

50 MPH: EPISODE 16

“SPEED AND THE ACTION MOVIE CANON” (with Nick de Semlyen)

Transcript (01:04:00)



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

Welcome back to another episode of *50 MPH* and something a little different today. We’re basically a third of the way through our deep dive into the making of *Speed* at this point. We’ve got the project set up at Fox. We’ve got our director. We’ve filled out our key roles. Production has started, and that’s going to be the next phase of this podcast. But before we turn that corner into stories of principal photography, I thought we’d take a breather here this week with author and journalist Nick de Semlyen. Nick is the editor of *Empire*, the world’s biggest movie magazine. He’s also written for *Rolling Stone*, *Stuff* and *Time Out*. More to the point, he is the author of a recent book that you have to get your hands on if you haven’t already. It’s called *The Last Action Heroes: The Triumphs, Flops and Feuds of Hollywood’s Kings of Carnage*, and it charts the rise and stall of Golden-Era action heroes like Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Chuck Norris, John Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Dolph Lundgren and Jackie Chan. Nick, did I get all of them?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

You’ve got them all. Got them all like Pokémon.

KRIS TAPLEY

I’m looking over at the cover and making sure I got them all. First of all, thanks for doing this, man. I appreciate you taking the time.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Thanks for having me. Thanks for having me on the bus.

KRIS TAPLEY

Awesome. Well done. You know, we’re obviously focused around here on the story behind one movie, but I wanted to have you on because it is a film that clearly comes in the wake of the period that you’ve just exhaustively documented in this book. And it’s also, in some ways, part of a rebuke to that period as a new decade in action cinema took hold. And I have to confess, as I was reading the book, I was sort of clenching, like, waiting for the part where *Speed* would be lumped into some list of pretenders or

something. And you never really went there. Like, you certainly could have in the section where you're detailing the rise of *Die Hard* knockoffs. But I don't think the word *Speed* is to be found in the entire book. You do mention Keanu Reeves as part of a new wave of action heroes, though. And, you know, I guess I just feel like the film is a bit of a stepchild in this landscape, you know? Which is part of why I'm doing this. I want to try and firm up its place in the canon with all these movies you've just written about. So, before we get to that, let's just start with your book and start at the beginning. Because I'm always curious where in the process that it becomes evident that there's a story to tell. When did you know you wanted to sort of immerse yourself in a deep dive into '80s and early-90s action cinema, and was there a certain story or an element that made you say, yeah, there's a book in this?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Well, I've loved these movies – well, not all of them, but I've loved a lot of these action movies since as long as I can remember. I grew up on, you know, *Cliffhanger*. I remember seeing *Total Recall*, hiding behind the couch while my brother was watching it. I was way too young. And, yeah, then I started working at *Empire* and it just seemed to happen naturally, that I was meeting these guys and interviewing them. I got to go to Austin, Texas and spend a weekend with Chuck Norris, which was bizarre, as you'd expect, but cool. That's still the only interview I've ever done where the star asked to pray before the interview.

KRIS TAPLEY

Wow.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I got to go to Shanghai and hang out with Jackie Chan and then interviewed Van Damme and Seagal and Lundgren on the phone. I've met Arnie a few times. So, I had all these experiences and I think it's just a fascinating period of Hollywood history. It's so excessive. I mean, the '80s was excessive. I've written a book on comedy, as well, of that period, but this just felt like the natural place to go if you are telling outrageous stories about outrageous people, because these guys were all competing, feuding, trying to outdo each other, and these movies just kind of got out of control. I kind of think *Speed* is almost a response to how excessive these movies are, because it's so boiled-down and tight and disciplined. But I think when you were going into the '90s, everything was just getting really big and bloated and expensive, which I think is partly why people love *Speed*, because it's so refreshing, so stripped back.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. You reminded me, I forgot to pray at the start of this interview.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

There's still time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Maybe I can edit that in and later on. But no, well, you know, I found it interesting. First of all, the way their lives intersect, their stories intersect or overlap. Van Damme and Chuck Norris. Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren. Van Damme seems like the one that I'd want to hang out with, by the way, the most. I don't know why. He just seems like life is fun to him or something, I don't know. You know, Jackie Chan looking up to Sylvester Stallone and vice versa. Obviously Sly and Arnold's rivalry. Van Damme and Seagal's rivalry. I've got my money on Van Damme on that one. But I thought that was interesting. We all we all knew some of that, but did some of that, like, reveal itself to you as you were writing?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, that was really the joy of writing the book. I mean, everyone knows about Stallone and Schwarzenegger and them having that feud and, you know, Arnold tricking Stallone into doing *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*, and then trying to have, like, their combat combat knife in each movie has to be slightly larger than the knife that the other guy had in their last movie. I mean, it gets so petty, which is part of the hilarity of it all. But no, the joy in writing it was discovering that stuff, discovering that – you know, I introduced Chuck Norris and Jackie Chan in the same chapter. But when I started writing that chapter, I didn't realize that they actually crossed paths and they were at this award show in China and Chuck didn't understand Chinese, so Jackie was kind of translating for him. And, you know, there were so many little connections, and in the case of Seagal, just, the common thing is just him, you know, dissing these guys in various interviews and just being horrible to them all. There was stuff that I didn't get in to the book. There was a good story about Chuck and Seagal having a kind of face-off in an underground carpark, which I didn't manage to fit in.

KRIS TAPLEY

What was that like? More detail there?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Well, I did an interview with – sadly, quite a few of the people I interviewed for the book have passed away since I spoke to them, including Ivan Reitman and Ed Pressman, but I spoke to Robert Wall, aka Bob Wall, who fights Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* and was a really good friend of Chuck Norris. They were, like, business partners together. And that interview was probably the most eyebrow-raising one that I did. It was, like, a three-hour, hang-on-by-your fingernails kind of situation where he was telling me these absolutely crazy stories, including, like, the fact he rang up Seagal at his dojo and offered to, like – basically said he was going to shoot him with a sniper rifle and just all this crazy stuff. But, yeah, no, he told me that he and Chuck were in an underground car park and they got into, like, almost a physical confrontation with Seagal when they met him, because Seagal was shit-talking Chuck Norris all the time in papers. But there was a lot of that stuff going on. But, yeah, it was great. Just finding, you know, after *Die Hard* came out, Jim Thomas, the writer of *Predator* told me that he ran into Arnie in a restaurant and Arnie yelled across the restaurant, "You know why you're never going to be an action hero, Bruce? Toothpick arms." Like, these little stories of them

encountering each other out in the wild and kind of making fun of each other or, you know, it being more serious than that. But that was definitely part of the joy of the whole thing.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, Bob Wall seems like a character, man. That seems like the interview that probably required the most fact-checking, maybe.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Maybe the most legal passes. Yeah, it was definitely – he was still angry about stuff that happened in the '80s. I mean, he was definitely a gift. Everything he said was entertaining. But, yeah, he's sadly passed away.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now, is this the guy who Brad Pitt is sort of based on or no, that was someone else? Because, you know – *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, that's Gene LeBell. That's Gene LeBell.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, yeah, that's right, that's right.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Well, I think I interviewed Tarantino about *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* before it came out, and he kind of alluded to Cliff Booth, the Brad Pitt character, being based on multiple different people, but I think one of them was definitely Gene LeBell, who got into it with Bruce Lee on the set *The Green Hornet* and he's the guy – Gene LeBell is the guy that notoriously tangled with Seagal on one of those sets and the urban legend goes that he choked out Seagal, and then Seagal soiled himself. But accounts vary.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's in the book, right?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

