also could drive the bus. There's no way I would believe that from Julia Roberts. And it has nothing to do with her acting, of course. It's just not her. And a lot of other actresses, I would never believe that they would do that. And with her hands-on quality, I completely could see that she could drive the bus and make it believable. But she was perfect.

KRIS TAPLEY

There's one moment in the movie, by the way, that I've grown to suspect was an improvisation by Sandra. None of the writers have claimed it, anyway, so I asked Jan.

You know that bit where Alan Ruck's dorky tourist character, Stephens, is trying to strike up some small talk with Annie? And then she sort of sneakily pulls her gum out of her mouth and shows it to him and tells him it was stuck on her seat, in order to move away?

[SPEED CLIP]

ALAN RUCK (as "Stephens")

Ah, jeez. You know, it took me three hours just to get here from the airport. I got so lost. LA is one large place. Of course, you live here. You probably don't notice. I'm such a yokel. There, I said it.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")

Ah, jeez. You know what? I got gum on my seat. Gum.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, that's the part. Anyway, yep, that was an improv from Sandra.

JAN DE BONT

That was her, too, yeah. See, also, how could you write that? Because the way she does it, I feel like she's done that several times before in her life, you know? That wouldn't even occur to me. That's disgusting. But that's why it works so well. It's really great.

KRIS TAPLEY

The other thing you have to point out here is the sort of intangible thing that Sandra brought to the movie and out of her co-star. Although I guess it's quite tangible. There's a quality to who Keanu Reeves is, or would appear to be, and how he performs, how he approaches this work, that sits in such stark contrast to Sandra Bullock. "Opposites attract" is probably too simplistic but there's definitely an interesting spark between the two in the film, and she kind of feels like both the flint and kindling, if you will. That's a tortured metaphor, but you get it. She generates a lot of this chemistry herself. Now, I'm not sure if this next observation is entirely fair, but it's valid because it's first-hand. This is Loyda Ramos, who stars as Additional Bus Passenger #6 in the film. Like the others, who you'll meet on this podcast very soon, she was there, on the bus, every day. This was her assessment of Sandra and Keanu.

LOYDA RAMOS

I know there was a lot of concern about the fact that they didn't feel there was any chemistry with Keanu and Sandy at the beginning. And I remember them trying to push Sandy to get Keanu to loosen up. I felt bad for her because she was in a bad spot. She wanted this film to work and she was getting nothing from him, like, nothing. So, to me, she saves the film. He looks good but she saves it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's go back to casting director Risa Bramon Garcia.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

Well, I wasn't there, you know, on set. And I know that there were some issues that were talked about, and sometimes it was, like, "Oh, Keanu is monosyllabic," and yada, yada, whatever. But I think she was the one who was our access point to him. And I know it took a little time for her and Keanu to create their dynamic, but ultimately, they did, of course. I just think that there were so many things that just are inherent in her. And she brought, like, real vulnerability and an emotional life, and that combination of those qualities is really hard to find. Really hard to find. And now you look at it and you go, "Well, of course the part needed that," but we couldn't find that. Even some of the people we offered it to or chased, like, sometimes they were people who passed before being offered it. Like, "Would they consider this?" "No, they're passing." But anybody we went to, like, I don't think anybody had all of that.

KRIS TAPLEY

As I sat down to write this episode, I was struck by the fact that I didn't have a list of names that were in the mix for this role. I mean outside of that swing for Halle Berry. I get the feeling so much of this existed more as names on a wish list, but then, actresses certainly tested for the role and they offered it outright to some who just said no. Risa said things boiled down to two other actresses in the end, and the name Olivia d'Abo popped into her head. Though you almost have to wonder if she was thinking about *Flying*, aka *Teenage Dream*, which was a 1986 high school love story that no one saw starring d'Abo and, wait for it, Keanu Reeves. But anyway, I guess the point is no one left a memory or a mark. Sandra Bullock's star was simply that bright. Speaking of that word, star – look, I think it's clear Sandra Bullock would have been a star with *Speed* or without it, but something had to win the contest of what movie gets to say it did it. And so, *Speed* is the movie that made Sandra Bullock a star. You probably get the idea by now that we'll be diving deeper into all things Sandra in next week's episode, but in its broadest impact, I would say this is the most significant legacy of *Speed*. If there is a "star is born" moment here, it's hers.

