

50 MPH: EPISODE 12

“THE SCRIPT DOCTORS ARE IN”

Transcript (01:15:34)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hot shot!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

There’s a bomb on a bus.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

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

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

If it drops below fifty...

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

...it blows up.

ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)

Oh, darn.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

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

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?!

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

What do you do?

KRIS TAPLEY

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

[CITIZEN KANE CLIP]

LOUISE CURRIE (as “Female Reporter”)

If you could’ve found out what Rosebud meant, I bet that would have explained everything.

WILLIAM ALLAND (as “Jerry Thompson”)

No, I don’t think so. No. Mr. Kane was a man who got everything he wanted and then lost it. Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn’t get or something he lost. Anyway, it wouldn’t have explained anything. I don’t think any word can explain a man’s life. No, I guess Rosebud is just a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. A missing piece.

KRIS TAPLEY

Welcome back to *50 MPH*, and I hope you had your coffee or your Wheaties or whatever keeps you sharp today, because this one is going to go deep. Follow me down the rabbit hole here. So far, we have met and established the director of *Speed* and its two central stars. The film is hurtling toward a Labor Day 1993 production start. So, right around now, I guess, 30 years ago, is when everything I’m about to talk about was going down. *Speed* has a green light. It’s ready to go. Production is imminent. But, the brass at 20th Century Fox is about to pull a standard cover-your-ass maneuver. Here is Fox executive Jorge Saralegui with the context.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So right now, we’re basically on the verge of shooting. We’re close to – I forget exactly, but let’s just say a month. So, the studio decides that Graham has taken it as far as it can go and that we need somebody to punch up the characters. So, the studio does what I’ve always thought was a bad idea, starting with this bad experience, but I still think it’s one of the dumbest things that Hollywood does over and over again, which is, they have something that’s either good enough or maybe needs something else, but the person you have to hire has to be somebody super expensive. And you pay them an arm and a leg because it’ll elevate it that last little bit, and, I have a feeling, that if it doesn’t, you can say, “Well, Jesus, I hired,” you know, whoever. And this is the only

name that I'm going to give to you, like, in a negative light, because it pissed me off. So, it's Paul Attanasio.

KRIS TAPLEY

Ooh, shots fired! Today we're going to talk about what would become, in Jorge's eyes and in the eyes of a number of people involved with the film, an 11th-hour crisis for *Speed*. Screenwriter Paul Attanasio is, at this time, what they call a "script doctor." This is before he's the Oscar-nominated writer of movies like *Quiz Show* and *Donnie Brasco*. He's someone who comes in to, as Jorge says, take a piece of material to the next level. If it sounds vague that's because it sort of is, but we'll try to explain. This is an uncredited contribution, by the way, and, of course, a mutually agreed-upon arrangement. Here's how Paul Attanasio himself puts it.

PAUL ATTANASIO

I used to do a lot of this work. I used to do a lot of script doctoring in that period, and I loved it. I don't know if you're a baseball fan. It's like being the closer. It's like coming in and you throw gas and the crowd loves you and you go home. In this instance, I was more like the set-up man, like they eighth-inning man, as it turned out.

KRIS TAPLEY

If you look up Paul's list of credits at IMDb, you'll see a handful of "script revision" entries for films like *Air Force One*, *Armageddon* and *Patch Adams*. He's also listed for *Rapid Fire*, which you'll recall was a Fox movie directed by Dwight Little, who was actually up for the job of directing *Speed* at one point. Clearly there was a relationship there and Fox production president Tom Jacobson did what was the typical studio thing to do: hire a talented script doctor like Paul to stir in some special sauce. And by the way, I'm pointing you to IMDb because this isn't something Paul is big on talking about. I couldn't get a list of titles out of him that he's worked on under the hood or anything. He understands that the job is to be a ghost.

PAUL ATTANASIO

When you do the script doctoring jobs, they give you a lot of goodies. It's, like, a lot of money and a lot of hanging out with movie stars and being the hero, and I think it's important to remember that some other guy had the idea, started it out, worked for years to get a green light, which is really what a screenwriter's job is, and it probably didn't feel really great for that man or woman to be replaced at the culmination of what they had been working on by somebody who had, you know – who maybe was a better writer, but also maybe just had more celebrity. So, I accepted the goodies. I liked the goodies. But, you know, the goodies were enough.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, Paul is brought on to punch up the script for *Speed* when they're just weeks away from shooting, but we're going to run into some faulty memories about what the actual assignment was and, frankly, who suggested what. But let's see what we can discover.

PAUL ATTANASIO

Often, they would hire – I don't remember specifically. Often, they would hire me to tell them what needed to be done. Sometimes – I don't think that was in this instance – oftentimes, the actors were unhappy with their dialogue. That was why I was coming in. But I don't remember that being the case. Sometimes it was just insurance. You know, I think they were nervous about the film. Jan was a first-time director. So, they bring in somebody who's going to sprinkle the magic screenwriting dust and make it better or solve the problems. But I don't remember specifically. I think it was just to polish the dialogue.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here is former Fox production president Tom Jacobson, who appears to have blocked this out a bit.

TOM JACOBSON

Wow, that's a dim memory. See, the script was always in good shape. We just needed to push it up, like one – something missing. Some dynamic between the characters. I frankly didn't even remember the Paul Attanasio part. Isn't that interesting? Partly, probably, because it was unsuccessful. Paul was really – and still is, obviously – well-known for dialogue, for characters, and I think maybe that was the push. We needed a little more, just, interpersonal dynamic. And then, I can't remember – there was just something. And when you're really close to a project, you're like, "There's something, like, missing or something we need to fix, but we don't quite know how to fix it or what it is." Like, it was hard to give the development note.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, we hire him, which I didn't want to do and Mark didn't want to do, honestly, I wouldn't even say for a good reason or a bad reason. I would say basically because we liked Graham, and we thought Graham was good and we thought it was a good script already. We were invested. So, fairly or unfairly, we want to just stick with Graham, but we're overruled in a way that we're told, you know, "Forget it. Graham's going to get sole credit. Don't worry about it."

TOM JACOBSON

It was not an easy conversation, like it is with any writer, to say to Graham, "We're going to bring someone else." You know, he had conceived it.

PAUL ATTANASIO

What I remember about the job was, and this is not uncommon – Mark Gordon. Mark was very resistant to changing anything, which I said is not uncommon because producers, you finally got your green light and you're going and some guy comes in and wants to start changing the thing that got you the green light. Well, if the thing that got you the green light is flawed, how'd you get the green light, you know, "smarty pants," was kind of his attitude.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, obviously, Tom doesn't have a firm memory of the assignment here. Jorge, beyond his frustration with how this was about to turn out, had nothing vivid to say about the marching orders. Paul seems to think it was meant to be a dialogue polish and I think that's basically what it was supposed to be, but here is what he remembers about bigger changes he had in mind, and I want you to remember this as well, because there's going to be an echo later.

PAUL ATTANASIO

So, there were a couple of things that I really wanted to do. You know, I wanted to have, like, a best friend character who gets killed at the end of act two, and I wanted to get off the bus, you know, periodically, and punctuate the journey with getting off the bus. Well, Mark was like, "Well, the whole concept is that you never get off the bus. The whole thing's on the bus." And I said, "But you need it, like, for rhythm." The entire script was just, you never left the bus. There were no cutaways. Because Mark, he was wedded to the purity of the concept, that you never leave the bus. And I felt, and I think it's proven out by the film, that you needed to cut away. Because cutting away can actually accelerate your pace rather than slowing it down. Because it creates like a slingshot effect, and it allows you to advance time and jump ahead in time in the periods, in the cuts, basically. The thing's called *Speed*. You don't want to make it play slower. The script didn't build, so – the script needs to build, and so you needed something like the partner dying to create an emotional build into that ending. They didn't want to do either of that, but I feel a thousand percent confident about those two things. I don't know what else I changed.

