

## **50 MPH: EPISODE 28**

### **“ORDER OUT OF CHAOS”**

Transcript (00:28:41)



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**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**

Happy New Year everybody! We’re ready to hit the ground running in 2024, the year of *Speed*’s 30th anniversary. And I’m here to tell you there will be no more hiatuses. We’re about to embark on a 23-week endurance race to the finish line of *50 MPH*, which means my work is cut out for me. But we’re about to move into some brand-new territory as well, so I think it’s going to be exciting. For now, let me just say congratulations! In our ongoing chronology, we have made it through principal photography on *Speed*! The film is shot. The footage is ready to be assembled. Let’s see what we’ve got. Well, to be fair, like most movies, the editing has been happening all throughout production, and this is a simpler example of that workflow given how much of the movie director Jan de Bont shot sequentially. First assistant director David Sardi recalls a moment toward the end of shooting when he first got a look at what they had really been up to.

**DAVID SARDI**

When we got to the elevator sequence, we were, I don’t know, a week or so into it, and Jan came to, like, a few of us – I think Gary and Alex Witt and me, six of his key crew, and he said, “After wrap, I want you to come to my trailer because I want to show you something.” And we were like, “OK.” And he showed us about a 45-minute assembly of the bus portion of the movie, and, I mean, literally, we were all, like, shocked at how amazing it was. Because you’re in the thick of it, you know, you can’t see the forest for the trees, right? But when we saw that assembly, we all suddenly realized what we had, which was a really exciting, breathtaking movie that was going to be amazing. We really didn’t know what we were doing until – for me, it was that moment when I was like, “Oh boy, this is really going to be quite a good movie.”

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Until then, it wasn’t just the crew but the suits at the studio who were a little skeptical of how *Speed* was going to come out in the end. Here’s Jan de Bont.

**JAN DE BONT**

When they saw the scenes and they saw, especially, the actors and how well they functioned in this movie, that made a huge difference. And of course, an early screening, not finished screening, by any means yet, they were ecstatic. Because they still had no clue, because I didn't show them too much. Because I know from so many directors who, all the problems they have in editing, the studio gets in too early and they want to change things and before you know it, they have a really distorted movie where the storyline is barely understood by most audiences. Because so much is cut out and changed. That's the one thing I learned from all the big directors I worked with in my life.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

And just for one more skeptical perspective, we first heard from *Speed's* DGA Trainee, Seth Edelstein, a few weeks back, who is now an Emmy-nominated producer and assistant director in his own right. Here's what he was thinking during the shoot.

### **SETH EDELSTEIN**

I was only involved, obviously, in the production phase, and I did not have a sense that the film was going to be watchable. Or, to say it a different way, I thought that there were all these random bits of action and I could not imagine how it was going to come together as a story and I didn't think it was going to be able to hold anyone's attention. When I saw the movie and saw how it all worked, it was exciting to know that I had been so wrong. It's one of the amazing things about directors, that a good director has that overall picture and knows how it's going to stitch together and knows why they are doing some of the things that, when you don't have any real view or understanding of it, just look completely random.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I've been very excited to get to this episode because I was fortunate enough, in April of 2021, to interview the editor of *Speed*, John Wright. John was nominated for an Oscar for his work on the film, which I'll talk about later on here, but he was also nominated previously for John McTiernan's *The Hunt for Red October*, which Jan shot. So, he was very much in the family for this film. John's list of credits also includes *The Running Man*, *Gleaming the Cube*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze*, *Last Action Hero*, *Broken Arrow*, *X-Men*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *Apocalypto*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Secretariat*. I would consider him one of the greats of his generation, maybe even a little unsung. John Wright passed away in April of last year at the age of 79 after a battle with prostate and bone cancer, and so I'm fairly certain what you will hear today is his final interview. And I want to say at the top here that I'm honored that this project can serve that function for him and his career. The last guy he talked to on the record about his work on this movie was and is an absolute fan, and I hope that sentiment somehow makes it to John's friends and family. And so, here is John Wright.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

The movie never stopped pushing forward. It's almost like the first scene in the movie, the elevator scene, was almost as exciting as the climax of the movie. That's sort of how the movie went. It never let up. And I think it was one of the first movies to do that,

in my recollection. I mean, I'm a big fan of a lot of – like, I like *Die Hard*. I did one of the *Die Hard* movies, but even the first *Die Hard* wasn't as relentless as *Speed*.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