That's in the book, yeah, and I spoke to two different people who were apparently there on the day, and they had different accounts, but we shall never know the truth.

KRIS TAPLEY

No, you know what? Print the lead. Print the legend. That reminds me, I didn't know about this thing – and as somebody who covered the award season for, like, 20 years, I never knew this. This showdown between Stallone and Schwarzenegger at the Golden Globes. What year was that? '77?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

That was, I believe, yeah, it was '76 or '77. I can't remember.

KRIS TAPLEY

It was the *Rocky* year, right?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

Because he won for *Rocky* and Schwarzenegger won the-

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, he was there for Best Newcomer, and yeah, I didn't know about it when I embarked on it and I was very happy to find it, because, yeah, Stallone talked about it recently in a video interview.

KRIS TAPLEY

He, like, threw something at him.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Apparently, he picks up a bowl of flowers and threw it at Schwarzenegger's head. Which is an amazing image.

KRIS TAPLEY

Holy shit!

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. And I kind of did some research and I looked up who was there on the night and it's all, like, Farrah Fawcett and all of these – I'm trying to imagine this happening. But, yeah, it apparently happened. So, they were not fond of each other at that time. Well, certainly, Stallone was not happy about Schwarzenegger.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's so early to not be happy about Schwarzenegger. You know what I mean? It's like, bro, you've got some – you've got more to come. But I just thought that was wild. I'm like, is this – was this televised? You know, so, anyway.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I failed to find out what flowers they were. But I was thinking is there some kind of war of roses line. But, yeah, that was how it began. A bowl of flowers.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's that next level of detail. That's that Pulitzer Prize level of detail if you get the flowers. Now, you sort of peg 1993 as the place where the wave finally broken rolled back, you know? With these two movies from Schwarzenegger and Stallone, both of which I love, by the way: *Last Action Hero* and *Demolition Man*. These are two films that collectively feel like an elegy to this period and these figures. And they're also sort of

meta in how they kind of gaze upon action heroes. And then a year later, it's our movie, but, you know, I can only sit back and be bemused whenever people talk shit about *Last Action Hero*, because, I mean – I guess it's objectively considered a piece of junk, but I absolutely love it and I think the spirit of the original material still runs in its veins. I know a lot of people thought it was ruined from what it was, originally, on the page, but that movie is the bomb. I love it. And, you know, *Demolition Man* gets much better treatment in the book, I think, not from you necessarily but from, you know, folks that look back on it. And I love that movie, too. It has our girl, Sandra Bullock, which is sort of the justification for Fox settling on her for *Speed*, by the way. It was like, "OK, she did an action movie, so I guess she can do ours."

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, so I wonder if Lori Petty might have ended up in *Speed*, had she not been fired from *Demolition Man*. But I think Arnold would agree with you on *Last Action Hero*. He just did an interview where he said that's his most underrated film. But definitely the most of the people I spoke to – I was kind of led in the book a bit by the filmmakers and what they think of what they made, and certainly John McTernan and Shane Black are very down on *Last Action Hero*. But I'm with you. I don't – maybe my enthusiasm for it isn't quite as big as yours, but I definitely think it's underrated and has a ton of good stuff in it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I mean, and for me, obviously, it could be nostalgia, but I've never not liked it. I've never thought that it was a sore spot. I mean, there's wonky humor in that, that – it's willful. You know, it's not like the movie is some bust, that it missed some mark. Like, it seems to me exactly what it was trying to be. I mean, collectively. Obviously, there's a lot of cooks in that kitchen. But I don't know I think it's – and I love the way you frame it, with *Demolition Man*, as these two movies that mark that sort of end as this, you know, reflection of who these guys have been over the last decade at that point. So, yeah, *Demolition Man*. I mean, I can watch *Demolition Man* any time of the week. I've got both of these movies on VHS in my garage, which is like a time warp when I go out there, but yeah, I'm a big fan, so.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I agree. And I don't know, both films kind of feel like the end. I mean, obviously, it went past 1993, but that era of practical effects and people blowing shit up for real and it not just being CG, and it was starting to creep in, obviously, with *Jurassic Park* and that kind of era where – even with *Terminator 2*, where the CG is starting to creep into these films, but they were still blowing stuff up, blowing buildings up, and it was still being done. Stuff was being done for real. Which is something I love about *Speed*, rewatching it again, is that they're there in LA and there's no green screen, really, or certainly not in the bus – not much in the bus stuff. I'm sure in the train that wasn't done for real on the train.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, the train was rear-screen projection. Like, exquisite rear-screen projection, sort of the peak of that technique. That's what I love about *Speed*, actually, is that – and I've said this before – it's a movie that was made at the height of a number of filmmaking techniques that were on their way out. So, it's hard to even say, "Oh, *Speed* was influential," because as we say, CGI was coming in and would soon be the status quo. So, it feels like *Speed* is sort of the peak of something, and yeah, people would still keep doing things for real for a while. In some of my conversations with some of these effects guys, they sort of peg *Dante's Peak* as the, like – the last big practical effects show, and yeah, it does start to fade away after that, but yeah, I mean, that's something – that's part of why I wanted to do this podcast, was sort of a celebration of that. Without dumping on CGI and visual effects artists, because I'm not here to do that, and I thought it was interesting you peg *Jurassic Park* beating the tar out of *Last Action Hero* as, well, here we are. A new era.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, and I think Stallone pinpoints something even earlier, the Burton *Batman*, as saying, "This is it. We're done."