KRIS TAPLEY

I just want to briefly connect this with something from a few episodes back. Do you remember that thing that screenwriter Graham Yost said about producer Mark Gordon and the development process and wondering if they could stop the bus at some point? Here let me just go back to the tape on that.

GRAHAM YOST

In the sort of development process with Mark, he had a deal at Disney and we would just hang out in his office and just kick things around. At one point, because *Passenger 57* had come out, they're on the plane, they land, then they go have this big action scene at an amusement park and then they get back on the plane and take off again. And I was watching and I said, "That is nonsense. That is a bad studio note." And at one point Mark said, "Is there any point where the bus could stop for a while?" I said, "Yeah, yeah. I mean, it'll blow up and they'll all die. But it can stop." And he said, "Oh, right, right, right." So, I've held that against him for years.

KRIS TAPLEY

I wanted to bring that back here because it's clear there was a pacing issue to be dealt with and multiple people were aware of it. Now, stick with me here, because I'm about to start detailing multiple dated drafts of the screenplay. I've read a March 1993 draft, which would have been a handful of iterations before the one they were looking to

punch up here, and in that, you are indeed on the bus the whole time in the second act. There are no cutaways to Harry because Harry kind of takes the Joe Morton position of being on the flatbed truck alongside the bus. I actually think it's a great piece of propulsive writing. It doesn't bog down at all, though there are some flat lines here and there and you can tell it needs some kind of a spark. But that's my opinion. Let's go back to Jorge Saralegui.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, Attanasio does, like, a one-week rewrite meant to punch up the characters, and what he does is he punches it up and changes a bunch of stuff without having been asked to, and then turns it in at the end of his assignment. So, therefore, he's done.

PAUL ATTANASIO

Yeah, I mean, I'm sure that's true. You know, I can't help myself. I remember I had this conversation with Sorkin, because he used to do a bunch of this, too. And it was – I can't remember the movie. Actually, I can remember it. I don't want to say. But I said, you know, "They want me to make it smarter. So, I did this, I'm doing this." And he said, "Paul, they just want you to write jokes." And a lot of it was that. You know, sometimes "smarter" just meant "better jokes." And I was always trying to make it better. So, I'm sure that's fair enough. But then, on the other hand, like I said, I think Jorge was wrong, because I think those things needed to be changed.

KRIS TAPLEY

If you're wondering to yourself, "Wait, they did end up cutting away from the bus. And they did end up having a friend, Harry, die at the end of the second act," you're absolutely right. And there was a winding road to get there. But let's keep pushing ahead for now.

JORGE SARALEGUI

He made the script clearly worse. You know, just thinking about it infuriates me, because it happened to me twice in my career, actually. But the ego of people like that to, like, come in and instead of just steal the money you're being given – and, you know, you're a good dialogue writer. Improve the dialogue. Sharpen the characters. But you have such contempt for the material that you decide, "No, I'm going to change this, I'm going to change that," and you don't know what the fuck you're doing.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, what did Graham Yost think of all of this? Here's how he says he reacted to Paul's punch-up.

GRAHAM YOST

And I'll be honest, when I – and I think Paul is a great writer - but when I read his draft – you know, I always joke that with Peter Gabriel and Springsteen, people are always getting in their cars and driving around and thinking about shit. I actually left our house in the Palisades and drove down to the cliffs and just sat there. I was so depressed. It's like, "You've ruined this movie." And I can't remember specifically why. There was just

the approach to story and characters and I think there was some fucking around with some of the action and some of that stuff. And I was just really upset. He also changed the number on the top of the bus, which pissed me off. It's like, "What the fuck?" And so, it was, "OK..."

KRIS TAPLEY

The original bus number, by the way, was 2574, which Graham says just related to an old address of his. We'll get to how it became 2525 in short order.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, he turns it in, like, on a Friday and it goes to Tom Jacobson and Peter Chernin, as well, for the weekend to read. So, I read it that Friday night and I'm sick.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's finally hear from producer Mark Gordon this week. Here's what he had to say.

MARK GORDON

I don't know what he was doing. I mean, honestly. He changed the names of the characters. It's like, who asked you to do that? You know, we gave him specific instructions and he just kind of went off and did what he did, and he was paid a fuck-load of money.

PAUL ATTANASIO

The name of the character is – Annie, is my daughter. So, that's where that came from. And she's a filmmaker now. She made a movie called *Mickey and the Bear*. She's a writer-director.

JORGE SARALEGUI

I recall that he really screwed up Sandra's character, like, in getting on the bus and who she was and her early interactions. I recall that all being messy.

PAUL ATTANASIO

You know, I always felt like part of what I offered in that context was a kind of objectivity. It's like, "This works. This doesn't work." It really put the doctor in script doctor. I would come in and be like a doctor. I would say, "Here is where it hurts." But yeah, it's funny that he said that. I'm sure that's true. I'm sure they were like, "What is he doing?"

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, I read it and I tell my wife that night, "Peter is going to call me tomorrow morning and I don't know what I'm going to do. Because it sucks and it's gone backwards." OK, so, you know, nine o'clock Saturday morning, my phone rings, and it's Peter. And he's a calm guy. Even when he gets angry, he's under control. He's not a yeller at all. But he says, "What have you done to this script?" Those were his first words. And I go, "I know. I know." I said, "I don't know why he did what he did but I know that it's a mess. I know that it's got this, this, this and this wrong with it." And so, we talk for a while, and then he basically tells me – OK, now, keep in mind, I'm a junior executive and this is my first

movie. And I also know that he likes me and respects me within reason. You know what I'm saying? He likes me and respects me for a junior executive who found something that looks pretty good, but not that good, you know what I mean? OK. So, he says, "If you need help, don't be too proud to ask." I said, "OK." Early the next week, one of the senior vice presidents comes to me and goes, "Hey, listen, if you want me to come on board and help you out with this thing, I'm happy to." And I'm thinking, you know, "Yeah, you mean, if I want you to come on board and, like, take over the project, OK, you're happy to?" And I said, "No, thanks," but I realize I have to do something, you know what I mean? And Graham isn't the answer because they've already said Graham is not good enough, right? Fairly or unfairly.

GRAHAM YOST

But I got hired back for one weekend and I did an emergency rewrite over that weekend and restored the action and cleaned up the – restored a lot of the stuff the way it had been, but also made some big changes. But that was also the time they were reaching out to Walter Parkes and Laurie Macdonald to come in as additional producers, and they had no interest in me working on it.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, what I did is I did two things at once. I called up Walter Parkes, who, by the way, is probably the only name producer I even know, because he tried to hire me to be a story editor, which is how I became a junior executive at Fox. But I know that they think well of him, so I said, "Walter, would you look at this thing and I have a writer in mind who I think could do it. So, could you look at it, talk to this writer and see if you think that there's a way to solve the problems that have just been created?" And he goes, "OK, who's the writer?" And I said, "Joss Whedon."