The *Die Hard* movie John edited, by the way, was *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. I'm a huge fan of that movie and I love the way John put it together. In fact, it's a movie that probably owes more to the energy of *Speed* than it does to the previous two entries in the *Die Hard* franchise.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

Yes, it was more of a seat-of-your-pants action movie, whereas the first *Die Hard* was a little bit more suspenseful and so forth. It's funny, I like *Die Hard with a Vengeance* a lot, and I enjoyed working on that, too, but it never really got the respect I thought it was due as an action movie, because I thought it was pretty damn good.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Preaching to the choir there, John. OK, back to *Speed* and the collaboration with Jan de Bont.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

I only saw Jan at dailies maybe a half-dozen times out of the three months that they shot or the two months that they shot, so I didn't have much communication with him. The reason he hired me is because we both worked on *The Hunt for Red October* and I think probably John McTiernan probably recommended me to him. But when they finished shooting, I told Jan to go away and rest and I think we ran the movie for him about two weeks after they finished shooting. Other movies I've tried to do it in much more of a way where the director is involved. It's almost impossible, you know? I mean, they're working 12 hours a day, you know? They're exhausted. When I ran the movie, after I put it together for Jan, I could tell by his reaction he was very happy and very surprised. Jan's kind of a stoic guy. He doesn't let you know how he feels. He's a nice enough guy but he's very to himself and he doesn't really emit a lot of emotion one way or the other. He didn't particularly spend much time in the editing room, and I don't think that's because he didn't care. I'm not sure he knew what he was supposed to do when it came to my relationship with him.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I did find that to be an interesting point. After all, Jan is very much a creature of production, given his career as a cinematographer. How, then, would he take to things like picture editing and post-production sound and working with music composers, all the stuff that, beyond color grading and things like that, happened when he was off the clock on his previous collaborations?

### **JAN DE BONT**

I love post-production. The only thing that's kind of really hard for me is the first time I see it. So, when the movie is shot, the editor gets a couple of weeks or so. Because he's already working on it for a while, no? And then you see it for the first time. I mean,

I've seen scenes put together, of course, because we go to the editing room almost every other day during film production. So, you kind of know what it is. But then when you see it all put together, it's like, do all the scenes hold up? Do they work? Does one scene really lead to the next one and with a purpose and is it meaningful? Is there too much of this or too little of that? You don't know that until you see it the first time. So, it's really important that you have a really good editor who really keeps the story really tight and makes sure that everything is in the movie, and the length of those scenes are the right length and the right tonality when some of the scenes are lighter, that they have the comedic element or kind of a lighter element to it. That's really – that's the most important job, I think. And he was really good at that. Actually, I think that he got it cut really quickly.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

When I showed it to him the second time, he said, "Don't touch a frame. We're done," you know? And it was one of the easiest kind of check-off, OKs I ever got.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

We've talked a lot across several episodes about the way Jan shot this movie. He had tons of cameras running on that bus and he got tons of coverage for his editor to work with. When you're a film editor, the more material you have in that bucket, the better.

### **JAN DE BONT**

Yeah, he was not prepared that it was so much footage. He said nobody, all the things he worked on, it was never that much material. The tempo of the movie, that is really, for a big part, thanks to him. That's why gifted editors are so important. Also, the one I used on *Twister*, that editor, which is also Spielberg's editor, he also is only interested in story. He cuts the scene, the movie, first, story-wise, and then he starts to cut scenes and make changes for the characters, or make changes for the action or for suspense. So, he adds those layers later. So, he makes sure, first, that the whole story works. And that's a very smart way to do it, you know? It's a little frustrating at times to really see it in stages, but it gets better every step that you take. Michael Kahn was that, and the same with Wright as well. He did it the same way. First just a kind of a relatively conventional cut, almost, and that is the story cut. And then you find out, also, almost immediately, that that's not the movie they made, because we don't have to see this, we don't have to see that, I do want to see that. And that goes very quickly. And then it's just little tidbits, you know? Because there are so many angles and each time I place a camera in some way or another, I always have a goal in my mind of where it should be cut or what it could be used for and at what point. But you also want to let the editor have their own free choice, too, because he can see it differently and different might be better.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

