

50 MPH: EPISODE 35

“THE MOVIE OF THE YEAR”

Transcript (00:29:20)



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

You know, there’s a certain excitement when a film hits big out of nowhere at the box office. I think today’s audiences might be a little numb to it and not fully understand this. After all, every other year leading up to the pandemic it seemed like records were being shattered left and right. The Disney machine in particular has made an art of it with the Marvel and *Star Wars* brands. Franchises have come to dominate the annual list of top-grossing movies. The most impressive entries in the current, say, top 30 all-time box office champs are movies like *Titanic* and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, if only because they’ve managed to survive this modern-day onslaught of movies based on IP with built-in audiences. That wasn’t always the case. I believe 2011 was the first year that the domestic top 10 was nothing but sequels and IP-based entries. And again, ever since, it just feels like box office success doesn’t have the same ring to it. That’s partly why the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon last summer was so exciting. I’m sure I sound like an old man pining for an era that is gone forever, but hey, that’s sort of the vibe of this podcast in the first place.

KRIS TAPLEY

Speed opened on June 10, 1994, on 2,140 screens. It was an instant hit and a totally unexpected, overachieving success. It pulled in \$14,456,194 that first weekend, which was about \$6,540 per screen. It even exceeded Fox’s expectations after they knew, from the test screening process, that they had something special on their hands. Let me read for you *Variety*’s assessment of the film’s debut: “Fox’s *Speed* created rush-hour business as it climbed aboard the weekend box office with an estimated \$14 million launch. The actioner’s momentum was easily ahead of Columbia/Castle Rock’s *City Slickers II: The Legend of Curly’s Gold* – the other major debut release – which rode into third with a sizable \$11.5 million. The battle between *Speed* and *Slickers* had been envisioned as more of a head-to-head race, with the sequel seen as having a slight edge. But the Fox pic began to pick up the marketing pace on Monday, and by opening day, audiences decided to take the bus to the end of the line.” That analysis comes from the late great Len Klady, by the way. He quotes Fox’s former president of distribution, the late Tom Sherak, in the story as well. Tom says: “It’s the kind of success that makes this industry so surprising and exciting. Obviously, our expectations were more modest

prior to delivery. It was scheduled for August and October until we started to preview. We got excited, exhibitors found it, the critics loved it and now the public has embraced it." What drives this kind of success? We spent last week detailing the studio's marketing efforts, which were a huge part of that equation. But here's what's fascinating about a movie like *Speed*, and Sherak said it right there: the critics loved it. This movie wasn't just a popular success. It was a critical success. So, with that in mind, I'd love to just read a few excerpts from a smattering of reviews.

First of all, here's Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. This was a four-star review, which I've said before, it's just so awesome that he went all-out like that for a movie like this. Ebert wrote: "*Speed* is like an ingenious windup machine. It's a smart, inventive thriller that starts with hostages trapped on an elevator and continues with two chases – one on a bus, one on a subway – so that it's wall-to-wall with action, stunts, special effects and excitement. We've seen this done before, but seldom so well, or at such a high pitch of energy." And he closed his review out like so: "Films like *Speed* belong to the genre I call Bruised Forearm Movies, because you're always grabbing the arm of the person sitting next to you. Done wrong, they seem like tired replays of old chase cliches. Done well, they're fun. Done as well as *Speed*, they generate a kind of manic exhilaration."

That's the GOAT talking there, OK? Here was Mr. Ebert's TV cohort, Gene Siskel, in the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*: "Our Flick of the Week is *Speed*, the first American film of the over-hyped summer season to deserve your immediate attendance. As a thriller, *Speed* ranks with the fun-loving excitement of the *Die Hard* pictures ... [Keanu] Reeves is absolutely charismatic, giving a performance juiced with joy as he jumps through elevator shafts, under a bus speeding through the L.A. freeway system, and atop a subway train. Best of all: Just when you think *Speed* is over, it takes you on a new high." Speaking of those two, let's just throw in Siskel and Ebert's volley about the movie on their weekly show, *Siskel & Ebert at the Movies*.

[SISKEL & EBERT AT THE MOVIES CLIP]

GENE SISKEL

Speed works.

ROGER EBERT

Boy, it sure does. This movie was fun. This is what I call a Bruised Forearm Movie, because you grab the arm of the person sitting next to you in scenes like the one where the bus is going to have to try to jump that 50-foot gap. I knew it wasn't possible in real life, but I didn't care. I thought this movie was really superb in the way it put together this very – you know, like, how can, in Los Angeles, you have a bus that can't go less than 50 miles an hour with the bad traffic out there? And how do they manage to keep moving more than 50 miles an hour? That, in itself, was terrific.

