

50 MPH: EPISODE 13

“JEFF DANIELS NEEDS A JOB”

Transcript (00:27:18)



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

Alright, we’re cruising right along here. I hope you’re enjoying this journey so far. We’re about a quarter of the way through. Now, this episode was originally meant to be a focus on the villain of *Speed*, Howard Payne, played by Dennis Hopper. But I found it kind of difficult to talk about Payne without also talking about the evolution of another character, Harry Temple, Jack Traven’s partner on the LAPD SWAT team who meets an untimely demise at the end of the second act. Or, as he was originally called, Harry Sears. So, I thought about making this a sort of maxi-episode that folded all of that in together, and then I realized, you know what? This guy deserves his own space. So, now it’s a two-parter, and we’re going to spend today with actor Jeff Daniels, who would sign on – almost reluctantly – to star as Harry, who ended up with the less, I guess, hard-ass surname of Temple instead of Sears. We got into this a little bit in last week’s episode detailing the last-minute rewriting that whipped *Speed* into camera-ready shape. A big part of this final push was evolving Harry past a concept that screenwriter Graham Yost had been clinging to for years: the reveal that Harry was the one holding the busload of passengers for ransom. You know, “It was me all along!” That kind of thing. Not quite a Scooby-Doo ending, but, you know, not far from the wheelhouse, either. Though producers Walter Parkes and Laurie Macdonald did not recall being the ones to suggest that Graham move away from this conceit, that’s nevertheless how Graham remembers it. And frankly, I’m still fuzzy on when this actually happened, even after last week’s *JFK*-like immersion into the rewrites.

[JFK CLIP]

KEVIN COSTNER (as “Jim Garrison”)

Back, and to the left. Back, and to the left.

KRIS TAPLEY

In any case, here’s what Graham said about it again.

GRAHAM YOST

And then the biggest note, I'm sure you know, is Harry was the bad guy. And that happened around the time that Walter and Laurie came in. 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 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

OK, now, let's look at the screenplay description of Harry at the time: "HARRY SEARS, tall, muscular, crewcut. The classic cop. Seemingly calm and easygoing, yet you know he could snap your neck like a twig." Doesn't exactly read like Jeff Daniels, does it? So, no, the search early on for this character was a little different. I don't know about you, but I read that description and I kind of jump to a specific actor in my mind. As it turns out, that's the actor Fox had in mind, too, and according to former studio executive Jorge Saralegui, that's the one actor who turned *Speed* down twice.

JORGE SARALEGUI

We thought, OK, why don't we get a guy like Ed Harris for the villain, and he basically passed twice. I mean, he came in and met with Jan twice, and I think some of us, and he was very nice, and basically, he wasn't interested in being in a Keanu Reeves action movie. And in fairness to him, that's not like saying today he wouldn't be in *John Wick*, although for all I know he wouldn't be in one. But no, what he was saying is, "I'm not going to be in an action movie starring, you know, Bill and Ted." It makes complete sense, you know? And we wanted him because he'd be good but also because he would elevate the movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

Soon enough, of course, Harris – one of my favorite actors of all time, by the way – would star as the villain in the kind of film *Speed* would help pave the way for, Michael Bay's *The Rock*. And, yeah, he would have crushed the role of a villainous Harry and elevated it from where it was on the page, which was sort of unconvincing. I'm looking at the script right now, and as I said in the last episode, Harry serves the kind of Joe Morton role of being on the flatbed truck alongside the bus throughout the second act. And again, he's revealed to be a little pissed off that he, as a second-generation cop, won't be promoted to captain thanks to Jack's recklessness in the elevator sequence at the beginning of the movie, which caused a hostage to be killed. And no, it's not because Jack shot the hostage. And by the way, the elevator thing is put together by a whole other nutjob named Rudy, who dies in that sequence and is sort of confusingly used as a red herring throughout the film until the big Harry reveal. Anyway, here is an example of Harry's dialogue from this period, when the shit's going down in the third act. This is after he's accidentally outed himself to Jack as the bad guy by saying something he wouldn't have known unless he was the bad guy, you know, that old trick. OK, this is just before the subway sequence kicks off. Harry says, "Values, Jack. Do you know anything about values? I put 15 years of my life into becoming the best at what I do. The

best. By the book. Right down the fucking line. I was supposed to be captain, you fuck. But you had to play cowboy! So, this is what you get.” And then from there things basically progress through the subway sequence as they do in the movie, only it’s Harry, not Howard, handcuffing Annie - well, she’s still Darlene at this point - and fighting with Jack on the top of the subway car and, yes, getting his head ripped off.