I tell you, the thing that helped me as an editor with that movie is I started in documentaries. I started with a company, David Wolper Productions, back in the '60s, and that's all he did is documentaries. And that's where I started as an apprentice and worked my way up. I edited some National Geographic specials and things like that, and

working with documentaries, I learned how to tell a story with film even if it wasn't real structured. And it helped me a lot in *Speed*. I had worked in areas where the cameras were just roving and you sort of figured out what would work where. But Jan is a really good cameraman and I know that his contribution to *Speed* was huge, especially in the area of all the great shots they got, because I know they came from him. When I was cutting the movie, I felt that it was important to make the people on the bus an integral part of the story. I'm not going to take total credit for that, but a lot of that was my idea, to keep them involved, because, you know, you can't just have Keanu and Sandra and Dennis Hopper, totally. It would be kind of boring.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

And that just goes right back to what we've said about the actors on the bus knowing a camera was on them and always reacting to things, always giving Jan, and John, something to cut to, something to use. It's not about finding tone by shooting a whole bunch of material and then seeing what you turn out in the edit. There are filmmakers who do that, but it can yield genius. Or perceived genius, anyway. No, *Speed* was a very willfully plotted-out film in terms of what would be shot. It's just that within that bucket, there were a lot of options. This all reminds me of something Joss Whedon told me when we spoke.

### **JOSS WHEDON**

I don't know if I said it to Jan at the wrap party but I know I said it to at some point, I was, like, you know, "If I'd known this was your first movie, but didn't know you, I would watch it, I would have thought you were an editor, not a cinematographer." So many cinematographers go in and just make things very pretty, but they don't quite cohere. It was, like, that was not a problem. There's no actual showboating. He's not going to do the grand crane shot that goes in and out of the bus, because that's not the experience of being on a bus.

### **JAN DE BONT**

I can totally see that, because I really believe in pieces, you know? Like in some of the really great movies of the past, it's the little pieces that kind of can have so much impact, but if you forget some of those pieces in a small scene, then the scene suddenly works totally different. You know, the nervousness of a character, this thing happening in the background, somebody reacting over there.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I want to bring in someone else from the editing room here. This is a fun example – and I've had a few – of someone who worked on the film actually being a listener of *50 MPH* and reaching out. This gentleman is Kevin Ross and he was the Lightworks assistant on the film. I should probably explain that a bit. We haven't been afraid of the nuts and bolts on this podcast, so a little of that here. And this is interesting, particularly as next week we'll be discussing the visual effects component and how *Speed* was a bit of a hybrid of peak practical applications and budding digital technology. Lightworks was a digital editing system and it was new on the post-production scene. Here's Kevin Ross to explain more, and Kevin, by the way, has gone on to become the Emmy-nominated

editor of TV series like *Californication*, *Halt and Catch Fire*, *Stranger Things* and *Yellowjackets*.

### **KEVIN ROSS**

For nonlinear systems, basically, at the time, the Avid existed, but it was mostly for television broadcast. And it did what's called 30-frame, because video is 30 frames a second. And Lightworks came out and could do true 24-frame, which is what our film base was. And what was great about it was that it had a very simple interface that mimicked a flatbed editing machine. So, editors were learning how to use this and it was an easier transition than an Avid, which was just a keyboard, which scared a lot of old-time editors. And that's how I got to work a lot at the beginning and in union films, is because I came from a film background and I happened to learn this. I was able to teach editors how to think to use this computer like they were cutting film. And once they got adept at this, a lot of them would switch over to Avid because now they didn't feel scared of buttons and a keyboard. At the time, it was just a swivel thing that you used with your hand to move the – you know, move your cursor back and forth.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

I had never done anything before like that. Every movie I did up to that point was either on a Moviola or a KEM. So, I had to learn this machine, and it was very new then. Nobody talks about this but it was probably one of the first hits that was done on an electronic editing machine. That took quite an adjustment for me to do that. And after, I did about three movies on Lightworks and then shifted over to Avid and stayed with Avid until I retired, but it was the very first one, yeah. I had never done it before. It took me a little while to get used to it. I was very frustrated in the beginning.

### **KEVIN ROSS**

What happened was we were always film assistants and I happened to learn the Lightworks for a TV movie of the week. And so, Fox Studios bought two or three systems, because they thought it was the future, this digital editing system. *Beverly Hillbillies* was actually the first Fox Lightworks show. They were doing that at the lot while I was in San Francisco doing *Mrs. Doubtfire*. And then, as soon as I finished *Mrs. Doubtfire*, I came down and took over for *Speed* for the Lightworks Assistant. He moved on to *Little Rascals*, I think. So, those were the four first films, I believe, at Fox that were edited on Lightworks. And my job was also to help train the editor. John had a really good feel for the system, you know, very quickly, so he didn't need a lot of help.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