GENE SISKEL

Well, there are also some marvelous stunt pieces. When he has to try and get down at the bomb.

ROGER EBERT

Underneath the bus, yeah.

GENE SISKEL

All of that stuff really works, and that – you know, they could have shortchanged us in a whole lot of different ways. He’s really – you know, we feel that he’s really down there and a lot of work is done and also grabbing – simple things like grabbing people out of small places and freeing them up. It’s all done very, very well.

ROGER EBERT

Yeah, and at the end when you think, “My God, this movie can’t do anything more,” then they go down to the subway train and you have a whole other movie right down there.

GENE SISKEL

It’s a lot of fun.

ROGER EBERT

It was a lot of fun.

KRIS TAPLEY

Some more blurbs for you. Here’s Kenneth Turan in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Action directing is a put-up-or-shut-up game, a skill that can’t be faked or finessed; even a 10-year-old can tell if you’ve got it or not. And on the evidence of the invigorating *Speed*, Jan de Bont has definitely got it.”

Here’s Janet Maslin in *The New York Times*: “At the time of year when Hollywood traditionally bludgeons its audience back into the Stone Age ... you can still pick your poison. The summertime no-brainer needn’t be entirely without brains. It can be as savvy as *Speed*, the runaway-bus movie that delivers wall-to-wall action, a feat that’s never as easy as it seems. This film’s dialogue isn’t much more literate than a bus schedule, but its plotting is smart and breathless enough to make up for that.”

Here’s Peter Travers in *Rolling Stone*, and boy, if any movie was ever cut out for a Peter Travers blurb, it’s *Speed*. He says: “If you’re looking for action movie heaven, try *Speed*, a crackling blend of suspense and fun that gives you the rush of a runaway roller coaster.” He closes with: “Still, the fireworks wouldn’t count for much if the hardware overwhelmed the humanity. *Speed* cinches its spot as the thrill ride of summer by providing characters to hiss at and root for. Jack and Annie actually manage to strike up a convincing romance even at hyperspeed and without taking their eyes off the road. It’s an impressive feat enhanced by the film’s knack – shared with *The Fugitive* – for serving up two hours of pure pow without gratuitous gore. Action flicks are usually written off as a debased genre, unless, of course, they work. And *Speed* works

like a charm. It's a reminder of how much movie escapism can still stir us when it's dished out with this kind of dazzle. Pass the popcorn."

Finally, here's Owen Gleiberman in the pages of *Entertainment Weekly*. Rest in peace. The magazine, not Owen, who is alive and well writing for *Variety* these days. He wrote: "What disaster movies were to the '70s, action films are to the '90s, lurid cinematic comic books that, in their appetite for destruction – for bigger and better thrills – tap our collective anxieties about urban apocalypse. Recently, though, my anxieties have felt a little tapped out. The action genre, with its car chases and smash-'em-up violence, its endless formula sadism, has become mired in a dead-end, we've-seen-it-all-before lethargy. That's what makes *Speed* an exhilarating shot of adrenaline. The film takes off from formula elements – it's yet another variation on *Die Hard* – but it manipulates those elements so skillfully, with such a canny mixture of delirium and restraint, that I walked out of the picture with the rare sensation that every gaudy thrill had been earned."

Those are all wonderful, glowing assessments, but I think, perhaps, there wasn't a more significant stamp of critical approval than, of all people, Anthony Lane, film critic for *The New Yorker*. The opening paragraph of his review is frankly the stuff of legend. And I quote: "*Speed* is set in Los Angeles. Most of it takes place on a bus. It is a film full of explosions but bare of emotional development. Its characters are no more than sketches. It addresses no social concerns. It is morally inert. It's the movie of the year." Now, you might think that was a set-up for a begrudgingly positive assessment full of snark, but no, Lane loved the movie. And he went on to shower it with praise throughout his review. Those 48 words probably read like an indictment today, given what movies are expected to be by many critical minds. But they're not. They're a reflection of cinema's most basic goal: to entertain. Here is screenwriter Graham Yost.

GRAHAM YOST

Well, he's right. It's all true. It was certainly the movie of my year. You know, I mean, listen, I had been doing TV and I spent the next days – and Connie and I met in a running group. One of the reasons I wanted to join this running group was because Frank Marshall and Kathy Kennedy were in it. And the first day I met Connie I thought, "I would give up, you know, a development deal at Amblin for one date with that Connie girl." And I ended up making the right choice on that. But it was a movie group. We would run together Saturday mornings and go for breakfast. I remember that, after the movie opened, you know, just that sense of congratulations from them and that was pretty huge, too.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here is director Jan de Bont. He's talking about the premiere at the beginning here, which we discussed last week, but I think it's a good overall reflection of how the reaction landed for these guys.

