

50 MPH: EPISODE 14

“THE PERFECT FOIL”

Transcript (00:24:11)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hotshot!

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

I just want you to take a second to soak in this moment. I mentioned it at the end of last week’s episode, but on September 1, 1993, cameras started rolling on *Speed*. We are very much in the sweet spot as we ride out this 30th-anniversary celebration. They’re shooting out there on the soon-to-be-opened 105 freeway on the south side of Los Angeles, and we’ll catch up with them soon enough. But in the meantime, we still don’t have the final ingredient: a nemesis. The character started out as Rudy. The March ‘93 draft sets him up like so: “RUDY, blonde, athletic, hair pulled back in a ponytail, glasses. In one hand Rudy holds the hair of his hysterical hostage, FRANCINE. In the other hand he holds a short, stick-like device. Strapped to his chest is twenty pounds of C-4 plastic explosive. He grins.” And he says, “Deadman stick, sport. Kill me and we all go.” Alright, so, Francine comes out of nowhere here, by the way, and she’s the hostage that I’ve mentioned who originally died in this scene and set Harry up for his villain arc before all that went away. And eventually, Howard Payne was conjured from the ashes of Rudy. And by the way, his name changes to Howard Fisk at some point and that’s what it is in the production draft, but obviously they got cold feet on that. Anyway, the character is evolving a little bit as the script doctors tinker with it. By way of description, the script originally sets him up as, quote, “a tiny man with marble skin.” Later on, writer Joss Whedon would put some more meat on those bones when Payne kills a guy with a knife in the opening moments of the movie. The final description reads: “Dripping knife aside, he is an ordinary-looking man. His face is dead calm, only his eyes betraying the sea of hate behind it.” So, he’s clearly a psychopath, ultimately a disfigured former Atlanta bomb squad officer who lost his thumb on the job and is out to get a forced pension, if you will. Nevertheless, just like everything else, they’re simply not finding any interest in the role. Let’s go back to casting director Risa Bramon Garcia.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

Jeff Bridges passed. Kurt Russell passed. But it was all the - it was the usual suspects, you know? I mean, we went after very A-list guys – Sean Penn passed – you know, we went after A-list guys who could play convincing, fantastic bad guys. Kevin Kline. Like, we had, like, all the usual suspects. And why would they do it? My God. Like, there was nothing there on the page.

KRIS TAPLEY

Speaking a moment ago of Joss Whedon, if you'll recall, this is what he remembered of the shaping of this character on the page and through the casting search.

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. I wanted – because I wanted him to be a nerd. I wanted him to be a quiet man who makes things with his hands, and, you know, very meticulously, and has for years, and is angry in an almost passive-aggressive bomber sort of way. Passive, suddenly very aggressive.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's hear from producer Mark Gordon on all of this.

MARK GORDON

Dennis Hopper, number 44 on the list. I mean, there were so many people. Jan and I wanted – both of us were really excited about Randy Quaid. And the studio said, "He's a comedy guy. People aren't going to take him seriously." I said, "He's a really good actor. He's a really interesting actor. Go back and look at some of his earlier films, where he's playing more dramatic than comedy." Maybe they were right, but we were, like – so many actors. There was Willem Defoe, there was this one, there was this one. The studio would have an idea, we would say no. We'd have an idea, they'd say no.

JAN DE BONT

Gary Oldman, he was also one of them, by the way. And I liked him, but it was too typical. It was like – I just wanted the bad guy, also, to be kind of a surprise character for the audience, not just like – and they hold themselves to the line. They don't improvise so much. I mean, he's a great actor. Don't misunderstand me. But it's a kind of acting that didn't really fit in this particular kind of movie.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

We had some Brits, yeah. Alan Rickman passed. Of course, we went from person to person to person to person, and there was no reason for them to do it, and there wasn't money. Sometimes it's like, come in for a week and we'll pay you \$5 million. Sometimes it's hard to say no to that, you know? Then we had the list of all the great character actors out there, and even some of them passed, you know, people who weren't quite as fancy. More like Tim Roth and, you know, obviously, all of those people are on the list for obvious reasons.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, if you're keeping track, that's a lot of names. Sean Penn, Kevin Kline, Kurt Russell, Jeff Bridges, Robert Duvall, Charles Grodin, Randy Quaid, Willem Dafoe, Gary Oldman, Alan Rickman, Tim Roth. Wow. Someone also told me Jeff Goldblum, but I couldn't get that confirmed by anyone else. But there was one guy who was basically a hair's breadth away from landing this role. Everyone else said no, but this guy would have

done it under the right circumstance. You ready for it? Here's former Fox exec Jorge Saralegui with the story.