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Because you've got Michael Keaton, and then I guess, you know, Keanu Reeves – 1994 Keanu Reeves and Michael Keaton both have a slim build. They're not what you would expect. In the '80s, they wouldn't have been action heroes.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, Stallone says something like, "Once you could Velcro your muscles on, that was the end of it." And it's like, I literally never thought about that. I mean, I've never – obviously *Batman* is the beginning of kind of the new era of superhero – not the era we're in now, but, you know, that's 10 years after *Superman*, you know? And so, it's like and it did gangbusters at the box office, so it sort of can be marked as the beginning of superheroes starting to come in, and obviously through the '90s would be a huge franchise. I wouldn't say *Superman* was a huge franchise in the '80s, you know?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

True.

KRIS TAPLEY

It completely fizzled. So, yeah, I thought that was interesting.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, and, I mean, you can draw a line from John McClane – from Bruce Willis' John McClane to Jack Traven quite clearly, I think. John McClane is burlier and more muscular. I'm not having a shot at Keanu Reeves' physique. He looks great in this. I mean, he

looks – this is peak Keanu Reeves in *Speed*, but it's definitely – he's an ordinary guy. Like, you don't even – when he arrives and he's there in the kind of group of SWAT guys, he doesn't stand out. It's like, if you had Arnold coming in, everyone is looking at Arnold. But Keanu kind of blends in a little bit. But yeah, it's interesting, you know, I talk a lot about in the book – the middle chapter is on *Die Hard*, and then kind of the second half of the book is all the ripples, really, of *Die Hard* and what happens when this film comes in. This one film kind of transforms the whole genre, really, and, you know, in terms of high concept plot lines, but also in terms of what an action hero looks like, what he sounds like, and yeah, it's interesting, I think can even – *Speed* is like an evolution of that. It pushes it even further.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's about relatability. It's about – I mean, *Die Hard* is definitely still in the land of one-liners, but – and Jan de Bont and everybody wanted to get away from that in *Speed*. And so, when you get the influx of a voice like Joss Whedon, who we've talked to on the show about this new sort of pop culture voice, that all does start to shift and you get away from the one-liner, and you get away from also, just, heroes that are seen as just renegades and mavericks. And, yeah, *Die Hard* is sort of – there's a lot of DNA that's shared there. And you started to get into this, I was going ask, like, what do you make of just that new wave of action heroes that came in the wake of these guys? Keanu Reeves, Nicolas Cage. Action hero Nicolas Cage? I mean, it was crazy at the time. Will Smith? You know, in our episode detailing the search for the lead actor in *Speed*, we talked about how they were sort of all over the place with that, but the point was made by a Fox exec that the heroes of the era were all older. You know, Arnold, Stallone, Seagal, they're all in their 40s at the time. Bruce Willis is late-30s. And Keanu Reeves turns 29 years old the day after production begins on *Speed*. And Cage is the same age. Will Smith is a little younger. It's clearly the dawning of a younger mold, you know?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. I mean, Seagal was considered – he came after, obviously, Arnold and Stallone, and he was considered the young one. But I don't think he ever truly looked young. It's kind of like having a – he always seems like he's, like, 50, even when he's in his 20s, because he's just, like, this granite guy who's just walking around like an Easter Island statue. But yeah, Keanu is so fresh-faced and has just that youthfulness. I think you could say that Cage never 100% seems young, either. I don't know how old he was when he did *The Rock* and *Con Air*. But yeah, Keanu has so much-

KRIS TAPLEY

He would have been early-30s, like 33 or so, I think.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Right. He has so much energy in this film, and that just matches the subject completely. Like, the fact that this is a film that just doesn't stop and you've got this guy who is, you know, in great condition. I mean, I'm a huge Cage action fan. Like, these are some of my favorite movies. *Con Air* and *Face/Off* and all of those. I mean, they're all, you know

– certainly *The Rock* has got a bit of *Die Hard* DNA. I think it took a long – I mean, you still see it. You still see films that are *Die Hard* on a... , and that was *Die Hard* on Alcatraz. And you see it in this film where it's basically three *Die Hard* films Sellotaped together. You've got *Die Hard* in a building, which is *Die Hard* again, but, you know, this is like the compact version of it in 20 minutes. And then *Die Hard* on a bus. And then – I mean, I was talking to some people about *Speed* over the last few days and some people, some of my friends, were like, "Eh, that last bit on the train doesn't work. They shouldn't have done that. They should have finished it on the bus." I love that you just get an extra *Die Hard* film stuck on the end. I love it.

KRIS TAPLEY

I always say it's three movies in one. You get a lot of bang for your buck. I mean, yeah, objectively, the emotional ending of the movie is when they come flying out from under the bus. But why not? I mean, you've got to deal with Dennis Hopper. You've got to have, you know – you've got to close this thing up. And folks have heard by now on this podcast, about how that changed in the development period when they were at Paramount for a period of time. And the execs there were like, "There's just too much bus." Like, they were exhausted by the bus at a certain point. And so, let's do something else. And Graham Yost was like, "Well, it's all modes of public transport. You know, elevator, bus, how about a subway?" And it worked for LA at the time because the subway was new and sort of mysterious to Angelenos, I think. Probably still is. But yeah, I mean, I love the third act, and that's where a lot of that filmmaking technique I was talking about comes into play. The rear-screen projection. There's a lot of awesome miniature model work with the train derailment. And then, obviously, the real thing in front of the Chinese Theatre.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Where they're showing *2001*.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Did you find out in your in your research why it's *2001: A Space Odyssey*?

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh, well, Jan's a big Kubrick guy. You know, they're watching *The Shining* in *Twister* when the tornado rips through. He's just – that's him. That's him putting his stuff in. I was actually going to ask, did you talk to Jan de Bont? Jan was obviously the DP of *Die Hard*, so he's kind of got a leg in both worlds here.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I didn't end up talking to him. No, I talked to Larry Gordon. I did a big interview with John McTiernan. I talked to Alan Rickman before he passed. So, I had enough *Die Hard* voices. I would've loved to have spoken to Jan de Bont. It was just a case of trying to cram – I can't spend too long one thing without moving on, much like *Speed*. There's a

bomb in the book and I've got to keep moving. But, no, I haven't. I've never spoken to Jan de Bont.

KRIS TAPLEY

You should.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

But now I want to talk to him about *Barry Lyndon*.

KRIS TAPLEY

There you go. Get Barry Lyndon into a movie. No, he's fun. Yeah, you really do fly through this book, and you're juggling so much. It feels like each of these subjects could be a whole book, obviously. Was there stuff that, like – what was, like, the worst thing you had to kind of leave out?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

That's a really good question. That's a really good question. It's one of those things where you've got so much research and so much stuff, and then you're condensing it in and you kind of lose track of what you left behind. I mean, I would have loved to have gone a bit further-

KRIS TAPLEY

Or maybe – sorry to jump in, but maybe even, like, if you can't think of something specific, was there just a road you were, like, I'm not going to go down that road because I'll just have so much more material that I won't know what to do with. Like, whatever you can think of that was just, like, "I've got to keep this on pace."