KRIS TAPLEY

Eventually, that all gets weeded out at some point and then Paul Attanasio and Joss Whedon take their cracks at fleshing out a new character that Graham has conjured, Howard Payne. Now, remember, for a while Harry was killed in the first-act elevator sequence. That’s when Jeff first got the script from his agent, remember? And he was less than enthused.

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 on, like, page 80. I said, “Great. I’m in.”

KRIS TAPLEY

Before that, like every other role, they were out to any and everyone who would consider it. And, probably because the character had next to nothing going on in this iteration, no one was interested. People’s memories tend to blur this search with the Howard Payne search, of course. But I’ve heard Bill Pullman was someone they looked at here, which makes complete sense. In the end, sort of out of necessity on both sides, Jeff is who they ended up with.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Jeff Daniels took the movie – I think basically he needed the job. But he wasn’t thrilled about – yeah, he was not thrilled about being in this movie.

JEFF DANIELS

It was a job. The career was floundering and I just told the agent, “I need something. I need to get something.” And he said, “Well, Mark Gordon” – I think it was Mark Gordon, right? “Mark Gordon has this action movie with Keanu Reeves, Sandra Bullock. It’s a small part, but let me call him on it.” I said, “OK, great.” You know, “I haven’t done that.” Keanu, I hadn’t worked with him. And Sandy was still kind of – I mean, they were both kind of about to burst, you know? And this was the movie that kind of did it. So, I knew of them. But, you know, they were reasons to do it. The money was whatever the money was. I was happy to get it. And, you know, next thing I know, I’m wearing SWAT gear and Keanu and I are flying, you know, up and over a hill and coming in and landing and bursting into a building. I’m going, “I don’t know what I’m doing, but here I am.” And there was a whole bunch of stuff on a bus, and that was just other people shooting, you know? I was either back in Michigan or back at the hotel wondering when I’ve got to

limp around the office again. Because apparently, I got shot, didn't I? Yeah, I got shot, so, I'm limping around on a shot leg.

KRIS TAPLEY

No big deal, Jeff. It's just, you know, "shoot the hostage," one of the most famous things from the movie. He really does have fuzzy memories about all of this, and look, I'm not judging. I mean, my guy was just looking to rebuild a career that had sort of hit the skids and he was out to show the industry that he was a jack of all trades.

JEFF DANIELS

I got out of the gate great with *Terms* and *Purple Rose* with Woody, *Something Wild* with Jonathan Demme, and then I started doing independent movies. I'm a creature of off-Broadway, where you really try to – you know, the scripts are a little more challenging, but not necessarily popular. Certainly not aimed at how many people want to see, you know – *Speed* is aimed at everyone who wants a thrill ride, and I was doing scripts that could have been off-Broadway plays. Indies. Nobody went to see them. It doesn't make them bad; it just makes them that, nobody went to see them. You know, you're doing it for very little money. The budget is way down, but you love the script. And so, I did like three or four of those in a row. And, you know, it just didn't – now all that capital that I had bought in Hollywood, you know, with the first three or four or five movies, had dissipated.