JORGE SARALEGUI

One that stands out in my mind is, we finally at some point go, "Look, it doesn't matter if it's obvious, whatever. At this point we just need a villain, right? OK, let's go with Christopher Walken. Fuck it. OK? That's all he does, right? Is these things." So, we go out to him over the weekend, and I live near a video store at the time, and that Saturday, I'm walking home from, you know, from wherever and I pass the video store and I see a one-sheet on, you know, the glass for some action movie, you know, I had never heard of, starring Christopher Walken. And I go, "Yeah, he's going to say yes. He'll do anything." Monday, he passes. Now, he would have done it. He passes because he is doing *God's Army – Prophecy*. And 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. Because that was, like, really – this is like, arguably we just started shooting and we still don't have anybody, but we need the Dennis Hopper character by a certain time. And so, he said no. That's how close it came. Now, the truth is, he would have been great. That's one – that's the one, of all these little stories, that's the one character that you go, "You know, he would have been fine." He would have been great, because he is great, and he would have done his own version and it would have been just as good. It might have been better.

MARK GORDON

We didn't cast this role until three days before we started shooting the actor, or a week before. In other words, 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?" "No, we don't like that idea." "Jan, what do you think of this? Nope, he doesn't like this." "Oh, no, I don't know." So, yes, Christopher Walken. What Jan said about him was, "He has death in his eyes. I don't want him. He has death in his eyes." And Dennis was the only actor that we could all agree on.

KRIS TAPLEY

Dennis Hopper had one of the most unusual, unexpected, sort of all-terrain careers of anyone of his caliber. We're going to go a lot deeper into this in next week's episode, but here's a guy who started his career on screen opposite James Dean, who got himself blacklisted in Hollywood for his rebellious ways, who screamed back onto the scene as the director of *Easy Rider* in 1969 and helped chart the course for a New Hollywood, and who then sort of ebbed and flowed, falling in and out of favor, clashing creatively with some, flourishing with others. He was, above all, an uncompromising artist, and his most accomplished work would be with uncompromising artists. Wim Wenders, Francis Ford Coppola, David Lynch. As cameras begin rolling on *Speed* in September of 1993, he's on screens in Tony Scott's *True Romance*. He's no stranger to playing the villain, certainly. In fact, he's fresh off of playing King Koopa in the live-action *Super Mario Bros.* movie at the time, as well as other stints in John Dahl's *Red Rock West* and opposite Wesley Snipes in *Boiling Point*. All while maintaining a directing career. He made two movies in 1990, *Catchfire*, which he disowned, and *The Hot Spot*,

and he'd release *Chasers* the same year as *Speed*. So, he's not just sitting around the house. He's a working professional, and I'm sure he looked at *Speed* as a paycheck. But, holy shit, is he perfect. Here's former Fox production president Tom Jacobson.

TOM JACOBSON

It was a hard part to cast. I think it was rewritten a couple of times. And then he brought his own special quality to it. I think, you know, he did some of his own dialogue work. And, you know, the part didn't work that long, right? Because of the way we did scheduling, a lot of it, he's calling in. And then when we finally see him, he was great. He was really talented. He was a director himself. He's an artist. And it was cool for all of us, sort of growing up in the business. "That's Dennis Hopper! That's cool!" You think of him as sort of this outsider, eccentric guy, but no, he was a pro. He sort of created a character there.

JAN DE BONT

I thought he was like an American icon, in a way, that he represented a period in time in American filmmaking. I already knew him a little bit, because he is also a photographer. He made quite a bit of work, photography work in his life, and was exhibited at quite a few galleries. I knew him, more or less, about that. I wanted to really have a guy that is, like, really good at improvising. In fact, that's all he does. He cannot remember a single line of dialogue, and that was to my benefit, in a way, because he made it always more personal. He came up with lines that are, like, never written by anyone, apart from somewhere in his head, and they were really good. It's kind of a funny thing to hear him say things that actually fit him, you know, and not so much the story. And then he would repeat it one more time, the whole thing, in his way, with fractions, sections of the needed dialogue in there. So, sometimes I ended up using that, even though I wasn't always clear what he meant, but it was so interesting.