JAN DE BONT

Almost immediately, the audience embraced the movie. Almost immediately. And it was so fantastic. You cannot even imagine that the audience responds in the same way as

you always would hope they would do, but loud. I mean, really responsive. Reacting to what's happening. Reacting to the dialogue quite often. It's a rarity, I think. I mean, the studio was so excited. They couldn't get enough press people to come over. And then, of course, we had to make a whole tour through Europe and to Asia, of course, and everybody loved it. I mean, what was so remarkable on that movie, that it didn't matter if you were in Berlin in Tokyo in India, anywhere. In Italy, whatever, they all responded the same way. I thought that was never possible. They all got it immediately, that they were all participating an adventure, you know? Almost a real-time adventure. It was great. It was like they really felt like it was money well spent. They got value for their money.

KRIS TAPLEY

And indeed, the movie kept performing. It only enjoyed one weekend in the top spot as Mike Nichols' *Wolf* with Jack Nicholson and Michele Pfeiffer unseated it the next week, but audiences quickly moved on from that and in its third week, *Speed* leapfrogged *Wolf* and settled into second place again, behind Disney's debuting behemoth *The Lion King*. As other major releases like *Forrest Gump* and *True Lies* stormed into theaters, *Speed* held its ground. I mean, *The Lion King* and *Forrest Gump*. You're talking about two of the biggest financial successes in movie history. The film didn't leave the top five until its seventh weekend, which was incidentally the weekend it crossed the \$100 million mark in the US. It would continue to draw new and repeat viewers throughout the summer and fall on the way to a total domestic gross of \$121,248,145. Internationally, it pulled in about \$229 million for an overall worldwide tally north of \$350 million. On a \$30 million budget. For a film they probably just hoped would break slightly above even. What was the vibe like in the halls of 20th Century Fox? Here's the studio's former president of production, Tom Jacobson.

TOM JACOBSON

Fantastic. Now, we had an inkling, obviously, from that screening and moving it up, that we, you know, had something good on our hands. But you never know. You can never predict. And not only was there tremendous excitement about it, or, you know, the numbers were bigger than we had thought, but the feedback was, you know – the sort of exit polls, and all those things, were just really high. So, it's, like, 'Yeah! We did good!' Also, this was the early days of international really blowing up. This movie, like *Independence Day*, did fantastically overseas. Almost two-to-one. The first time – just to get wonky about numbers – the first time that all of the whole box office, domestic versus international, international passed domestic, was '97. The release of *Titanic*. And then it went back down, and then, like, three years later, 2003, something like this, with the release of maybe the second *Matrix*, international passed and never went back. Pre-COVID was, like, you know, two thirds, one third. So, it was almost, like, two-to-one, and definitely over 60 percent internationals. And so, this was the early days of that trend starting, which proved its legs, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Here's Bill Mechanic, former chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment who came into the studio as *Speed* was gearing up for release.

BILL MECHANIC

Part of when I came to Fox, part of it was changing the importance of things, and one of them was to treat international with the same focus that we spent on domestic. You know, 5% of the world shouldn't be, you know, 70% of your business. So, I rebuilt all of the foreign operations, and *Speed* was one of the first things to go out there. And, again, we picked our dates, because Keanu really wasn't known overseas at all, you know? So, we picked dates, it was much more selective. So, we ran, if I remember, a bunch of different dates, and a lot of them were the same idea of non-competitive dates. So, we could get established some places in the summer where nobody was releasing pictures in Europe because of people taking vacations and stuff. But we ended up two-thirds of the business, and Fox was 70% or 65% of the international by the second year. Everybody else sort of woke up to the fact that you're leaving money behind when you just crank them out on a release date that, you know – and they're doing it now. Everybody has a worldwide release date, more because of, you know, the internet, but to me on a movie that, there wasn't much of an internet then. But, you know, even today, even if it's not internet-crazy – you know, if it's Marvel, you almost have to do sort of day and date all around the world, but I didn't really believe in that. Every country has their own dates and your own competition, so this one was a flagship for what we were doing and put Keanu and Jan on the road for probably three or four or five months.