KRIS TAPLEY

Here is casting director Risa Bramon Garcia, who was up to her elbows in the search for this guy and, later, Howard Payne as well.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

And he was living, like, in Michigan and he didn't like to fly. He was not easy to access, you know? I don't know if he was living in Michigan at that time, but he was living in Michigan a lot and he was not a guy who was just like, "Hey, come in for a meeting in LA." Like, he was just not around. He had a family he was raising and wasn't interested, never, to do TV. He was very much his own guy and very selective about what he did. Maybe he needed a paycheck. I don't know. I don't think we paid him a ton of money. I don't remember, but he wasn't there for that long. The idea was, and this is something we talked about a lot, was to have somebody in there that would surprise you, that you would never think would die. We aimed pretty high with certain guys and they said no because it was a very small part and they didn't want to get killed, but Jeff was at a great place – well, not great for him, maybe, but for us – at a great place in his career where he would be recognizable to an audience and they would think, "Oh, he's a costar in the movie," and not expect him to be killed. And so, when he was killed, it had the right amount of surprise and disappointment and heartbreak that you understood. Like, it really motivated the story. And I think at that point, again, because the ambition of the movie was about getting the best actors available, interested and affordable into these parts, it wasn't stupid. Like, you know, it was hard, but it wasn't, like, unrealistic to the point of stupidity. It was a little stunt casting in that we wanted somebody in there

who the audience would really be devastated and surprised by his death, but it didn't have to be too ambitious.

KRIS TAPLEY

As it turned out, 1994 would be the year to turn things around for Jeff, and not just because of *Speed*. This is all jumping ahead a bit, but it's worth it for the context. Because Jeff would have an even bigger opportunity later in the year opposite a skyrocketing Jim Carrey in the Farrelly brothers comedy *Dumb and Dumber* – funnily enough, playing yet another Harry.

[DUMB AND DUMBER CLIP]

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Dunn”)

It's gets worse, Lloyd. My parakeet Petey?

JIM CARREY (as “Lloyd Christmas”)

Yeah?

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Dunn”)

He's dead.

JIM CARREY (as “Lloyd Christmas”)

Aw. Oh, man, I'm sorry, Harry. What happened?

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Dunn”)

His head fell off!

JIM CARREY (as “Lloyd Christmas”)

His head fell off??

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Dunn”)

Yeah, he was pretty old.

KRIS TAPLEY

After that, he was back. Here's Jeff talking about this entire stretch of 1994 and I'm just going to let him talk for a while, because it's kind of great.

JEFF DANIELS

Well, it was a pivotal year for me, personally. We had shot *Speed*, it must have been the previous year, the end of the previous year. Summer/Fall. Because by the time it was February/March, the career was still in a nosedive. So, in March of '94, I went out to LA. And, you know, I live in Michigan, and I never had to do this. But I'd been in Michigan eight years, and the career had started to stall and nosedive, and so, now I've got to go out to LA, get a hotel room and audition on five movies and land one of them. I need a job. And two of them really wanted me. One was a movie about divorced dads, and the other was *Dumb and Dumber*, and I really wanted to do *Dumb and Dumber*. I wanted to

work with Jim. I was tired of trying to be a serious actor. You know, again, I'm coming off a movie where I died on page 22, OK, 80, you know? I mean, if that – I've got to do better, and I wanted to go comedy. I knew I could do it, but, you know, it's Jim Carrey. And at the time, Jim was Ace Ventura. That's all he was. He had shot a movie called *The Mask*, but it wasn't out yet. And so, the shortest version of, I had agents trying to talk me out of doing *Dumb and Dumber*. It was like an intervention. "We're not going to let you do this movie." I really wanted to work with Jim. They were offering me, like, a third of what the married – the divorced dads movie was offering me. I said, "I want to work with Jim. I want to change it up. It's my decision. I'm doing it anyway." And they said, "OK. Good luck." And I went out to LA. We started shooting *Dumb and Dumber*, Colorado, and I remember in May, Jim went to Cannes over the weekend, and then flew back after having seen *Mask* premiere at Cannes, and it exploded. And then we finished shooting, I think in June, right when *Speed* is coming out. And I'm just in that, you know? It's Sandy and it's Keanu and it's Dennis Hopper. I'm just in it. And that's a huge hit. And then I get into the Fall, and then now we're doing promotion for *Dumb and Dumber*, which is being released in December. And the reviews were atrocious, and we're the number one movie in the country for six weeks. 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. In one year, that was a big, big turnaround. And it wouldn't have worked had I not done *Dumb and Dumber*, if I'd not worked with Jim and across from Jim, you know, a comedic genius, and held my own, plus *Speed*. As Nicholson said, "You just bought yourself five years," you know? So, that happened.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's hear from director Jan de Bont this week. Here's what he had to say about casting and working with Jeff Daniels.