[SPEED CLIP]

DENNIS HOPPER (as "Howard Payne")

You still don't get it, do you, Jack? Huh? The beauty of it. A bomb is made to explode. That's its meaning, its purpose. Your life is empty because you spend it trying to stop the bomb from becoming. And for who? For what? Do you know what a bomb is, Jack, that doesn't explode? It is a cheap gold watch, buddy.

MARK GORDON

There was an over-the-top quality, a kind of insane, Dennis Hopper thing, and at first, I thought, "Is this too much? Is this just so over-the-top that people are going to laugh?" And yet, it worked. He was great. It turned out he was great, and if it had been a more grounded performance, it wouldn't have been fun. The movie, I think, works because it doesn't take itself too seriously. It's inventive, it never stops and it's elevated reality.

JAN DE BONT

He was kind of an inventor, a little bit, in a way, inventing the character, and no matter what was written about him, what the character was supposed to represent, he came up

with something completely different, and that was actually so much better than what was on the page. And in that regard, I was very grateful to him, that he did that. And I let him do it, because I could completely see this is more original. And it was all, to me, what felt real. Anything that feels real and fits the other characters, too, because a lot of the dialogue has been improvised to a degree that benefits the character, and generally, he was the one who did the most of it all, though. And I didn't even call it improvisation. It was him. He didn't consider it to be improvising, he said. He said, "That's how I am."

KRIS TAPLEY

One of those improvised bits, by the way, is when Payne calls Jack Traven a punk in the subway. As I've said, I just love the meta-textual quality of that, this industry-recognized rebel deigning to call someone else a punk, and the guy who will soon become Mr. Cyberpunk, at that. Speaking of which, here's what Keanu Reeves had to say about working with Dennis Hopper.

KEANU REEVES

Ah, man, I love that guy. I had met him earlier on a film called *River's Edge*, and so it was nice to see him again. You know, he had such a warmth and a twinkle in his eye and in his heart and spirit. You know, he really took on board this arch kind of character and made him feel, I thought, almost in a way sympathetic and vulnerable. And then as a performer, just, you know, had fun and allowed us to enjoy his kind of bitterness and vena – he's kind of, like, a guy who's trying to have control who has no – who's thwarted! It's so much fun when he's just like, "Jack! Raaagh!" You know, scrambling around. When he realizes he's been had. So much fun, you know? And the way that he's kind of smarmy and thinks he knows it all.

KRIS TAPLEY

Actor Jeff Daniels got to work with Hopper in that opening elevator sequence and, you know, gets to be blown up by the guy. Let's hear from him.

JEFF DANIELS

You know, he was perfectly nice, but hardly the rebel, renegade, you know, that you might expect. You know, I didn't impose myself on him too much, and yeah. He was a pleasure. He was a pleasure. I did my job and he did his and then we went to lunch. You know, I don't know if he was doing it for money or just to do something or whether he really, really believed in it or loved playing it. Now, at that point, you're playing a bad guy, which is kind of what, you know – I can see, "We got a great bad guy if you want to play him in a movie called *Speed*, Dennis." "Yeah, that sounds good." He might have been that, but no, as a person I got to work with a little bit, pure pro.

KRIS TAPLEY

Dennis Hopper died in 2010. It was prostate cancer that got him. I never met him, though he did squeeze past me in an aisle at a screening once. I even remember the movie: *All the King's Men*, the remake, with Sean Penn. Anyway, it sucks, because I'd love to interview him about this movie. Because no one else did! At least, not retrospectively. There's the usual stuff around release, and even then, he didn't seem to

have a lot to say about it beyond dutifully promoting the movie. He did host the *HBO First Look* on the movie, which is a hoot and I'll talk about that more down the line. But you find yourself digging through 30-year-old junket interviews for any interesting morsel. Sort of the world of Bobbie Wygant. And you either get that reference or you don't, and I'm not going to explain it, but anyway, one of the most insightful things I did find was this answer to Nashville journalist Jimmy Carter. No, not the president. It feels like the right way to work Dennis's voice in here.