KRIS TAPLEY

OK! A lot of new information there. Let's start with the producers, Walter Parkes and Laurie Macdonald. Walter Parkes was, at that time, the revered writer of *WarGames*, a 1983 thriller about a computer gamer who stumbles onto a back door into a military central computer and nearly starts World War III. Great movie. Matthew Broderick. Check it out if you haven't already seen it. That script earned him an Oscar nomination for best original screenplay. But he had most recently written *Sneakers*, a sort of high-tech *Dirty Dozen* starring Robert Redford and Dan Aykroyd that became a huge hit for Fox in 1992, right around the time he and his wife and producing partner Laurie Macdonald had a development deal with the studio. Walter had also produced the Best Picture nominee *Awakenings* for director Penny Marshall, and he and Laurie were soon to head up director Steven Spielberg's production company, Amblin Entertainment. So, lots of cachet. But here's the thing. Hiring a writer to basically ghostwrite some revisions is a totally standard thing in Hollywood. Hiring someone to ghost-produce that process, at least according to Walter and Laurie, was unique. Here's what they had to say.

WALTER PARKES

Jorge, as an executive, has a pretty good story sense, and I think we sort of saw that in each other, and I remember getting the phone call. It almost felt like the producer's

version of a last-minute production rewrite. It seemed like there was issues with the script, issues getting the cast together, and they just – really, you know, it was very interesting – they just asked Laurie and me to read the script. And, you know, clearly there was a very commercial movie there, but yeah, there were some problems.

LAURIE MACDONALD

The premise was so insane, in a way, so ridiculous, and yet, so delightful. And the script wasn't working, but we read it and immediately had some thoughts on it and thought it was a really – it was a kind of challenge we had never taken on before, coming in so late to something, and we thought it would be interesting.

KRIS TAPLEY

And now, Joss Whedon. I'm sure many things come to mind when I say that name. Today, Joss and his tonal voice as a writer are sort of inherent in our pop-cultural bedrock. His work in television in the mid-aughts with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly* and *Angel* established an empire that soon led him to the geek promised land as the director tasked by Marvel Studios with bringing Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, Thor and Captain America together for the first time in *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. He also, infamously, was brought on by Warner Bros. in 2017 to reconfigure Zack Snyder's *Justice League* for a wider audience. There is, of course, a lot more to say about that situation and the quote "Snyder Cut," but please don't make me talk about it here. At this stage, however, in 1993, all of that was far away on the horizon. Joss had sold the feature film script for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to Fox a few years earlier and had also seen it really stray from his intentions in the resulting 1992 film. He had worked in television on series like *Roseanne* and *Parenthood* as well. But he had developed a little bit of a history with Jorge, who was about to call in a favor. And so, here is Joss Whedon.

JOSS WHEDON

Jorge is a major part of my history. I was having lunch with him. I had been writing comedies, was known for comedies, mostly. And people were pitching me comedies, because I worked in television comedy. Dogs. Comedies with dogs in them, a lot. Some just really, really brutal meetings. And Jorge, I had lunch with him. He was pitching me a dog comedy.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it seems like as far back as this, Jorge was still trying to get that *Hamlet* pig comedy-turned dog comedy going. Or maybe it was just another one. Who knows? Anyway, back to Joss.

JOSS WHEDON

And he told me the premise for *Speed*. I was, like, "Oh my God, that's, fucking, so cool! That is the best." And as a joke – I had a joke pitch for a *Die Hard* rip-off. I was, like, "It's *Die Hard* on the George Washington Bridge." And he's just like, "Go home. Write that script." He's like, "That is not a joke. Go home and write it. Do not option it. Do not do

anything with it. Finish it. Give it to your agent. You will never be pitched a dog comedy again.” And he was right.

JORGE SARALEGUI

A script that he sold but it actually never got made called *Suspension. Die Hard* on a bridge, that he sold for a zillion bucks and it never got made, but he and I had spoken about it and so we had a relationship. I knew Joss because when I was a reader, I read the Buffy movie script, OK, when it came in. I was a reader and I gave it a “yes.” Well, not a “yes,” a “maybe.” But that’s what a “yes” is. You know, but I recommended it. So, I get them together and Walter tells me, “OK, I’ll come on and supervise this.” So, I call Peter Chernin and I say, “How does this sound to you?” And it was the first, like, smart thing I ever did in my job. It’s one thing to be a good script analyst and say, “Speed’s got something,” OK, just conceptually, which I did do. And then it’s another thing to fight the way I fought to keep it going and all that, which I did do also. But in this case, it was kind of like, “OK, you’re in trouble. You need credibility or this whole thing is in danger of imploding.” Because they said they don’t care about Mark. Peter said, “You can get rid of the producers.” But in effect, they told me, “Do whatever you have to do. Get rid of the producer. Bring somebody else on.” And I mentioned the name Walter Parkes, and the waters calmed. It was amazing. That was it. It’s under control. There’s no longer a crisis. There’s no script. There’s no longer a crisis. So, then, I speak to Mark, who is, you know, pissed, upset and nervous as to what it could mean, you know, that he could be losing control of his movie or whatever. And I told him that he wasn’t, that the arrangement that I had made with Walter was – it’s be around right now at the beginning, just in terms of calming Peter, but really, he’s going to supervise Joss Whedon and Mark and I are not. So, that’s the arrangement. So, Mark, I mean, he has no choice except to accept it, but he wasn’t happy about it. And, you know, I mean, I don’t blame him.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, we’re kind of back to square one. What needs to happen to this script? Here’s Walter Parkes with that echo I mentioned earlier.

WALTER PARKES

I remember the biggest thing that struck us going in was, in the draft we read, the Jeff Daniels character died on about page seven. Got blown up. And it just struck us that it put a pall over the entire movie. It really is a movie that isn’t trying to be particularly deep-dish, but it’s really about the visceral thrills and the fun of the situation. And it also struck us that if you lost that main character, one of the two main characters, you didn’t have anything to cut to, and to keep that bus sequence alive without being really invested with the voice that’s on the other side of the communication with Keanu would be a mistake. So, I remember that was a big first thought. And it also gave us something we really needed, which was, it’s a very linear script, so, by keeping him alive, it gave us the opportunity for him to be killed at the end of the second act. And that’s sort of where you needed to boost the emotional stakes of the movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here is Tom Jacobson recalling a meeting where this was presented by Walter, Laurie and Joss.

TOM JACOBSON

I remember this meeting with Joss, he said, “Look, your script’s in good shape. It needs to have a little more pop to it, but you’ve got one problem. You don’t have enough motivation going into the third act.” Keanu’s partner was killed in the elevator sequence. So, that was Joss’s big pitch. He was like, “Let’s not kill him there, because they’re buddies and Jeff’s a bit of a mentor to Keanu’s character. Let’s save that and do that at the end of the second act.” So, that whole sequence where the Dennis Hopper character blows up Jeff Daniels’ house and kills him, was new with Joss. And then that gives the motivation to propel our hero into the third act to really bring down the bad guy. That’s the big note I remember from the Joss rewrite. Good rewrites are less about, like, a funny quip or exchange, but a dynamic that changes – some idea that changes the dynamic of the journey of the movie, and that clearly did.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I know. It’s the same note Paul had. It’s a complete mess. And here, let me make it messier. I can’t help but wonder where in the process Harry went through another drastic shift. In that March 1993 draft I mentioned, he was revealed, sort of clumsily, to be the bomber. He’s pissed about not getting promoted to the rank of captain, which means a great deal to him as a second-generation police officer. The reason he’s not promoted, by the way, and why he never will be, is because in the opening elevator sequence, the Howard Payne character – who at that time was a blonde pony-tailed weirdo named Rudy – ended up killing a hostage, thanks to Jack’s recklessness. That costs Harry and that’s sort of the flimsy motivation for his actions. And Harry is also in cahoots with a game named Squint, who is the head of the LAPD bomb squad. It’s kind of rushed and doesn’t fully work, and Graham says all of that changed around this period.