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, I mean, when it came to choosing who the eight guys were going to be, there were other people that I considered. You know, do you put Carl Weathers in there? Do you put Wesley Snipes in there. And I'm a big fan of Wesley Snipes and his action stuff, but it was really just about the era and when I was going to end the story. But no, there was enough to juggle without adding more and it was kind of, at certain point, you had to be, like, right, we're going to stop there. But Jackie Chan was a fairly late addition, and I'm really glad he's part of it. Especially as, like, I didn't really fully understand – I didn't really get the connection with Stallone, with Jackie, between Jackie Chan and Stallone and that, you know, on the set of *Demolition Man*, they were watching Jackie Chan movies. Stallone was watching Jackie Chan movies in his trailer to inspire himself. So, that was really, really nice. But I would have loved to have gone a bit further into the '90s. It's kind of an arbitrary stopping point. You know, when you get to *Demolition Man* and *Last Action Hero*, it kind of felt right to end with those two, kind of, meta examinations of the action hero. So, that felt like the right place to stop. But there's, you know – I could have gone as far as *Speed*. I would have happily written about that. And, you know, Arnold and Stallone had interesting films that they did after '93, for sure, so.

KRIS TAPLEY

It feels like *Eraser* was kind of the end. I mean, I know he does, like, *The 6th Day* or something.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

“You’re luggage.”

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, exactly.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I love *True Lies*. That was one where I was thinking, “Do you end with *True Lies*?” Because that’s a really, really fun, bombastic, huge movie. But it felt nice to end the story with Arnold failing, because Arnold wins all the way through the book. Like, you look at the ‘80s and into the ‘90s, and he does not make a wrong move. Like, he’s just smashing it, whereas Stallone is having huge failures and getting stung repeatedly, and so it felt nice to end with a low for Schwarzenegger and Stallone actually on top.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. That’s interesting. Because I guess *True Lies* would be, like, you know, his saving grace after *Last Action Hero*, but it’s also interesting, too, because Stallone is obviously taking bigger risks in his career throughout, and Stallone tried everything, right?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. He tried country-and-western music. He tried arm wrestling. Yeah, he did everything, because I think Arnold – for the book, I spoke to a guy called Eric Morris, who was Arnold’s acting coach very early on, like, even before – like, before *Pumping Iron*. And Arnold, at that point, had barely made any films, and he was trying to become a serious dramatic actor. And then there was a certain point where he just decided, “I’m going to be an action star. I’m not doing that.” So, he was, like, “I’m stopping doing this class. I’m going to be an action star and that’s all I’m going to do.” And he kind of stayed there and he did it. And obviously, he expanded into comedy later on really successfully, which Stallone struggled with it. But, yeah, Stallone, I don’t think – he came in and he was writing and he did *Rocky*, but *Rocky* wasn’t really an action movie. But then he kind of – it just ended up that his action movies were the ones that were huge. But he did a ton of other things. But I think as it got into the kind of late-80s, I think Stallone got increasingly stuck on his image and was taking less risks. But yeah, I did – the interesting thing is the comedy, you know? Because they both tried to transition into comedy at the same time, and actually, with the same people. Like, the writers of *Twins* also did *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*, and Ivan Reitman was involved in both. And *Twins* was this gargantuan hit for Schwarzenegger, but Stallone, for some reason – because he’s really funny. Like, you read interviews with Stallone and he’s hilarious, but that didn’t translate for whatever reason, and that stung Stallone a lot. He didn’t like that.

KRIS TAPLEY

That is – I’m glad you bring that up, because I’ve always thought he’s funny. Like, he has little quips and jokes that, they seem so singular. Like, just the little idioms he’ll throw out there. I don’t know where he gets it from. I guess he’s just a smart guy, but he’s a funny guy. He really is.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

He’s underrated. I mean, he’s a great writer. He writes great screenplays. And hilarious, and honest to a fault, often. He was one of the most interesting guys to write about, for sure, because you get to, like, a Seagal or even a Van Damme, and they’re what they are, and they’re kind of unique and hilarious or super interesting in that way. But I think there’s something about Stallone. He’s so complicated and there are so many facets to him and there are so many contradictory elements, that you’ve got this guy who plays Rambo, but also is happy to team up with Dolly Parton and do this mad thing. Yeah, he’s super interesting. You can never quite pin him down.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

But yeah, I don’t know why he never managed to have a successful comedy.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, you’ve got to have a good spirit. I mean, you know – I do think it’s funny about Arnold tricking him into doing *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*. I haven’t seen that one in a while, and weirdly, I sometimes confuse it in my head with *Throw Momma from the Train*, which is a completely different movie.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Great double bill.

KRIS TAPLEY

There you go. But – and regarding the volume of work he did and how he just always had stuff. People forget, I mean, to have *Rocky III* and *First Blood* in one year, I mean, that’s insane. I watched *First Blood* again the other night. And actually, before we did this, I figured I’d watch sort of the seminal works for each of them. So, like, I watched *First Blood* I watched *Conan the Barbarian*. I watched *Missing in Action*. The whole story of *Missing in Action* is hilarious, the fact that they went out there, they shot *Missing in Action*, then they immediately started *Missing in Action 2*. They come back. *Missing in Action 2* is the good movie, so they’re, like, “Let’s put that one out first and put the second one out as *Missing in Action*” – or the – see, I’m confusing it. Put the first movie out as *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning*, as a prequel, and it’s, like, such a Cannon thing to do.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It's a head fuck. Yeah. It's complicated. I still get confused, and I've written a book about it. But, yeah, they came back and just flipped it around and called the second – called the first one *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning*. I don't know. I can't even keep – I've lost the thread now. But, yeah, what did you make of that?

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh, it's funny because it's, like – how much dialogue is in that movie? Like, two pages worth? I mean, it seems like every time you look up, they're still in the same sequence. It's just wall-to-wall machine gunfire. Like, the soundtrack of that movie is just a constant barrage of gunfire, and it just seems like the whole thing is a giant montage. And I laughed my ass off at the freeze frame at the end. I mean, I've seen this movie back in the '80s, but, like, you know, the whole thing is about him going in to get POWs out of Vietnam just like, you know, *Rambo II* – kind of an obsession with this in the '80s – and he bursts into this, like, press conference where they're, like, "There's no POWs in Vietnam." And he's, like, "Here's one," and then it's like, freeze frame on Chuck Norris' face as if he's saying, "See, I told you!" And that's the end of the movie, and it just cracks me up. I don't know.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It's glorious. And introducing Chuck Norris watching a Spider-Man cartoon on TV, that is amazing as well.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah! Spending time on that, too. Like, here's a shot of the cartoon for, like, 20 seconds. I'm just, like, "What's going on?"