[JIMMY CARTER INTERVIEW CLIP]

DENNIS HOPPER

Well, when I read the script, there's no, really, backstory on this guy, which is, you know, we're conditioned as actors to want to know who the parts we're playing, who is this guy? And there wasn't any story. I mean, at the end of this movie, all you can really figure out, if you follow your information, is that he has a bad hand, that something obviously happened to him in an explosion. He was an ex-cop. He's retired. He's made one of the bombs out of his retirement watch, his gold watch. You know nothing about him. So, the main job is make sure this guy isn't a one-level guy. Put in a little humor. Make him human. I thought of Keanu as my son, maybe, in some sort of perverted way. "Couldn't interest you in a bribe, could I? There's enough money for everybody." "Oh, here his is again! He always gets his man!" You know, that kind of thing. Have a little humor in it. Sort of come on to her, with the dynamite all over her. "Don't worry. It's not going to hurt you when you explode. You won't feel a thing." I mean, sick, but humorous, and yet, like the guy next door. Could be the guy next door. Something a little sad about him. Some sort of human element that's in there. It makes it scarier to me.

KRIS TAPLEY

In the end, like with every other role, I think *Speed* got the absolute best person to play this part. There's just something about that dynamic between Dennis and Keanu that's hard to really explain. There's a spark to the whole thing, and there's something singular about it to me as well. I don't feel like it's derivative, even though it's clearly dabbling in derivative material. And I love that Keanu and Dennis crossed paths that one time before, in *River's Edge*, because they're in two completely different movies in that film and they feel like ghosts in each other's movie. Nearly a decade later, they clash, finally. They square off in an elevator shaft. Jeff Daniels is there. Keanu shoots the hostage, and then they play out the middle of the film off-screen from one another, just like *River's Edge* all over again. Finally, they fight each other on top of a subway car and Dennis Hopper loses his head. It just feels like if it had been anybody else, then it simply could have been anybody else. But no. Dennis Hopper is Howard Payne.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

We totally got the best person. And I kept coming back to Dennis because, A, he would do it, and we were, like, you know, a week away, and B, it would be fun. I love reinventing people. I love kind of bringing surprising, you know – I mean, why do the obvious casting? I either wanted to cast somebody who nobody knew and go find some

great, obscure, incredibly quirky, odd, you know, interesting guy, or bring somebody who's not considered a name. Of course, the studio wanted to be able to promote somebody and have this triangle of Keanu, the woman and the guy and to be able to have those kinds of names up there with Keanu, because it would help promote the movie, and the marketing department had a lot to say about it, but the movie didn't attract those people, or the roles didn't. They were behind whoever was the most famous at the time who hadn't said no yet. You know, I don't think they ever thought that we would get a huge movie star, but they definitely were interested in the biggest name we could possibly get for the money. Yeah, there was a lot to bring to it and Dennis did that in the most wonderful way. And at the end of the day, you know, it's a great lesson and reminder to all of us in, you know – trust the actor. Trust the actor will bring something, and it will be something a little unexpected to what the obvious thing is. Like, had Chris Walken done it, it would have been amazing, but it wouldn't have been surprising. Or any of those guys. And there were a bunch of people we could have cast also that were, like I said, great character guys who were out there, but I think the Hopper thing had enough baggage – good baggage, interesting stuff – and enough history and, you know, complicated human stuff. I mean, when you look back at who he really was for all those years, there was great history and life there that won out over maybe just a great character guy.

[SPEED CLIP]

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

You're crazy. You're fucking crazy.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Oh, no, poor people are crazy, Jack. I'm eccentric. Get the money. Let's go. Come on! Let's go! Move it. Move it! You stay! Move it. Move it. In the door. In that door, now! Bye, Jack. Punk!

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

We've got ourselves a bad guy! And if anyone from *Speed* deserves a deeper dive, it's screen icon Dennis Hopper.

MARK HARRIS

He has over 200 credits. It's a really interesting indication of how many different worlds he lived in.

KRIS TAPLEY

Author and journalist Mark Harris joins me to break down the Hollywood rebel's career, from the turning points...

MARK HARRIS

He is the most unlikely Tom Ripley of anyone who has ever played Tom Ripley.

KRIS TAPLEY

...to the landmarks...

MARK HARRIS

Apocalypse Now is '79, so it's a little bit of a look back. You get to enjoy the era-specific wild-man authenticity that Hopper brings to that part.

KRIS TAPLEY

...to, of course, the bomb-on-a-bus movie.

MARK HARRIS

Aside from the fact that he can do menace and villainy and evil, you know, in his sleep by this point, there is a kind of lightness to him. He knows that *Speed* isn't, like, this huge plunge into darkness.

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.