GRAHAM YOST

And then the biggest note, I’m sure you know, Harry was the bad guy, right? And that happened around the time that Walter and Laurie came in, right before Joss was brought on and right after Paul had been on and I was brought back briefly, and I remember Walter saying, “It’s an interesting idea, what you’re trying to do with Harry.” He says, “I don’t know if it’s gettable. But I don’t think you should do it. I think it should just be one bad guy beginning to end.” You know, the thing I’ve said in interviews is that my whole concern was I loved Hans Gruber so much that I wanted there to be a relationship between the bad guy and the good guy and there to be some history.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now, when I asked Walter and Laurie about this, if they recalled a draft where Harry was revealed to be the villain in the end, this was their response.

WALTER PARKES

We were spared that one.

LAURIE MACDONALD

I don't think we read that version, but the partner was not the character that's in the version that we – we did change a great deal about that story. I believe we pitched it even before we brought Joss in, but I don't recall.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here is Paul Attanasio racking his brain.

PAUL ATTANASIO

No, I don't remember that. Because I remember wanting to use him to create, like, poignancy, whatever. Like a rooting interest to create emotion at the ending. It would be consistent with how I approach these things that I would try to amplify the villain. I don't remember what I did, though. I was very dogmatic about it at the time, that the antagonist is what gave movies structure. You know, now, I'm a little looser. But at the time, you know, I had, like, doctrines that I used to follow.

KRIS TAPLEY

You know what? Screw it, let's drag Jeff Daniels into this and see what he recalls. You know, the guy who played the part? Jeff, do you remember a draft where your guy was revealed to be the bomber in the end?

JEFF DANIELS

Never saw that. That would have been, "Oh! Oh my God, yeah, gee." That would have been – because there's just more to do.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, so it had at least been weeded out by the time they were out to him to play the part.

JEFF DANIELS

And so, they sent the script and I died in the elevator shaft. It was like page 22. I miss a step, fall, you know, 50 floors and die. And I told the agent, I said, "The career is in trouble, but it's not in that much trouble. So, forget it." They go, "Well, hang on. They're doing a rewrite. You die later." "OK, well, I'll wait for that." And, sure enough, I died later in the house, like, page 80. I said, "Great. I'm in."

KRIS TAPLEY

Let me try and clear this up just a little bit before we continue. The most widely available draft of the script is originally dated August 31, 1993, and that's the production draft. It includes all of the production revisions through November. That is basically Joss Whedon's draft. However, there is a draft dated August 6 at the WGA Foundation's Shavelson-Webb Library in the guild's vast screenplay collection there. And yeah, I literally drove out there to read this. This draft pre-dates Joss and, in reviewing a lot of the differences between that and the March draft, Graham and I both came to the

tenuous conclusion that it is, at least in part, that “rescue” draft, including both Paul’s work and Graham’s efforts to get it back into shape before Joss took a crack at it. In that draft, Harry is no longer the villain, and indeed, he does die in the elevator sequence. Page 19, to be exact. And he doesn’t fall. He gets blown up, which, as you heard, is what Walter remembered. So, obviously, they tried a couple of different versions of Harry dying in that first sequence, but in the end, Joss, Walter and Laurie moved that event to the end of the second act to heighten the emotional stakes, which is exactly what Paul said the script needed. Meanwhile, in this August 6 draft, Howard Payne – who would ultimately be played by Dennis Hopper – is his own character. And he’s also been amplified, to steal Paul’s word. Like, he kills a guy in a bar with a pencil at one point because he’s trying to watch news coverage of the bus. Graham doesn’t claim that one. And Paul has no memory of changes like this. But I’m going with that was a Paul thing. OK? You still with me? Alright, here’s Walter Parkes.

WALTER PARKES

I think, however, because I remember talking about it – Laurie, did we make the suggestion that Dennis’s character was an ex-bomber because we sort of lifted it from *Juggernaut*?

LAURIE MACDONALD

Ah. I don’t know if that was here, no. It’s so hard. This is a long time ago. I think that might have been something we brought to it.

WALTER PARKES

If we brought that to the table – and I don’t remember if we did – I do know that *Juggernaut* is one of those movies that over the many, many years that we’ve developed scripts, I find myself referring to a lot. *Juggernaut* is a very underrated, sort of, ‘60s disaster, suspense picture directed by Richard Lester with an amazing cast, from Anthony Hopkins to, you know, Omar Sharif, to – just incredible. And in that, it’s about a bomb that’s put on a ship, and the bad guy turns out to be an ex-bomb disposal guy. You know, a former colleague. And I don’t recall if that was already in the script or if that was something that happened at our suggestion.

GRAHAM YOST

Well, I do remember Walter saying, you know, sometimes it’s like - and this is back in, you know, God, forgive us any errors here in judgment in talking about this - but it’s sort of early-90s, talking about pedophile priests, and one theory has been, or at least it was then, that some people become priests because they’re pedophiles and they think that maybe they can be cured by being a priest. And that, in a sense, maybe Howard Payne had been someone who wanted to blow shit up and went into the bomb squad because he had that urge. It would be like an arsonist joining the fire department, and then, now, after his retirement, his true self has come out, and now he can do the thing that he’s always wanted to do, which is blow shit up. I remember Walter talking about that.

KRIS TAPLEY

We'll get deeper into the character of Howard Payne and the whirlwind process of trying to cast him in all these different iterations next week, but for now, here is what Joss says he wanted to do with him.

JOSS WHEDON

The bad guy, when – they told me they wanted Robert Duvall, and I had this very sort of, like, low-key – my actual pitch for the bad guy was Charles Grodin. Because I wanted him to be a nerd. I wanted him to be a quiet man who makes things with his hands, you know, very meticulously, and has for years, and is angry in an almost passive-aggressive bomber sort of way. Passive, suddenly very aggressive, and making sandwiches and sort of being quiet. And it's funny because, you know, then they bring in Dennis Hopper because he will make everything pop, and there's a lot of lines in the movie that were [meekly] written to be just sort of like this. But Dennis gets ahold of it and it comes out very different. And then I started doing rewrites that leaned into, you know, being a little over the top. And then, actually, I think the next thing I worked on was *Waterworld*. I think it was Laurence Fishburne, and then it was like, "It's going to be Dennis Hopper." I'm like, "What's happening to me?"

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, moving on for now, we still haven't quite zeroed in on what Paul had apparently done to screw up this script. Here is what Joss recalls of some of the other issues he faced when he sat down to work.

JOSS WHEDON

I think there was some very old-fashioned writing, in the sense of, like, we got to know everybody's – everybody had a backstory. Everybody had a moment, you know, whatever baggage they were bringing along, and there were some moments that were kind of florid and speeches and stuff where maybe people should not have a speech. And this is from a guy who never shuts up. I mean, his characters, either. There was, you know, the whole speech, you know, after the bus crashes and they're OK and they're lying there. And she's like, "Why do men like him exist? Why did he kill Beth?" And he's like, "Because he lives in a world where Beth..." It was just - it was not the time.

KRIS TAPLEY

That is indeed in the August 6 draft, which is what leads me to believe a lot of Paul's work is in there. And yeah, it's sort of clunky. Here, let me read the actual exchange. Like Joss said, this is after the bus has exploded and they're lying there and Annie is super upset, largely about the death of Helen, Beth Grant's character. So, Annie says, "I don't even know her last name, but she knew all my secrets. Every morning, everything I'd tell her. All my stories - I guess because she liked hearing them so much. She said I was better than cable." And then as Annie breaks down, she bellows, "Oh, God, why?" To which Jack responds, "'Cause there's a guy out there who hates a world that has Helens in it. 'Cause his never will." Anyway, I'm putting that into context because it's going to be important that this draft indeed had a lot of Paul's work in it.