JORGE SARALEGUI

It's hers. It's hers. Because Keanu would have been a star anyway, because he already was a kind of a star, because guys have it easy. Good looking guys have it easy. You get 8,000 chances. Sandra Bullock, starting with that movie, was, you know, a cheerleader and putting herself out there. She's just an unbelievable person.

TOM JACOBSON

You know, there's something that the audience relates to, obviously, and it's a combination of the movie and the performance and the essence of the person. So, the fact that it was a really good movie and that it sort of showcased their skillsets together is what launched them. I mean, they launched themselves. Stars launch themselves. But they use an opportunity like this to do it.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

She brought humor, which, you know, was always helpful, because she was funny. You know, she's a funny person. She brought so much likability that you really rooted for her and she brought that to the relationship, ultimately. She brought incredible strength to the role. It was a good girl, the girl next door, but she brought that kind of hero strength to it, and I think for women, even that many years ago, you know, we just didn't see a lot of that. And so, as a strong, young woman, it was great that she had that in her. She was great to everybody, and she stayed pretty grounded, you know, as her career evolved. So, I think that was helpful to the making of the thing, because it took a lot of stamina to get through these scenes and be on that bus and go through everything.

JAN DE BONT

Quite often, those starry actors, they kind of tend to isolate themselves on set and go back to the trailer. She never did. She was always on the set, she helped with people. Anything they could do to make things easier for other people, with makeup or with costumes – she did everything to really make it pleasant. Because when you sit on a bus for that long, many weeks on end, then you have to have a character that is really – who wants to accommodate and give a helping hand all the time. And the other passengers related, also, immediately to her as well. So, they didn't feel like they were dealing with a star.

SANDRA BULLOCK

I was just happy to get the job. I think we were sort of ridiculed a little bit for, you know, the low-budget bomb-on-the-bus movie. Not that I cared. Again, I was just so happy to have a job and I got to work with Keanu. So, I was just grateful no matter what it was.

[SPEED CLIP]

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

When that bomb went off?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

I know.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

I thought that was it. I thought that was the bomb and I was dead. And then when I saw her body fall under the bus, it was like...

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

You were glad you were still alive.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Mm-hmm. I'm so sorry.

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

Don't be. You should be glad. We all are. It doesn't mean you don't care.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

I know, but she was so scared.

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

She was scared. She was a nice lady who didn't deserve to get killed, but Annie, if she had gotten off, it would have killed us all. He's the asshole, Annie. The guy who put us here. Remember that, OK?

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Big asshole.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

We've got our Annie. Now let's get to know Sandra Bullock.

KATE ERBLAND

She's taking a sort of typically male stardom rise and putting her own spin on it, which I think was pretty bold.

KRIS TAPLEY

I talk to *IndieWire* executive editor Kate Erbland about how *Speed* launched the actress out of a cannon and set her on course for a massively successful career.

KATE ERBLAND

And then, all of a sudden, it's like, she's a movie star. She's like a fully-formed movie star. She is rocketed into the upper echelon of not just female movie stars, but Hollywood movie stars. And it's not just, "Oh, she's great at this." She's also a really great businessperson.

KRIS TAPLEY

We talk about the audience Bullock commands to this day and walk you through her filmography role-by-role, including the one that brought her Oscar gold.

KATE ERBLAND

She hit so well because it is not something we're used to seeing from her, but it also taps into stuff we are used to seeing. And she's doing different things, but I think people always like Sandra and they feel like they know her.

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.