KRIS TAPLEY

Just an epic, unqualified success, and to Tom Sherak's point, the kind of success that makes this industry so exciting and surprising. I just don't feel that anymore. I'll say I was pretty impressed when *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* gobbled up more than \$900 million domestically, but I'm sorry, I felt nothing when *Avengers: Endgame* took the all-time worldwide spot away from *Avatar*. And then again when *Avatar* reclaimed that spot with a re-release, though I do think what James Cameron has managed to achieve with that franchise overall is the most impressive box office feat of the modern age. And yes, *Barbenheimer* was exciting. But *Batman*, *Home Alone*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Jurassic Park*, *Apollo 13*, *Independence Day*, *Titanic*, *The Sixth Sense* and, indeed, *Speed* – these are the truly impressive box office stories to me. These are reflective of Sherak's sentiment. But, again, maybe I'm just a nostalgic old man. Here's producer Mark Gordon.

MARK GORDON

We made this movie that was kind of *The Little Engine That Could*, and I do think that it was a series of happy accidents. When people say, "How did you put this all together in such an interesting way?" And I say, "Accident, accident, accident, accident." You know, I can't tell you that we had this grand vision. We just were trying to get our movie made. And I think that's true a lot of the times. You can't guarantee – nobody knows. You just never know. I really can't take credit for being a visionary here.

KRIS TAPLEY

Just to circle back to *Speed's* opening, I thought I would give you the full spread of that weekend. *Speed* was number one with \$14.4 million. Universal's *The Flintstones* came in at number two with \$12.6 million, a bit of an overperformer in its own right. *City*

Slickers II was third with \$11.5 million. In its second week of release, *Maverick*, with Mel Gibson, came in fourth with \$6.8 million. *Renaissance Man* with Danny DeVito landed at number five with \$4.2 million. This one will get a chuckle out of longtime listeners: Coming in at number six was *Beverly Hills Cop III*, with \$3.3 million. *The Cowboy Way* with Woody Harrelson and Kiefer Sutherland came it at number seven with \$2.8 million. *When a Man Loves a Woman*, starring soon-to-be SAG nominee Meg Ryan, pulled in \$2.4 million in the eighth spot. Comic book adaptation *The Crow* landed at number nine with \$2.3 million. And finally, one of the big runaway hits of the year that would eventually secure a Best Picture nomination, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, rounded out the top 10 with \$1.1 million. And worth mentioning is Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*, starring Keanu Reeves, was still in the top 15 after 11 weeks in release at this point. The year's final domestic box office grosses were as follows: Number one, *Forrest Gump*, \$329.6 million. Number two, *The Lion King*, \$312.8 million. Number three, *True Lies*, \$146.2 million. Number four, *The Santa Clause* with Tim Allen, \$144.8 million. Number five, *The Flintstones*, \$130.5 million. Number six – it was the year of Jim Carrey, after all – *Dumb and Dumber*, with \$127.1 million. Number seven, *Clear and Present Danger* with Harrison Ford, \$122.1 million. Number eight, here's our boy, *Speed*, with \$121.2 million. Number nine, more Jim Carrey, *The Mask*, \$119.9 million. And finally at number 10, another shocking display, *Pulp Fiction* with \$107.9 million. Outside of the gargantuan success of the first two entries there, I would very quickly wager that *Speed* and *Pulp Fiction* were the most impressive performers on that list.

Now, there was one other thing here that I thought I would bring up, because look, the hype machine is aimed internally as much as it is externally, right? You want your company excited about what it's doing. With that in mind, there's this story I've heard in drips and drabs about a town hall meeting and a whole production mounted by 20th Century Fox chairman Peter Chernin – you know, everyone's boss here – that was meant to get everybody pumped up for the movie's success. Here's Tom Grane, Fox's former senior vice president of promotional programming, and at the top here, he's talking about Jon Landau, the studio's former senior vice president of production who has gone on to become filmmaker James Cameron's producer and right-hand man.

TOM GRANE

So, he went out and shot a thing of Peter Chernin being the bus driver, getting to a town hall at the studio. And, I mean, it's shot really well, including the guy in the convertible coming up. It's driving down the freeway and it's very much like the movie, but it's Peter instead of Keanu and Sandy, and it drives through there, it drives up Pico, turns onto the Fox lot, coming toward the stage. You know, we had thousands of people, of employees there for this town hall. And what they had done was they had taken the stage door and put a fake stage door. They opened it up and then built a fake stage door, and then they literally drove the freaking bus in through the door, onto the stage and Peter got out.