JOSS WHEDON

And I think my favorite “oh dear God no” – and I don’t know whose suggestion this was, but it was in the Attanasio draft – was that they wanted Annie to be able to be, you know, light and funny while being also in peril. And Sandra Bullock is amazing at doing both of those things at once, but in order to justify it, they made her character a stand-up comedian. And I was just, like, that’s the worst thing you can do. That is the least relatable person. And every time she makes a joke, you’re going to be, like, “Everyone’s going to die and you’re trying out material?” Like, “You’re looking for a tight five in the middle of doom?” It just – I was like, “Oh, no. We’ll hate her when she’s funny if we know that’s her job.” And I was just, like, “They should just be people on the bus, because, you know, we’ll care about them anyway.”

KRIS TAPLEY

On that point, you’ll recall from a previous episode that Graham has already copped to trying to make the character a stand-up comedian to get some humor into the mix, and that he had Ellen DeGeneres in mind at the time. Moving on...

JOSS WHEDON

One of the other big changes was making Alan Ruck not an asshole lawyer, but just a nice tourist who’s completely overwhelmed, because I just did not believe in the guy. First of all, how good a lawyer is he if he’s taking the bus? But more importantly, he just – he would throw conflict at Keanu Reeves at all times for nothing. Like, he just – a human person would not do that. And his character died, and then they were, like, “Well, now he’s likable, so he can’t die.” And I’m like, “Why?” But then again, I later on would become known for going, “Why can’t they die?” If somebody you like dies, there’s more tension. But I get it. I totally don’t think he needed to die, because right after that, you’re going to have a romantic moment with Keanu and Sandra and you don’t want that weight on you.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let’s actually hear from Alan Ruck on that. Alan is a great character actor. I’m sure you know him from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, TV’s *Mad City*, Jan de Bont’s *Speed* follow-up, *Twister*, and most recently, HBO’s *Succession*. Here’s what he remembers about this change.

ALAN RUCK

Originally, that guy was conceived as, like, a prick of a lawyer who – I forget what the exact circumstances were that he could not drive his BMW. I can’t remember if it was DUIs or unpaid tickets or I can’t remember what, but he was stuck on this bus and he was really pissed off about it, and he was an asshole. He was just, you know, a guy who thought a great deal of himself and he was just a horrid prick. And I don’t know, I just guess because of who I am and what I look like and my personality, Jan decided to go in a different way and decided to make this guy into a tourist. And up until that point in my career, I hadn’t been allowed to play too many assholes, which are really satisfying roles to play.

KRIS TAPLEY

This brings me to another element at play here. We're going to get into this with Alan and all the other actors on the bus in a few weeks, when we finally introduce them here, but by way of a preview, you'll soon learn that some of them were frustrated with this rewrite because a lot of their backstories had been cut out. Ortiz, for example, played by Carlos Carrasco, had a bombshell wife who figured into some of the script's humor. Beth Grant's character, Helen, was recently engaged and had things to say about that. David Kriegel's character, Terry, who was originally a USC film school student, plays a role in finding the UHF signal of the camera that's in the bus. And here, Stephens, Alan Ruck's asshole lawyer, who we indeed learn is riding the bus because of a DUI. It would appear to me that all of this was the work of Paul Attanasio, an effort to flesh out the secondary characters and give some of the events of the story a little more meaning as a result. Joss, I think smartly, streamlined all of that, while Jan de Bont ultimately shot the film in such a way that the ensemble really stands out. You get who these characters are, at least as much as you need to. Anyway, again, more on that in due time. Here's Joss.

JOSS WHEDON

The first time I turned in pages, we went through them and I just remember a couple of times with Mark saying, "Are we in love with this?" And Walter saying, "Yes we are." You know, I just think that Mark has an incredible nose for projects. I think this one was just, you know – Walter, that whole *WarGames*, *Sneakers*, that whole, you know, light with stakes. Like, he's just got that sensibility and this is a movie that, if it takes itself too seriously, it will take away from the seriousness of the movie. People always assume the script doctor comes in to make jokes, and usually, it's to connect things so that they make sense and make them try to matter. And you also get hired a lot to make the third act smaller. But in this case, I didn't have to worry about that because I was like, "I've got an alternate pitch to the plane," and they're, like, "Yeah, we bought the plane." I'm like, "OK, then."

KRIS TAPLEY

As things went along here, Joss started working with the actors, both before and during production. Particularly Keanu Reeves, who had some significant input for the character of Jack Traven based on his own research and immersion into the role.

JOSS WHEDON

You know, *Speed* is, I think, with *Die Hard*, the sea change where we went from, you know, "You're out of control!" You know, "You're a hot shot!" "You're a maverick!" "You're a renegade!" to, "I am going to try to make the people live in this situation." Like, much more relatable, down-to-earth kind of people in these situations, and less driving through the streets in such a way – I mean, obviously, with *Speed*, there should have been just a body count beyond numbers in LA – but less deliberately, sort of, driving down sidewalks to catch somebody. And in fact, he's not trying to catch somebody. He's trying to save people. You know, in *Die Hard* he was, like, a devoted husband and all this stuff - and I have plenty to say about that text – but this, you know, sort of continued

that trend, and Keanu has a lot to do with it because of who he is, just his energy and his thoughts. And he talked about being with the SWAT guys and how they are unfailingly polite. He's like, "They are only ever about defusing the situation." And he was like, "They call everybody 'sir' or 'ma'am.'" And I was like, "Click," and that was it. I was like, "OK, I understand this character now." My take on it was that it wasn't that he was a hot shot, it was that he was kind of a lateral thinker. That he just was going to do what felt right and he was going to have an odd approach to it, but generally speaking, it would work out. But just the "sir" and "ma'am," I was just like, "Ugh, that gives me so much." Because everybody was - you know, bluster was the order of the day, and then this is the opposite. And he was, like, "I don't want to pull my gun on that guy. Because I know that - you know, like, I wouldn't." I was like, "I don't want you to, either. You just kind of have to. Just for a tick. They're not going let you not pull your gun. But, you know, we'll get it back as soon as we can."

KRIS TAPLEY

And we should probably hear from Jan de Bont on all of this as well. After all, coming out of this project, Walter and Laurie - then in their post at Amblin Entertainment - would bring Joss on to crank up the dialogue on *Twister*, which they also hired Jan to direct. Here's what Jan had to say about Joss's work in really getting the script for *Speed* into a shape where it fit in with his penchant for capturing a level of realism and authenticity.