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Oh yeah. Cannon paid for those rights. They were going to use them.

KRIS TAPLEY

And I watched *Bloodsport*. I'll probably watch *Above the Law* tonight. You know, I just thought I'd watch the seminal ones. I was going to ask you, actually, about your favorites for each one. But you know what? Before we get to that, regarding this sort of new wave, and I know we're bouncing around, but regarding this sort of new wave of action heroes, you know someone who was sort of poised to be one of these guys was Brandon Lee. You know, he had *Rapid Fire*. He obviously died making *The Crow*. He was sort of the only guy that was brought up in the context of younger people when I was talking to some of these execs that would have made sense if you were going to get a younger guy for *Speed*, because again, they were all over the place. Like, obviously they would have loved to have had, like, Bruce Willis or something. But they were looking at, like, Charlie Sheen and William Baldwin. I mean, this was going to be a straight-up B movie all the way. But as far as younger guys go, Brandon Lee was sort of poised, and his father, of course, Bruce Lee, he looms over this book as like a godfather or something. What did you think of his influence on this era and these guys?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Bruce Lee? Yeah, I mean, huge, especially when you get into Steven Seagal, when you get into the more kind of kicky, punchy guys. I'd say less so for Stallone and Schwarzenegger, and more for – definitely for Jackie Chan. Because, I mean, Jackie Chan was positioned in China as the new Bruce Lee when Bruce Lee died, and he worked with Bruce Lee a few times. And Chuck Norris, obviously, faced off against Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, in the coliseum at the end. Yeah, I mean, huge. Obviously, he was the king of the martial arts movie, and so that was the kind of the benchmark that everyone was trying to hit. And just the charisma of him and the coolness of him. I think everyone kind of had their own variation on the formula. You know, maybe Chuck Norris leaned into the seriousness a little bit too far, which ironically makes him the funniest, because he's so serious in all of these films that it's just hilarious. But yeah, I think that Bruce Lee obviously had a gigantic impact. And, you know, the fact he only made a handful of films and they were all iconic, and I think he just had that image as, like, the coolest guy that you would try to match. And I think the more successful ones were the ones that did their own thing. Like, Van Damme created its own persona. It took him a little while to get there. I think if you look at the early ones, like *Bloodsport* and *Kickboxer*, he's trying to be super serious, and it doesn't work for him. It's only when he moves away from that formula that it becomes effective. And I think Seagal just gets stuck in that groove of, "I'm going to look cooler than anyone else," and it doesn't do him any favors, really.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I mean, Bruce – and I didn't mean, like, that martial arts was necessarily an influence, but just becoming an action hero, becoming a king of any genre. Like, he was sort of the guy to sort of, I guess, make that mold, you know? Like, I mean, certainly, quote, "action movies" were something different back then, and you've got your Dirty Harrys and whatnot. But, you know, your book says here "Kings of Carnage." I mean, it seems to me Bruce Lee was the first king of carnage.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

If you had anyone who was quite the same one-man army kind of thing. I mean, he was certainly the most iconic and a guy who would, you know, just face down entire armies, and you couldn't wait for him just to snap and just kick everyone's ass.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, I mean – yeah, I think you're right. I think he was like the original guy that everyone was trying to match. He's certainly the coolest.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I just found that interesting, because he just sort of looms over the proceedings in the book, you know? Was there anybody that you were not able to get that you're sort of either dying to ask questions of or follow-ups of, because you might have heard stories

and you're, like, "God, I've got to talk to this person," and maybe you weren't able to get them.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I mean, I would have loved to have talked to Joel Silver. I think the stories that man has, I mean, he was all over this era and, you know, just delivering one, like, huge, pumped-up movie after another. I would have loved to have talked to him. He's quite tricky to get ahold of. I would have loved to have talked to Bruce Willis about – he doesn't, obviously – he's not doing much press these days. He's sadly not well. But even – you know, I interviewed him probably about 10 years ago and tried to ask him about *Die Hard*, but he is not interested. He wasn't interested.

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh yeah? Well, Joel Silver's a big one. I mean, that's obviously somebody who would connect a lot of dots.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, for sure. I think he would have some amazing stories. But I was lucky enough to kind of talk to Paul Verhoeven and Renny Harlin and McTiernan, who were, you know, the guys who were all over that. Steven de Souza, involved in tons of those movies. I mean, it's interesting how it's the same people over and over again that you see popping up as, like, writers, producers, directors, and it was quite a small club in a way.

KRIS TAPLEY

I think it's fascinating de Souza ends up directing *Street Fighter* and it's just a colossal disaster. After everything he's done, and it's, like, "OK, I'm going to be the guy to do *Street Fighter* with Jean-Claude," and holy crap, that movie. The fact that there were two studios involved in it, I mean, it's-

NICK DE SEMLYEN

No, I was just going to say, like, talking of Bruce Lee, you know, it's another tournament movie. And I think any anytime you see – from *Bloodsport* to, you know, there's a ton of them. *The Quest*. There's quite a lot of Van Damme ones, for some reason, but whenever you get one of those movies where fighters from around the world have gathered, it's – they're all kind of ripping off *Enter the Dragon*. But, yeah, *Street Fighter*, again, it's the hubris. Some of the most fun things to write about in the book was just the hubris of them putting together these projects that they were, like, "This absolutely cannot miss." Like, "Look at the people we're getting together and look what we're doing." On a side note, there's a Jackie Chan film called *City Hunter*, which anyone who's a fan of the *Street Fighter II* video game should check out because Jackie Chan plays – I think he gets, like, kicked into an arcade machine of *Street Fighter II*, and he becomes all the characters, complete with the sound effects. It's actually amazing. Head to YouTube and check it out.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, when I saw that in the book I was like, “I’ve never heard of this. That sounds amazing.”

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It is amazing.