About three or four years later, I went to Disney to help out on a movie and it was on Lightworks. The movie was *The Rock*. Dave McCann was the head of post at Disney and so he called me. I went over there and Jerry Bruckheimer was the producer, and so, I called Dave McCann after about a week and a half and I said, "Dave, get somebody else." I said, "I dealt with Lightworks and now I'm trying to deal with a whole different system, it's driving me crazy." He was very nice. He said, "John, take your time. Give it another week or so and if you still want to leave, leave." So, but it clicked. It finally clicked in my head and everything went smooth. I don't like – I'll say this, but then

I'll preface it with, at the end, I really liked Avid – but I don't like the mechanics to control editing. I like the people to control editing, and that's how I felt at first, that Lightworks and the Avid were doing that. But once you get the hang of it, it's like anything. It's second nature and you don't even think about it.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I want to circle back to Kevin here and let him talk a bit more, because I think it's a valuable additional perspective from inside the editing room on *Speed*.

### **KEVIN ROSS**

What I'll say about John was, he was nominated for the Oscar that year, and I'll go to my grave saying he should have beat *Forrest Gump* for the editing award, because the way he shaped the movie with the material he had, I thought he built the whole show in the edit room. And that's how we felt in post, because we had a lot of footage. A lot of times, Jan would shoot eight cameras in a big action scene, but it was up to John Wright to figure out, "How am I going to put this together?" And once he had it together, it did not change very often. It was mainly his cut. We always heard rumors of how Jan was very vocal on set, I'll call it, with camera crew and actors. But when he got into the cutting room, he had never been in a cutting room, from what I could tell. So, he was very reserved, and he didn't have opinions, and he really didn't know the process. So, he kind of sat back, and when he saw what John had done with his editor's cut, you know, he didn't have a lot of input or say, "Oh, no, I envisioned this." He really liked what John did, and John did exceptional work. So, what you see is very close to the editor's cut. And John, he built things with material that wasn't there before. Or he would say, "I'm going to steal this helicopter shot and move it here, you know, to add that moment." But he built the pace of that show. I always think of the baby carriage scene and then right after that when the bus is supposed to turn, but the school kids are walking across in the pedestrian walkway. If you notice how many different shots are used, because the scene, especially with the kids, I remember we had dailies where we had basically eight cameras around that intersection. In the baby carriage scene, yes. He could say, "I designed this," because he shot through the window for POVs as it hit the baby carriage and the cans. But I think the moment was built because of John Wright, not Jan sitting back going, "No, no, I really want to see the carriage now," or, "Hold off on that," or, "Now let's cut to Annie's reaction." It wasn't as simple as just taking the footage and putting it together. It was a, you know, a jigsaw puzzle that had to be built, which is why I always felt it deserved the Oscar. Jan got us a lot of footage and then John shaped it into what it was. I don't know what would have happened if it had been a weak editor that Jan didn't push, because he wasn't ready to push anybody in the cutting room. In one case with Jan, I remember that he didn't really understand the Hollywood post-production system or workflow, in that there was talk that we needed some ADR for some of the passengers on the bus or for Sandy or Keanu, and Jan had his assistant start trying to wrangle getting the bus back from storage because he thought we had to drive around and do the lines on the bus. And we tried to explain to him, "No, Jan, that's all done in an ADR stage. We can make it sound like it's on the bus." But he was going, thinking, "Oh, we have to make it authentic. It has to be on the bus."



## **KRIS TAPLEY**

Moving on, on the subject of actors, John said he would typically develop a pretty good relationship with them, but on *Speed*, whether due to the pace of things or maybe even a reflection of expectations, that just didn't happen.

## **JOHN WRIGHT**

I met Sandra but that was about it, and the same with Keanu, and Dennis Hopper and I – he started late on the movie. We were about two or three weeks into shooting when he started, and his first day, he came to dailies, and after about the second or third week of dailies, nobody came to dailies but myself and my assistant, so it was Dennis and I and Barbara Dunning, my assistant, and the first scene was that scene that he did talking in the phone booth after the bus blew up. And he kept flubbing his lines. He was very nervous. But Jan shot enough that there was enough material to work with, but Dennis was kind of embarrassed and he said, "Boy, I really fucked that up," and I said, "No you didn't. Don't worry about it. It's there." But he's about the only actor I had any, really, interaction with on the whole movie. You know, the one thing that was interesting about it when I was editing it that I had to be careful for – and I don't mean to be negative about Jeff Daniels, but Keanu was so coordinated and could run and jump and everything, and poor Jeff Daniels, he looked like a klutz. I had to be very careful what shots of him I used.