JAN DE BONT

So, Joss comes up with those simple things that kind of throws you off a little bit, but when you think about it, oh, wow, this is exactly the thing you want to do. He had a sense for that. I needed dialogue that would fit real people, you know? I didn't want dialogue that nobody would speak like that on the bus, you know? And it had to be real. All the characters in the movie, they're all, basically, accidental presence of those people. They just happened to be there at that particular moment. For just two hours of their life, they got pulled into a situation, so, when they spoke, it had to be something that they would say. How they would react. How they would respond. And also, between the scenes with Sandra and Keanu, the dialogue itself in the beginning was really too stilted, too little - too trying to be funny or having a lot of those lines that are supposed to be - like, in *Die Hard* there are a lot of those lines, those one-liners. Quite often you read those one-liners, for instance, even on *Lethal Weapon 3*, there's a lot of those. And they're group lines. They're written by groups of people. Because I know, we had script meetings for that movie where the whole production team, writers, studio people, a meeting of 25 people - I was there, too - to come up with some lines for the dialogue. But lines that are written by committee, they sound, always, artificial. And Joss totally understood that, and the amount of times I called him during shooting, it's like, "Joss, we're doing this, and it absolutely doesn't work, that line." But also, in a way, it has to be more minimal, too. You cannot have long, you know, sentences. And they have to be very right for the age of the people, too. I mean, Keanu is young, Sandra is young. You cannot have them speak, like, stage lines or so, you know what I mean? And he was so great at coming up with those throwaway lines that are so fantastic.

JOSS WHEDON

I used to do a wake-and-bake back with my buddies every now and then. So, it was Saturday, we were all going off somewhere and we were very stoned, and I get a phone call, I think it's from Mark Gordon, and he's like, "Jan needs some dialogue when they're coming out of the car at the beginning, I'll hold." And it's just like, "You will not hold. I will call you back in five minutes." And I wrote some dialogue and called them back in five minutes. It was fine. But, oh my God. I was like, "This is like a nightmare."

JORGE SARALEGUI

The things that Joss did that stand out, apart from the many little things that they did, right? The two that he did is he came up with the Arizona Wildcat thing, that that's how they catch Dennis Hopper. OK, that was Joss. And the other thing was that line that captures who the Sandra Bullock character is, about relationships don't work under, in, you know, etc. Whatever it is.

[SPEED CLIP]

SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")

You're not going to get mushy on me, are you?

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Maybe. I think I might.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")

Hope not, because, you know, relationships that start under intense circumstances, they never last.

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Oh yeah?

SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")

Yeah, I've done extensive studying on this.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Right, that. That was Joss. That was Joss, and if you think about it, that kind of, like, framed her attitude, sort of, right? OK. So, those are the ones that really stand out in my mind.

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, if you've made it this far, you're one of the chosen. Now it is time for me to get to my own personal Rosebud on this journey. What about the film's most famous line?

[SPEED CLIP]

DENNIS HOPPER (as "Howard Payne")

Pop quiz, hot shot!

KRIS TAPLEY

This could just be a *Speed* fanatic talking, but I think it's fair to say those four words are embedded into pop culture. Like, it's a thing, OK? And it was definitely a thing back then. Do you remember when *Pulp Fiction* won Best Movie at the MTV Movie Awards that year? This was Quentin Tarantino at the time.

[1995 MTV MOVIE AWARDS CLIP]**QUENTIN TARANTINO**

Pop quiz, hot shot! You're going to awards ceremonies all year long. You keep losing to *Forrest Gump*. It's really annoying the hell out of you. What do you do? You go to the MTV Awards!

KRIS TAPLEY

This line has always been attributed to Joss Whedon. And, I mean, it certainly sounds like a Joss Whedon line, doesn't it? Plus, Graham completely forfeited any credit for it long ago.

GRAHAM YOST

For the past 25, 27 years of my life, people will come up to me and say, "Pop quiz, hot shot," and I have to just nod and smile. That's Joss's line. That wasn't me. Harry would say, "Hey, I've got a scenario for you, pal. What happens if blah, blah, blah?" "Well, you shoot the hostage." "You shoot the hostage?!" It was there, but Joss gave it this wonderful polish and this wonderful snap to it.

[REWIND SOUND EFFECT]**GRAHAM YOST**

And I have to just nod and smile. That's Joss's line.

JOSS WHEDON

No, it's not. That was already in it. That is not me. It's the only line people remember, but I cannot take credit for it, for it is not mine.

KRIS TAPLEY

Wait, really? Joss didn't write that line? Are you sure? Jan, was "pop quiz, hot shot" Joss Whedon's line?

JAN DE BONT

Totally.

JOSS WHEDON

Really? I mean, gosh, it'd be hilarious if I did write it and all these years I'd just forgotten. Maybe it's Paul's.

KRIS TAPLEY

Paul, did you write that line? That would actually be hysterical after all of this.

PAUL ATTANASIO

Gosh, I can't remember.

KRIS TAPLEY

Are you telling me no one is going to claim ownership over the most famous line from this movie?

PAUL ATTANASIO

Joss says he didn't write it?

[REWIND SOUND EFFECT]

JOSS WHEDON

I cannot take credit for it, for it is not mine.

PAUL ATTANASIO

And Graham says he didn't write it?

[REWIND SOUND EFFECT]

GRAHAM YOST

That wasn't me.

PAUL ATTANASIO

Oh my God. I don't know. I don't have any of those drafts around to look them up.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well... shit. There's a mystery I wouldn't have expected to leave with this podcast. I do know that Joss has said before that he didn't write the line, and that he actually didn't like it because of how it sort of connects to the canon of action cinema that *Speed* is looking to move away from, but nevertheless, everyone else has always said that it was him.

JOSS WHEDON

If you do find out that it is, let me know, because then I'll feel all full of myself. Yeah, no, I feel like it was there. I never connected with it. I really don't – yeah, I don't think I can take credit for it. And I think "shoot the hostage" was already in there. I know that because – was it on *Speed*? I'm trying to remember. There was at least one meeting where they were like, "And then he shoots the hostage because nobody's done that. You know, people have never seen that before." I'm like, "Except in *Another 48 Hours* and Sam Fuller's *Forty Guns*."

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, let's get a verdict. Here's what I think happened. "Pop quiz, hot shot" is in the August 6 draft, which you'll recall, predates Joss's contributions. It actually was Harry dropping the quote "hot shot" first. He says, "Alright, hot shot, pop quiz." In the movie he just says, "Alright, pop quiz," and then later, Hopper is the one who says "hot shot." Anyway, as Graham said, the general concept was there, that Jack and Harry would present scenarios to each other to pass the time. But the actual line "pop quiz, hot shot" came from someone else. And whoever it was, by the way, sort of fell in love with it, because it is all over that August 6 draft. Like, it's a reprise that keeps coming back, probably too much. So, by process of elimination, the line exists in the draft that contains Graham and Paul's work, Graham insists he didn't write it, Paul says he doesn't remember, and this is a draft written before Joss was hired. So, therefore, the guy who wrote the most famous line of *Speed* is the guy who supposedly fucked up the script so badly that they had to bring in another writer and a pair of producers to oversee that writer's efforts. Bless him for not remembering, but I've decided that the person who wrote "pop quiz, hot shot" was Paul Attanasio.

GRAHAM YOST

Wow. Wouldn't that be Hollywood? Wouldn't that be the history of the movies? It's like, someone sent me – they've got a page of all the alts for the ending of *Casablanca*, because those were all just done in post, those lines as they're walking away. And they tried them all, and they watched them and they said no – "the beginning of a beautiful friendship" was just one of three choices. So, I wouldn't be surprised. You know what? I might have hated the draft so much that I, you know, didn't want to believe that that line was from that draft.

KRIS TAPLEY

And fair enough. I mean, everyone else certainly seems to have blocked out just about anything that might have slipped through from Paul's draft into the finished product.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Oh, there's nothing left of – there's zero of Paul.

MARK GORDON

I think one line that he wrote is in the movie. I think it was when Keanu says, "Fuck you," and Dennis says something about the Constitution?

[SPEED CLIP]

DENNIS HOPPER (as "Howard Payne")

Are you ready to die, friend?