KRIS TAPLEY

Now what are your – pop quiz, hotshot – what are your favorite movies for each of these guys? I’ll start with Stallone.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I mean, that’s the obvious ones. I mean, *Rocky*, the original. *Rocky IV* I’m a huge fan of, just the pure excess of it. I don’t think the new cut is quite as effective as the original one. But he got rid of Sico the robot, which I’m not happy about.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, you can’t get rid of the robot.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. I’ve got a real soft spot for – I don’t know why this has popped into my head, but I really enjoy *Tango & Cash*, even though it’s objectively not a great film, but I have a lot of fun. I have a lot of fun with the kind of the mid-level, trashy Stallone films. I really enjoy *Cliffhanger* as well. That is a *Die Hard* rip-off, but I just enjoy, you know, seeing Stallone on a mountaintop fighting John Lithgow. I don’t know if it’s my favorite, but yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

By the way, Renny Harlin was the one major director they approached for *Speed*. He was nice enough to meet with them for an hour. They were trying to get him hot off of *Cliffhanger*. The movie hadn’t come out yet but everybody knew it was going to be a big hit because the trailer was, like, a huge deal, you know? And he said no. But Stallone – I’m not going to try to be cool with my selections, by the way, with all of these. My favorite Stallone movie is *Cobra*. OK?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

“Crime is the disease. He’s the cure.”

KRIS TAPLEY

There you go. Pitch black movie. I mean, it’s just dark, and I remember I saw that one too young, and it’s just – I remember the knife with the spikes on it, just – and a trashy movie. I love it.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It’s a fascinating movie. I am a huge fan of the Pepsi – the sheer amount of Pepsi Cola product placement. I believe that Marion Cobretti, actually his apartment has a giant

neon Pepsi sign. And then there's that iconic supermarket shootout action scene where, again, there's just Pepsi everywhere. It's great. Big fan of him eating – cutting his pizza with the scissors as well. Yeah, I would have liked to have talked more about *Cobra* in the book. I had to kind of skirt over it because I was doing a chapter about the geopolitics, and I was kind of heading towards *Rambo III*. So, yeah, I would have loved to have done a chapter on *Cobra*. Underrated.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. How about Arnold?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Arnold, it's the obvious stuff, really. It's *Terminator 2*, *Predator*. I quite enjoy *Red Heat*. That's maybe a guilty pleasure. I don't know if it's up there with his best but it's certainly got the best naked fight in a sauna of any Arnold film.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, you qualified it with "Arnold film," because I was, like, "What about *Eastern Promises*?" But yeah, I've got to go *Commando*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Oh yeah. *Commando* is so much fun. So much fun. Just the steel drums.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yes. Oh my God. James Horner, we love you so much. Although I guess it's basically the same as the *48 Hours* score, right? Like, he's – all composers sort of lift from themselves constantly, and he did it more than most, but I do love steel drums and saxophone in a score. I'm there. And I love the song over the closing credits to that song is the bomb, and I will not sing it now.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, quite uplifting power anthem. Surprising for the end of a film with, like, a body count in the triple digits. But yeah, *Commando* is a great one. Big fan of Vernon Wells. An iconic villain, and his bizarre chainmail vest that he wears. That was a kind of a wild shoot. Apparently – well, opinions differ. Accounts vary on this. But apparently one of the producers went to see *Rambo II* and came back and said, "We've got to kill more people in *Commando* than they did in this." So, actually sat – I love the idea of someone sitting there with a pen, like, tallying up how many people get killed, which obviously people now do on the internet. Everyone counts up every, you know, the *John Wick: Chapter 4* body count, but, yeah, I love the idea in the '80s of someone actually there with a note pad doing that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. *Die Hard* – it's hard not to say *Die Hard* for Bruce Willis, I guess. You know, I actually do love *Die Hard with a Vengeance* a lot. I mean, I like *Die Hard 2* also, but I've always liked *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. Even though it didn't start out life as a *Die Hard* movie, but there was a lot of that back then.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

None of them did.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I think that would make a pretty good double bill with *Speed*. You know, you've got the guy issuing the hero orders to run around doing tasks and you've got him in a kind of double act. You know, it's one thing I like about *Speed* is the fact that Keanu is always in a double act, either with Jeff Daniels or Sandra Bullock, and I love the double act in *Die Hard 3* with Samuel L. Jackson and Bruce Willis. Yeah, I'm going to say the original *Die Hard*, though. That's pretty hard to beat.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, that's hard. And speaking of movies that became other movies, when *Speed* was at Paramount, we talked about this a few episodes back, but Don Granger was developing it there. He's at Skydance now, and his last-ditch effort when it was about to be put into turnaround was to make *Speed*, *Beverly Hills Cop III*. And he was, like, "Let's just put Axel Foley on the bus," because they were trying to find a *Beverly Hills Cop III* at the time. And that was his, like, attempt – and he says he got a little bit of traction and then it just went away, but can you imagine?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

God. Would there have been a banana in the tailpipe? Is that what would stop the bomb?

KRIS TAPLEY

Man. Well, as he said, it might have been a better movie than what they ultimately got for *Beverly Hills Cop III*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Great George Lucas cameo.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. Chuck Norris.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Chuck Norris, I'm going to say *Code of Silence*. That's an easy one, *Code of Silence*, because it's a pretty – it's thin pickings for Chuck. I am a fan of Chuck. I'm a fan of elements of Chuck. I find him quite an enjoyable screen presence. Not the most convincing, but I quite like him. He's trying his best. But, yeah, *Code of Silence*, which is directed by Andrew Davis, who directed the early Seagal movies and *Under Siege*, is a genuinely good film.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

And as I say in the book, even Roger Ebert gave it a good review. And it actually it's the only Chuck Norris movie that got good reviews. But it's a great movie. It's set in Chicago, like every Andrew Davis movie, and it's got John Mahoney, aka Martin from *Frasier*. The dad from *Frasier* is in it. And it's got Chuck Norris teaming up with a robot to take on Colombian drug dealers, which, you can't go far wrong with that. But it's genuinely a pretty good cop film. It's got Chuck Norris teaming up with – his partner is Dennis Farina, in one of his, like, very early roles. And Dennis Farina was actually a cop in Chicago at the time. So, he was leaving the set and then going off and actually arresting people, which is pretty cool.

KRIS TAPLEY

I admit, I've never seen that one. Nevertheless – and I haven't seen this one in probably 25 years – but I know I loved *Delta Force* in the '80s. So, I'm going to say *Delta Force*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Good motorbike, yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

Who was the guy – Robert Forster as a terrorist, right?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I believe so.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, there you go. Wouldn't happen today.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Missile-firing motorcycles.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, come on. That feels like a little bit of G.I. Joe/M.A.S.K. influence or something.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

Van Damme.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I'm going to say *Timecop*.