## **KRIS TAPLEY**

By the way, we've heard a lot over the last, gosh, half a year now from Jorge Saralegui, the former Fox exec who oversaw *Speed*. A number of listeners have told me how entertaining Jorge has been in his candid, no-bullshit thoughts on how this whole enterprise came together, and I totally agree. I mean, that guy was a gold mine. I owe John Wright for that, because John was the first person who ever mentioned Jorge to me. He did it in passing one day and so I went about tracking down a Jorge involved with *Speed*. Not very easy. I mean, you look up a movie on IMDb, there isn't a list of junior executives who were involved with it. So, I dug into *Variety's* archives, which are a valuable resource that I hope the ownership over there takes care of. But in my digging, one day, there he was: Jorge Saralegui. Once I had the last name it was easy to track him down. So, wherever you are, John, thanks for that. And here's that particular moment when we spoke.

## **JOHN WRIGHT**

The thing that amazed me is how little faith Fox had in that movie. Each movie gets assigned, I used to call them junior executives, and the one that was assigned to our show, I think his name was Jorge. I'm not sure. It was so long ago. I sort of went through him if I needed to get things done. But he's the one that told me the studio didn't think this movie was going to be much, and then when they saw it, they realized they had a hit on their hands. As soon as they saw it, they loved it, but I just mean when it was being shot, you know? I mean you'd like to think that these people that make these big decisions at the studios can look at dailies and see whether there's a movie there or not, but I'm not sure they can. Or some of them can, some of them can't. I think

they were worried and then they were pleasantly surprised when Jan and I showed it to them.

### **KEVIN ROSS**

I just remember, suddenly, there was such positivity around the film, that everybody was excited. Jon Landau, who was, at the time, a Fox exec, and he went on to produce, with James Cameron, all the *Avatar* movies and stuff. But he's the one that came in and said, "We love it. We think it needs to be bigger. We're going to add a visual-effects shot to the bus jumping the gap scene." And he's the one that told us they were approving – you know, and we didn't have money at the time for visual effects. We were, like, "OK, how can we get through these scenes with, you know – can we remove those wires?" Because it was very expensive. But the wide shot where you see the birds fly in the gap. That was like a \$200,000 shot or something.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

More on that shot next week. But indeed, that was the most expensive shot of the movie. Now, as we've touched on here today, John was nominated for an Oscar for this movie. We'll have an episode focused on that particular aspect of *Speed* down the line, but I'll mention here anyway that I think this is such a cool Oscar nomination and I wish the film editors branch of the Academy would be so adventurous today. Nowadays it seems like they're just chasing the Best Picture players with their nominees. But there was a time when movies like *Aliens*, *Top Gun*, *RoboCop*, *Die Hard*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Seven*, *Air Force One* and, indeed, *Speed*, would turn up an Oscar nomination for film editing. Anyway, it's a pity, because those nominations were always a reminder of the expert craft on display across a wider spectrum of cinema. And as I said, I marvel at what John Wright accomplished on this movie. The film editing was yet another example of top-shelf talent owning their space and making one hell of a movie.

### **JOHN WRIGHT**

I've got to say, I've done a lot of movies, and a lot of pretty well-known movies, but that movie, above all the others, people recognize instantly. My daughter was in film school when that movie came out and she said that one of her teachers in cinema said that it was a – which was a very nice compliment – that it was a real groundbreaking movie in editing, but I'll leave that to others.

### **[OUTRO MUSIC]**

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Next week on *50 MPH*...

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

The post-production phase of *Speed* turns to hybrid concepts at a turning point for the visual effects industry.

### **DAVE DRZEWIECKI**

It was really a period of time when it was turning, and you could feel it. You could smell it in the air. The way it used to be done, the Linwood Dunn wire, tape and rubber band style was going away.

### **BOYD SHERMIS**

I'm pretty sure it was the most expensive shot in the movie and primarily because it's a panning, tilting, zooming camera mounted to a moving helicopter.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I also talk to some of today's VFX artists to get their take on *Speed's* legacy in their field.

### **TODD VAZIRI**

I think the forced ingenuity of how to light these types of scenes, if it's out in the real world with a bus on a tow cable and all of this business, I think that's going to lead to a better final product.

### **JAKE BRAVER**

There's nothing in it in the shot design that's showy in terms of the visual effects, and I think that makes it sort of a hallmark of, certainly, its time, but even something that gets referenced today.

### **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](http://50MPHpodcast.com). If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.