JEFF DANIELS (as "Harry Temple")

Fuck you.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Oh! In 200 years, we've come from “I regret but I have one life to give for my country” to “Fuck you”?

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

Go ahead, drop the stick.

KRIS TAPLEY

And by the way, Paul did say that sounded like him. But there are a number of things in that August 6 draft that are in the finished film, and again, who knows how many of them were added by Graham in the months leading up to Paul coming on, but it can't be all of them. One, for instance, is the Jaguar driver, played by Glenn Plummer, who Jack commandeers in pursuit of the bus. Graham does say that was him. But there's also the establishment of a sort of loft lair for Howard Payne above Pershing Square, and little bomb-squad details like clipping a battery to the bomb under the bus in trying to dismantle it, and the plot device of having that transmitter beacon tracking the money showing them that Payne has it and is on the run. The line, “Interactive TV, wave of the future,” shows up in there, and Graham says that wasn't him. Helen also dies trying to escape on the sly. In the earlier drafts, she died tragically as they tried to unload the passengers early. Oh yeah, and as Graham said, Paul changed the bus number to 2525. And there's actually a direct reference from Payne to the 1969 Zager and Evans song to explain it.

[SONG: “IN THE YEAR 2525 (EXORDIUM & TERMINUS)”]

ZAGER AND EVANS (singing)

In the year 2525, if man is still alive, if woman can survive, they may find. In the year...

KRIS TAPLEY

And I think 2525 is better anyway, because what's 25 plus 25? You got it. So, I just think there's more Paul in there than everyone would like to remember, including, as we have scientifically deduced, the film's most famous line. And not that he's looking to get some love here, by the way. I'm the guy crazy enough to track all these people down and force them to remember fleeting, 30-year-old events.

PAUL ATTANASIO

You know, it's Graham's film. Graham's the one who sweated through the whole development of it. Graham is the one who invented it. I don't have to go hogging credit now and saying I did this and I did that, because really, whatever I did on these movies – sometimes it was significant – it was never as significant as the guy or the woman who went through the creation of it and the birthing of it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Circling back to Joss, it's actually a wonder that he didn't write “pop quiz hot shot,” because it's hard to find any line in this movie that isn't his. Both he and Graham surmise that about 90% of the dialogue is Joss.

JOSS WHEDON

There are some lines that I like a whole lot. There is one just where I'm like, "Well, I'm never going to stop talking about class, am I?" When he says, "You're crazy." And he says, "Poor people are crazy." Bag of money. "I'm eccentric." It's just like, yeah, I had to put something in there about how rich people get away with shit.

WALTER PARKES

I need to take this opportunity. One of my favorite lines in the movie is donated by my partner here, when you talk about Sandra Bullock. Do you recall, Laurie?

LAURIE MACDONALD

Oh, yes, I do.

WALTER PARKES

It was just a throwaway, but when she's finally behind the wheel of the bus...

LAURIE MACDONALD

She's such a great driver, and you kind of go-

WALTER PARKES

Right. And Keanu says, "Usually" – well, not usually. She says, "No, they took my driver's license away." He says, "Why?" "Speeding." And you cut to the bus going like that and you just love her at that moment.

LAURIE MACDONALD

Yeah, it was the moment that gave you – because it really made no sense that suddenly this woman happens to be an expert driver, you know. And she's comfortable driving that fast. And it kind of defined her character at the same time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Quick note here: That's funny because it's an explanation Graham had been wrestling with himself. As you'll recall, the character had been everything from an ambulance driver to a driving school instructor in other drafts. Anyway, we're cruising to the finish line here, I promise. Now, Joss Whedon is credited by all involved with stepping in and saving a screenplay that had gone off the rails. He gave it exactly the spark it needed. But things were going to go south soon enough.

GRAHAM YOST

I read Joss's script and I go, "Oh, thank God." I'm so relieved because it's a funny script. But, you know, where things went bad between us is when he didn't get any credit, and he was not happy when we ran into each other at the premiere. And it was like he was blaming me. And it was like, "Dude, that's the WGA. Of course I'm going to write a letter saying I deserve sole credit. I sat with that thing for years. You know, that's my baby. You did great work, but they no longer allow the additional dialogue credit. The WGA took that out, so, this is what we're left with." I don't believe I ever said "dude."

JOSS WHEDON

Graham Yost came up to me on the weekend – the night it opened, Fox was having a little party on the lot because they were so excited, and we hadn't met, and he came up and we were polite and all, and he was like, "You know, man, you'd have done the same thing." And I was like, "Well, we can't know that, can we?" That got me. That really upset me, because it's not true. And I got to live long enough to find out that it was not true. In fact, the next thing, very soon after, was *Toy Story*. And when John Lasseter was, like, "I think all the key animators should get, you know, screenplay credit." I was like, "Hell yeah." So, I was, like, "Oh, good." Because I would hate to have found out that that was true. I don't like taking credit for things I haven't done. And it doesn't mean that his credit would disappear. But it's just when somebody says to me, "You'd have done the same thing." Somebody assumes your state of mind. It makes me cranky. And in fact, I didn't ever read Graham's version until the studio put my name on the picture. And I have the only poster for *Speed* where my name is on it. Because then it went into arbitration. So, I read – and I had changed some of the plot elements in Paul's, and I read Graham's and I realized I had changed them back to what Graham had written, originally had, that I didn't know about, so, I was like, "Well, I'm not going to get a credit."

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, Joss has said this a few times over the years, that he knew he was doomed with the WGA when he read Graham's previous drafts and realized some of his structural changes had already been conceived in those drafts. I asked him specifically what he means and he, like Walter and Laurie, hit this note again about killing Harry at the end of the second act. Remember, Paul said they didn't want to do that when he brought it up. As best I can tell, I think Graham's sort of rescue draft that we talked about earlier – or one of them, not the August 6 one, obviously – must have eventually incorporated this change that Paul wanted to do. Joss didn't know about it because he was working from a version that killed Harry in the first sequence. So, I think, once again, Paul Attanasio deserves a little more credit here, and that the quote "Graham" drafts that Joss read during arbitration must have included some of these ghost-written structural changes from Paul. So, yeah, he realized he wasn't going to get a credit after seeing this, but, again, from what I can tell, those changes should probably be attributed to the guy whose work had otherwise pissed everyone off. Anyway, back to Laurie and Walter.

LAURIE MACDONALD

It's very tough, once the basic story has been laid out by another writer or two writers, to get that credit, unless the work is, you know, so substantial. We fought hard for him to get it, and I think it was deserved, but it's very tough when you're a later writer in the run. I think there probably weren't enough major story changes to warrant it or, you know, that was decided during the arbitration. But really, every – the kind of feel of it, all of the dialogue, I believe, ended up being Joss'. Do you agree, Walter?

WALTER PARKES

I do, and I think it's an interesting thing about Writers Guild arbitrations, which is, tone is something that's very hard to arbitrate.

JORGE SARALEGUI

I'm sure Joss rewrote essentially all of the dialogue, but it was the same story, you know what I mean? And it's an action movie. So, yeah, you can change dialogue, but you're kind of saying the same thing. Like, "Open this door." Except you're saying it, one way was Graham's way, one way was Joss's way. If it's, "How do we keep this bus going," and the scenes are all basically the same scenes, then changing dialogue – because if you think about it, OK, if you wanted to be a sleazebag, all you do is go in there and change the dialogue and then you automatically get credit. It's too easy to change the dialogue, especially in an action movie where a lot of the dialogue is just serviceable stuff.