JAN DE BONT

Yeah, actually, there was a really good reason that I wanted Jeff to play that part. Because I was a little worried about Keanu, because *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, that was kind of a goofy movie. And so, I had to get away from that very quickly. You know what I mean? I have to get the audience away from that idea. And I liked Keanu because he has this kind of restlessness in him, kind of a really playful restlessness. But it's also like an energy that is kind of needed, that's always ready to come out, but quite often at inopportune moments, which you don't want. You want it to be a little controlled. And I felt I needed an actor that had more experience, and I needed a solid guy so that he could almost play off against, you know what I mean? And without having to force himself. That's the whole point with acting. You never want to see somebody "acting" acting, and Jeff can act without ever realizing that he's acting. And that is what Keanu really had to learn, a bit.

[SPEED CLIP]

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

We are the two luckiest guys in the world, you know that? We got the bad guy and we didn't lose any civilians.

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

Yeah, we're good.

JOE MORTON (as “Capt. McMahon”)

No, you were lucky.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

No, we were lucky. You better understand that we were dealing with a total psycho. You know, this guy could have blown us up at any time. And I got a bullet in me. Six inches off the mark and they're giving the medal to my wife.

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

Harry, come on, man. I mean, we won. We got him.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

Do you listen? Do you ever? Because I am not going to be around to back you up, so you better start thinking. Guts will get you so far and then they'll get you killed.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

He's a beautiful actor and he's gotten to be more and more complex and interesting and, you know, deeper than anyone ever imagined, really. So, it's nice to have this as part of the history. I also did *Something Wild* and he was in that and that was a hard role to cast and we went through a lot of people before ending up with Jeff. And, again, just, like, so excited to see the acting journey he's been on all these years and how, with age and time, he's just so brilliant.

JEFF DANIELS

Dumb and Dumber was, “I need to show people that I can go all the way over here with *Dumb and Dumber*, and then also do, whether it's *Gettysburg* or *Speed* over here – if I can do that, I will create such a wide range that there are jobs in between there.” And then in, like, 2002, I think it was, I did *Blood Work* with Clint Eastwood. And Clint told me, he goes – and *2 Days in the Valley* was another drama, an indie drama that nobody saw. But he saw it. And he said, “If you can do *2 Days in the Valley* and you can do *Dumb and Dumber*, you can do this.” And it was, like, there it is. Proof.

KRIS TAPLEY

And I do just want to go back to this dying-on-page-80 thing for a second. Yeah, Harry dies. Not a hero's journey here. But I do think the way that moment is shot and edited is kind of badass. You remember, Harry and the rest of the SWAT team are climbing into the windows of Howard Payne's house out near the airport. They found their scumbag! Then, as Harry glides past a wall decoration, a red light catches his eye. A bomb has

been armed. He's dead, his whole team is dead. So, the camera just settles on his face and lets Harry Temple quietly die a kind of noble death.

[*SPEED CLIP*]

JEFF DANIELS

Sure. None of which I thought about. That's what you guys get to do. You guys get to now go, "The moment – what a noble death." You know? Great. Terrific. Run with it. Wonderful. It's like with theatre. You know, you write a play. I write a lot of plays. You get to the end, and the audience goes, "What did you mean by this play? What are you trying to say?" And your answer is, "What do you think I was trying to say?" "Well, I think you were doing this, this and this." "That's great." "I disagree. I think you were doing this, that or the other thing." "OK. That's valid, too." There's no, kind of, manipulation to – you just want to give it to them, drop it in their lap and let the bomb explode in their head, in their lap. So, noble death? Sure. Great. But that certainly wasn't on the list of things when I was sitting in makeup that day.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, fine, but seriously, it's a badass death scene. And Jeff did bring something to the moment as an actor, which he's talked about before. Here is the answer to the trivia question "Where do *Speed* and *Jaws* intersect?"