KRIS TAPLEY

I honestly – I don't remember most of his movies. They all become one movie in my head. I know I saw *Nowhere to Run* a lot, and I'm not saying *Nowhere to Run* is my favorite movie from Van Damme, because I doubt it is if I were to watch them all, but it's the one I remember the most. Because I just remember he was out in the woods, camping, in the backyard.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

He usually is. He's usually in the forest in some form. No, actually, maybe it's *Hard Target*. Maybe I'll change it from *Timecop* to *Hard Target*. I am a huge fan of *Hard Target*, and not least because he plays a character called Chance Boudreaux, who punches a snake. But it's got Lance Henriksen as a great – that's obviously John Woo's first Hollywood film. It's got Wilford Brimley riding – you've probably seen the GIF.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

But Wilford Brimley riding on horseback with one of the greatest screen explosions ever going on behind him. It's a ton of fun. It's so much fun. And it's got a great – I just saw some people talking on Twitter the other day about, there's a scene where Lance Henriksen's jacket catches on fire and he just kept going, like, he didn't break character and, like, improvised some stuff while he took it off.

KRIS TAPLEY

Hell yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

That's a really fun film. But, yeah, that and *Timecop*.

KRIS TAPLEY

Awesome. Seagal. I mean, Jesus.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It's going to be *Under Siege*.

KRIS TAPLEY

It has to be.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It's kind of despite Seagal, rather than – I'm not a big – you can probably tell if you've read the book, like, I'm not a big Seagal fan.

KRIS TAPLEY

He doesn't seem likable.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

No, I think he had the skills, but I think he just —a very unpleasant screen persona. It's hard to really get behind him, and you tend to feel sorry for the guys he's beating up. But yeah, *Under Siege* has got so much going for it. You know, Tommy Lee Jones. It's one of the better *Die Hard* knock-off type things, but yeah. Andrew Davis again.

KRIS TAPLEY

Do you get the vibe that any of that stuff where, you know, he's insinuating that he knows people and was with "the agency," you know, that kind of shit. You get the vibe that any of that was not bullshit? Because I'll be honest. I can't tell. It could either be total bullshit, or, if it's true, this is how it would be true. It would feel like total bullshit. You know what I mean?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Well, he always had this line that was kind of ingenious, where he said, "Well, if you were really a secret agent, no one would be able to prove it." So, it's like, he basically had the perfect line, because no one could ever unravel it. Like, however obtuse his things were, it just added to his argument that he was this guy. But no, I – well, if there was anything there, it was wildly exaggerated. I mean, he did know people who were kind of involved – definitely involved in that world. If you go back and read magazine articles from the time, there's definitely – he has connections to real criminals, real spies. There was stuff going on there. As for whether he was involved and he was, you know, doing missions, as he was claiming? No, I don't believe that. I think it was the screenwriter of *Executive Decision*, who I spoke to, told me that he would come in and he'd have a loaded gun and he'd put it down on Monday morning on the desk, and they'd just be, like, trying to make casual conversation with this terrifying man. Just saying, "Oh, what did you do at the weekend, Steven?" And he was like, "I can't tell you. It's classified." I mean, there's no chance in the mid-90s that he was out, like, doing whatever he was doing. Yeah, I mean, I interviewed him for an hour a while back, and it was it was definitely an eye-opening – there's not a glimmer of humor to anything he says. He's deadly serious at all times, as you'd kind of expect. But yeah, he definitely – he's not going to tell you. He's not going to spill anything. And he's very careful.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, here's the thing. If it is indeed all bullshit, there's an argument there for him being one of the greatest actors of all time. Because he never breaks. Never breaks. So, there you go. "Vladimir Putin." Dolph Lundgren. I mean, I'm going to go ahead and say mine first, because there's not, like, a lot of good ones to choose from here. Only because it was the first movie I saw in a theater: *Masters of the Universe*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Do you like *Masters of the Universe*?

KRIS TAPLEY

No, I don't think I do. I don't think I do. I the score. I like the design. Like, I think he looks cool as He-Man. What's wrong with that movie is right there in the tagline. It's

something like, “A battle fought in the stars comes to Earth.” And it’s like, “No! We don’t want it on Earth. We want to see Eternia. Like, you know, we want to see He-Man stuff.” Like, doing it on a backlot, to look like a city alley, a lot of that – I mean, it’s a terrible movie, but it was the first movie I saw in the theater, so I have a soft spot for it.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

It’s got a few things going for it.

KRIS TAPLEY

The editor of *Lawrence of Arabia*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. Should have edited a bit more. I’m not a fan of *Masters of the Universe*, although Dolph made a very good He-Man, I thought. You’re going to be hard-pressed to find a better one. But, yeah, I’m a fan of *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. You talked about Brandon Lee earlier, and they make a really good double act. And it has one of the most bizarre one-liners in an action movie from the ‘80s, which is, “You have the biggest dick I’ve ever seen on a man,” which one of them says to the other one. It’s quite unexpected.

KRIS TAPLEY

Comes out of nowhere.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. They’re just making the subtext text, I guess. But, yeah, I have a soft spot for that. It is a genuinely fun, over-the-top action movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

And Jackie Chan.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Jackie Chan is really hard. I just – I think it’s just all about the action. Like, I don’t think you watch a Jackie Chan movie for the plot, because they’re often quite hard to differentiate what the plot is. And I think he would probably be the first one to say that. It’s obviously about the amazing action sequences, and there are just so many. Like, how do you choose? Is it, like, the shopping mall punch-up at the end of *Police Story*, where they nicknamed the film *Glass Story*, just because there was so much glass being broken? It was just this insane – I got to see a triple bill of *Police Story* 1, 2 and 3 on the big screen a couple of months ago, and, like, I was still reeling from it a week later. The third one is amazing where he teamed up with Michelle Yeoh, *Supercop*. *Drunken Master II* has an amazing, big fight scene at the end. *Armour of God*, which is, like, his Indiana Jones movie, where he almost died. I don’t know. It’s very hard to pick one. I really enjoyed *Miracles*, actually, I saw recently. It’s not my favorite but he directed this film called *Miracles*, and it has a big final set piece in a rope factory. It’s, like, one of those locations where he’s just like, “I need some rope.” So, they set it at a rope factory. But it’s really ingenious. Just the little gags and the little beats that he does are just – and they’re so rare in action movies, those clever little action beats. You see

so many action movies where it just gets boring, because it's just people firing guns and there's no cleverness to it. But those little clever little gags that you get in, like, *Indiana Jones* movies – the first three *Indiana Jones* movies. Jackie Chan movies from that period are just filled with them. and this is a very long-winded way of saying I'll go with *Police Story 3: Supercop*.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's hard not to say that one or *Police Story 1*. I like *Rush Hour*, because I like when he was finally packaged in such a way. I think there was something about finally getting that entrenchment in Hollywood, and the Chris Tucker thing really works. I think it's great to see him bouncing off of somebody like that. So, I just see it as sort of a level-up for him, in a sense, not that it's a better movie than, you know, the other stuff. But it's when it's, like, "OK, this is what – this is the fulfilled promise of Jackie Chan," you know?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah. And it was great to see him come to – I mean, I've interviewed him quite a few times. He's not a fan of the *Rush Hour* movies, hugely. I don't know if he's that proud of any of his American stuff. I mean, but it was great to see him finally get into Hollywood and be recognized by the whole world.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Because I think, you know, Asia knew he was incredible, but it spreading to the whole Western world as well, and everyone kind of getting to see what he could do was fantastic. And I know that meant a lot to him. But, yeah, I don't know, I don't know if any of his is American stuff, for me, quite stands up to that Chinese stuff, which is just unbelievable. It's so raw.