MARK GORDON

And I wrote a note to *Time* magazine about this – I think it was *Time*. Joss had been talking about – you know, he was sort of the new kid, wunderkind, and he'd given an interview about how he had saved *Speed*, or he had written on *Speed* and he didn't get any credit, and I was kind of pissed off on Graham's behalf, because Graham got sole credit, because the Writers Guild determined that he did whatever percentage was necessary to not share credit with anybody else. Doesn't mean that Joss didn't do a great job. He did. He was really good. He's a really talented guy. Came up with some great, funny lines. Came up with some really good ideas. But, you know, don't piss on another guy's thing. Just be gracious. It really comes down to how do people deal with credit, and if they don't get it, do they, you know, go public with it and say, "I should have gotten credit"? Or do you just say, "Hey, I was hired. I got paid money to do this job. The Writers Guild, in their infinite wisdom, decided that I didn't deserve credit." So, keep your mouth shut. I don't find that kind of behavior very attractive.

JOSS WHEDON

I don't remember exactly. I know that I did say that I had written, you know, a bunch of the dialogue and that I was disappointed not to get a credit. I didn't say I saved the movie, because that's not something you would say. But I worked very hard on it. And it being an early gig, I was pretty disappointed. I was pretty hurt by that. But the idea that I was, you know, mouthing off about the film and bragging, that's just not my way. That's very disrespectful.

TOM JACOBSON

I don't know. You know, I mean, they have specific rules about percentages and whatnot and, you know, they do what they do. A lot of writers think it's a tough process, but it works.

JOSS WHEDON

It is not necessary, but I knew I was going to lose. I don't think it was the guild acted unfairly. I don't like that rule, and now they're starting to do something to amend it. But that's now. Anyway, you know, it makes me sad. People were very sweet and they, you

know, called me and told me stories about, you know, “My wife worked on this and didn’t get credit, but then she got blah, blah blah, and everybody knows.” But everyone doesn’t know. I’ve never signed anything with *Speed* on it. And I don’t need to sign things, but it just is an indication that it sort of isn’t common knowledge, and that’s OK. It doesn’t bother me anymore. There are a lot of things out there that I care much more about.

JORGE SARALEGUI

He thought he deserved it, and you can see why. Their rules are idiosyncratic. I ended up getting sole story credit on the movie *Showtime*. OK, now, it was my idea and I had submitted something or other and I told the original writer, “Just give me co-story credit,” and then he didn’t. He just took full credit. And, so, I argued, because it pissed me off, because he really had never had a job. It was his first job. So, I argued it, and I get sole credit. I couldn’t – I mean, I didn’t think I deserved it. I couldn’t believe it, you know? And it wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t argued. That’s what I’m saying. I have no idea how their rules work, but whatever, you know, Graham got sole credit. But Joss’ agent did a mind-blowing job of promoting Joss’ role in the movie, so that Joss was getting a lot of credit at the time for a guy whose name wasn’t on it. He got a lot of credit for it.

JOSS WHEDON

Well, Jorge wanted to resurrect – that was not the title at the time – *Alien*. And so, based on *Speed*, he got them to let me write a treatment. Based on that treatment, they went back to Sigourney and then told me to write a new treatment that had Sigourney in it, because they were on board, but they didn’t feel comfortable doing it without her. And she joined because of the script. But yeah, no, it was an incredibly gratifying experience until it became the worst of my career at the time.

KRIS TAPLEY

He’s talking about the debacle of *Alien: Resurrection*, which I’m sure is a story for another podcast. Now, since we’re basically saying goodbye to them after this episode, where did the road lead for Walter and Laurie after all of this? They actually were offered an executive producer credit on the film, but they declined, partly because they were lining up an exciting new venture.

WALTER PARKES

I do remember us having laid out the rewrite on a bulletin board with three-by-five cards, which is what we like to do with each act, and clearly saying the end of the second act is the death of Jeff Daniels and laying it all out. And we were, I think, waiting to go and present it when we got the strangest phone call from Mike Ovitz, then super-agent, asking if we wanted to come and run Amblin Entertainment. It was a strange crossroads of a career for us, of a moment, which we ended up doing. But it was great. We were able to at least finish the work that had to be done on the script. I’m thinking back, though. You know, Laurie, props to Jorge, because, had we made *Men in Black* yet?

LAURIE MACDONALD

I think we had developed it. We were working on developing it. We hadn’t made it.

WALTER PARKES

So, we were hardly producers of note and Joss was hardly a writer of note and you have this big movie going, and the fact that Jorge and Tom and that whole group somehow trusted the three of us to come in at that moment, I mean, that's pretty great. I mean, we owe them a thank you. But there's a sort of a tone that you can see in most of Joss' work. We were saying, you know, "Gold watch, fairly cheesy" – I mean, something as thrown-away as that. There's a way that Joss is able to be very tossed-off in otherwise production-heavy environments, and it's a really great gift. I just remember it was one of the best collaborations we ever had, as is evidenced: the movie came out and we became friends and we immediately went to work on another movie soon after. So, he was a pleasure in that way. You know, the best experiences we have with writers is when they bring values that you can't even imagine. You know, we can certainly contribute to making a story very sturdy and fixing a lot of problems. We can have good ideas. But that sort of, you know, specificity of tone in the context of a big, production-heavy Hollywood movie, that's very hard to achieve and that's one of Joss' superpowers.

LAURIE MACDONALD

We tried – remember, Walter, we tried, after we did *Twister* with Joss – we desperately wanted to make an overall deal with him at Amblin, and he was so committed to doing *Buffy*, remember?

WALTER PARKES

As a television show.

LAURIE MACDONALD

We tried to talk him out of this crazy idea of doing, you know, *Buffy* as – "You're going to give up? You're going to go back to television?" And desperately tried to talk him out of it. But he was determined. And I'm glad he was. I think an original voice is such a treasure in, you know, in all writing, but particularly screenwriting.

JOSS WHEDON

I'm in there. To me, it sounds like just before people were starting to get the way that I wrote. Some of it, I think, comes off really well and I'm very proud of it. Every now and then there's a phrase that I'm, like, "I didn't know how I sounded yet." Like, there's something just a little off or, you know, it's, they didn't know how to work it, or I gave them something that was a little unwieldy every now and then. And, you know, obviously, when it came to *Buffy*, then it was very specific and I was very specific about it and everyone sort of understood it. And by the time I did *Avengers*, I realized that all of the actors were comfortable with it, just, already, because it had been in the world enough. Yeah, so, it was kind of a funky progression to go back and, it's like, "Oh, yeah, that's where I was still learning my craft."

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

With our stars in place, it's time to detail the unlikely casting of Jeff Daniels in the role of Jack Traven's SWAT team partner, Harry Temple.

JEFF DANIELS

It was a job. The career was floundering and I just told the agent, "I need something." And, you know, next thing I know I'm wearing SWAT gear and bursting into a building. I'm going, "I don't know what I'm doing but here I am."

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

The idea was to have somebody in there that would surprise you, that you would never think would die.

JAN DE BONT

I felt I needed an actor that had more experience, and I needed a solid guy so that he could almost play off against.

KRIS TAPLEY

The Emmy-winning character actor talks about the desperation that brought him to the table, and how 1994 would turn out to be a major turning point in his career.

JEFF DANIELS

We're doing promotion for *Dumb and Dumber*, which was being released in December, and *Speed* had just happened in the summer, and that had been a big hit, and now here in December, you're in another big hit, and now you're hosting *Saturday Night Live* in January.

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.

[CITIZEN KANE CLIP]

ORSON WELLES (as "Charles Foster Kane")

Rosebud.