JEFF DANIELS

It's one of those moments where you're going, "How am I going to do this?" You know, we've got to make it look like it's happening for the first time. I had just crawled in a window with SWAT gear, that, you know – I have to look as heroic as possible, which is hard to do when one leg is going in, and then the SWAT gear and all that. I mean, it was just like going through a little hole. But I got over to the mark, and I've got to turn and look at the thermostat, and then I have to realize that that's really a timer for a bomb. "Oh, no." Cut. Now you go outside and the house blows up. So, how do I – as an actor, how do I pull that off? Do you – surprised? Do you realize? Do you, you know, show-and-tell acting, where you show everybody what you're thinking? "Oh, my God. No!" Boom? Or, as you're getting ready to shoot it, do you remember – and I do this. I'll stockpile things that other actors say on how they did this or did that. Or you'll see movies and you'll steal from Meryl or you'll steal from Pacino or De Niro, some moment they do. I mean, there's stuff that Al does in *Dog Day Afternoon* that I'm just going, "I'll take that. I'll take that. I'll take that. What's he doing there?" And then try to study the choice. But this, it was like a light bulb went off, and I had remembered an interview that Roy Scheider had done. And they asked Roy, "Roy, how, my God, the moment when you're on the boat and you look down in the water and you see the shark, what were you thinking? How did you pull that off? What a moment. Tell us about it." He goes, "Well, I made sure that when I turned and looked at the shark, that my cheek muscles were squinting my eyes just a little bit, and then when I saw the shark, I just dropped the cheek muscles. They're up, they're down." It's just like a cheek muscle exercise. So, you put the thought in your head, but then as you turn to the thermostat, you've got just a little lift in the cheekbone, the cheek muscles, and you come around and you see it,

and you let them drop. “Cut.” So, it really was kind of a technical, mechanical, kind of, “Let me steal from Roy Scheider. It worked for him. If it’s good enough for Roy it’s good enough for me.” And that’s what I did. And I guess it makes the experience the audience’s. You know, you learn, and this is my issue with method acting sometimes, is that we don’t really care how you’re feeling about it internally, whether you’re there. The only thing the audience cares about is if they get there. What’s the story? What do we have to make them feel in this moment? We want them to go, “Oh, fuck.” “Oh, no.” Now, I can play “oh fuck” or “oh no,” or I can set it up so they do. You know, you want them to feel what he’s feeling, and what do you have to do to get to that? And Roy Schneider’s cheek muscle drop did that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Tragically, I don’t think this beat actually made it into the movie. There is no perceptible cheek muscle drop. He comes in tensed up and we cut to him I think maybe already unclenched. Jeff says he hasn’t seen the movie since it came out, no big shock, so he can be forgiven for not realizing this, but hey, it’s still a good story. Now, look, I know Jeff saw this as a job and he, of course, wouldn’t come close to this kind of movie again in his career. But I hope he appreciates that he really brought something to the film and that it’s kind a fun little credit on his IMDb scroll. Be proud, Jeff. And like I told you, give the movie another look one of these days. It holds up. Oh, and by now, as the script is more or less locked in and production gears up, the character descriptions for both Jack and Harry have been crashed into a single efficient line: “WE SEE these two are a team, and that when they move, Jack leads.” I want to close this week by noting that today is September 4, 2023. Cameras began rolling on *Speed* on September 1, 1993. So, happy 30th anniversary to the production of *Speed*. But hang on. We still need a bad guy!

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH...*

MARK GORDON

We didn’t cast this role until three days before we started shooting the actor. We were already in production and shooting on the freeway, me talking to the studio as buses are flying by going, “Well, how about him? Well, how about him?”

KRIS TAPLEY

It’s time to build the perfect foil. We chart the journey of *Speed*’s twisted bomber, Howard Payne, and the last-minute casting of screen icon Dennis Hopper.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

We went from person to person to person to person. And then we had the list of all the great character actors out there, and even some of them passed.

MARK GORDON

And Dennis was the only actor that we could all agree on.

KRIS TAPLEY

You'll also hear, for the first time anywhere, how the role very nearly went to a different screen icon. And trust me. It was close!

JORGE SARALEGUI

Now, he would have done it. He passes because he says, "I have to have two weeks off." Just, take a break. And we couldn't do it. It was already waiting too long. That's how close it came.

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.