KRIS TAPLEY

How's that for a victory lap? Alright, one final element here is the VHS release. Remember, Bill Mechanic had established a new paradigm for home video in his tenure

at Disney. All those clamshell classics from back in the day that lined living room shelves in the '80s and '90s? You can thank Bill, in part, for that. For the longest time, VHS cassettes of movies were not available for purchase until at least a year after release. They were available for rent at video stores maybe six months after release, and they carried an exorbitant price tag per unit. Something like a hundred bucks for a tape of, I don't know, *Die Hard* or whatever. And that's partly because video stores were the ones paying that price for each tape, but of course, they were turning right around and then making money off rentals. Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989 is considered the film to break the mold for sell-through releases, meaning you could buy it six months later for an affordable price tag of 20 bucks or so. Here's former Fox exec Jorge Saralegui.

JORGE SARALEGUI

At that point, you put action out for rent, because the average guy wouldn't want to own the movie. There were other movies that were available only for sale. Action movies were only for rent.

KRIS TAPLEY

And here's Bill Mechanic with his philosophy.

BILL MECHANIC

Yeah, I didn't believe all that shit. I mean, the simple answer is that I believe people collect things that are good, and movies that are fun like *Speed* are rewatchable, as you're proof. If something really works, it works. It doesn't work to see it once. If the movie is no good, you watch it and you forget about it. You usually forget about it before you're out of the theater. Among my duties, I ran multiple divisions at Disney, but one of them was home video was under me, too, and I thought all those films were collectible, but that the industry was being, as it is on most things, pretty stupid about things and going by rules that don't make any sense. And everybody was happy because they were renting cassettes, but that wasn't the way to make the most money. Consumers are the way to make the most money. So, *Speed* was not that long after I got there, and I thought you could take something like this and sell it.

JORGE SARALEGUI

I remember that whatever it was, by then we knew what we had, given the opening of the movie, and we knew who was going to the movie and we knew that it probably should have been a PG-13 movie, and so that's when we said, "No, let's put this thing out for sale as well, because people are going to want to own this movie." And so, it did really well on video cassette, and it was because of that change, which is, as far as I know, it was the first movie that broke that kind of, like, rule for action movies. It was also just the first rated-R action movie that did that.

KRIS TAPLEY

The *Speed* VHS hit shelves on November 15, 1994. My birthday! Incidentally, that was the same day *Batman* hit shelves, November 15, 1989. Just in time for the holidays.

BILL MECHANIC

I think we were seven to 10 million, maybe 10 million units or something like that. It was the biggest film of the year other than – I think biggest film, or second-biggest film of the year – other than a Disney animated classic. I'm sure we released those numbers when it came out, because, the Doubting Thomases were widespread.

KRIS TAPLEY

He's obviously referring to *The Lion King* there, which of course sold like gangbusters on the very paradigm he himself had established. Here's Tom Jacobson.

TOM JACOBSON

That's something that Bill Mechanic was really good at, and in those days, the, you know, home video market was really a big market. You could make a ton of money. I mean, the *Home Alone* sell-through, you know, sold, like, 10 million cassettes, whatever formats it was. So, Fox was good at that. Fox had a really good aftermarket department. And I remember that about this.

KRIS TAPLEY

What else can I say? You've heard from me plenty on this episode but I've brought the copy, the figures and the recollections to back it up. *Speed* was, in so many ways, the movie of the year in 1994. It thrilled audiences. It impressed critics. It was something people wanted to keep coming back to and, like Bill said, this endeavor is certainly proof of that. It was fine-tuned craftsmanship that transcended many of the industry's self-imposed limitations and boundaries. I'll just throw it back to Siskel and Ebert to put a fine point on it.

[SISKEL & EBERT AT THE MOVIES CLIP]

GENE SISKEL

Speed works.

ROGER EBERT

Boy, it sure does.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

ELLEN BARKIN

And the Oscar goes to...

KRIS TAPLEY

Speed finds itself at the 67th annual Academy Awards with three Oscar nominations.

JAN DE BONT

That's what you always had hoped for when you were a child. I always told my mom I was going to go to Hollywood and I was going to go to the Oscars, and never quite sure it ever would happen, but it did happen, so, it was really cool.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'll talk to the film's big winners about their Cinderella night.

GREGG LANDAKER

We had no idea. We thought it was a good action film, but as far as Academy-wise, it didn't fit the mold.

STEPHEN HUNTER FLICK

It's hard to describe. I thought I was going to float away like a balloon.

STEVE MASLOW

It's hard to take it all in because when you're on stage, the lights are so bright, you're lucky to see the first two rows.

KRIS TAPLEY

But unfortunately, in the end, not everyone was able to walk away with Oscar gold.

JOHN WRIGHT

I was a little disappointed. I mean, everybody in the movie business that makes movies wants to go out with, you know, winning an Oscar, but it didn't surprise me.

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.