KRIS TAPLEY

For sure. It would have been boring if we had the same ones. So, I had to mix it up a little bit. Let's close here, let's finish, by talking a little bit about *Speed*. I mean, do you think *Speed* belongs in this canon?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Oh, 100%, yeah. It's an incredible film. And I think it could be called a *Die Hard* knock-off, but I don't think it does. I don't think I've ever thought of it like that. It's its own thing. It feels – it felt – I remember seeing it at the cinema when it came out and it felt super fresh, and it still felt fresh when I saw it last week. It just moves and moves, and it's so clever, and nimbly plotted. It's got a great villain. Maybe where it falls down is the one-liners. I think it's actually – Jack Traven is actually a very generous action hero, in that he doesn't take all the one-liners. Like, Annie gets a lot of them and she gets a lot of the great moments. She does, obviously, a lot of the action herself. But, yeah, Keanu gets a couple of one-liners at the end after he takes out Dennis Hopper, and they're pretty bad.

KRIS TAPLEY

No, they're not.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Do you stand by them?

KRIS TAPLEY

I stand by them. "I'm taller" is an all-timer line as far as I'm concerned

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Well, he was taller than Dennis Hopper before he lost his head.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's not the point! And it's the way he says it, too, in that Keanu way. Like, "Yeah? Well, I'm taller."

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I'm taller. Yeah, I see where you're coming from. It made me smile, but I just – it's so out of character, that that character would suddenly start doing one-liners to himself. And then he thinks of another one and then he goes in does a one-liner.

KRIS TAPLEY

I don't like that one. I don't like coming – it's like, don't gild the lily. Like, you know, don't come back with the "he lost his head." We already got one.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, what would have been great if he had just, you see him come down and then he just repeats the one that we've already heard, because he's so proud of it. "And then he said, 'I'm smarter.'" But no, I mean, *Speed* is – obviously, you don't need me here to say that *Speed* is incredible, but I have a lot of love for it. And I as I was saying, like, right at the start, like, these action movies were getting more and more big and bloated and grandiose, and this film obviously is not small, but it comes along and it feels small in the best way. Like, it feels like it's just this little brisk – you know, there's no fat on it at all.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

And I think that it had a great, like, impact on the genre, and I think people hopefully, you know – some people learned lessons from that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Regarding there being no fat on it, I think there's, like, two deleted scenes? Like, everything they shot is in the movie, basically, you know? Like, it's very controlled and lean. But why do you think – and maybe I'm being sensitive – but why do you think it's

not considered, typically, in the canon? It's almost like when people finally watch it again, they're like, "Oh, yeah, this movie kicks ass." You know, it's not always top of mind, I guess.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I don't know. It's a good question, because – I don't know. I kind of see it having its own influence in the way that *Die Hard* had that ripple effect, and you saw "*Die Hard* on a..." I feel like *Speed* did that to a lesser extent, but you kind of have – I was thinking about movies that kind of do *Speed* again, in a different way, and I couldn't think of that many, but *Crank* is certainly one of them, which is like *Die Hard* in a human body. There's an *X-Files* episode where Bryan Cranston is in a car and it can't stop.

KRIS TAPLEY

Right, right.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Which is clearly like somebody saw *Speed*. There was another one I was trying to think of, but I don't know. Were there any other movies you can think of? *Unstoppable*?

KRIS TAAPLEY

Yeah, *Unstoppable*. That's my point, is that it's not influential, and maybe that's the answer. It's because you can't find its DNA in everything that came after it, and it's because, I think, of what I've said. It was more of, like, the peak of something as opposed to a watershed. But that doesn't mean it doesn't deserve to be, you know, in the canon. And so yeah.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

I guess with Keanu, like, *The Matrix* has kind of overshadowed *Speed* a bit. It's, you know – I prefer *Speed*. But I mean, well, what am I going to pick, *Speed* or the original *Matrix*? I mean, the *Matrix* sequels have sullied the whole *Matrix* thing for me in a major way.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. That first one is perfect, though. I mean, we don't have to choose. Thankfully we don't have to choose.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, don't make me choose.

KRIS TAPLEY

But it is cool that, you know, *Speed* is definitely the seminal moment for him becoming an action star, and that is absolutely what he is today. I mean, he's still kicking ass on screen right now.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

He's still doing it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, my thing, too, is – and it's not as simple as this – but they don't make 'em like they used to, you know, action movies today. And this is where I wanted to kind of close with you. What is the outlook look like to you? I mean, it seems like, yeah, these kinds of movies at this budget can – you do see the made sometimes. They're on streamers, usually. But the marketplace is all about superheroes today, and massive budgets. And, you know, this is a movie that was made for \$28 million. It started out at 15, but it's something about needing the strictures of a budget, I feel like, and how that breeds creativity. That's my take. But what do you think about just the outlook of action films, and are we just never going back? Or is, you know – is the pendulum going to swing again? Like, what do you think?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, I was thinking this while I was watching it again, that it just felt so different and refreshing to what we're used to these days, because I think it's the simplicity of it. It's this lean, mean, sleek, kind of shark-like movie that's just moving, and nowadays, everything has to be interconnected and has to be setting up something or it's got to be *Fast X*, which is setting up two more – you know, one more, oh, it's two more – and so everything is just engineered to be, like, one piece of the puzzle that they're going to build on. And I think what's really refreshing about *Speed* is it's just this – you know, apart from the not-great sequel – it's just its own thing. I don't know, I'd like to think that people are going to go back and try to recreate this. But I think it's tricky, because I think it's multiple things that happened all at the same time. You know, you had to have Keanu Reeves in that role for that role to work, I think. Like, you could have had Jean-Claude Van Damme doing it, but it wouldn't have worked. It would have cheapened the whole thing, I think. It kind of just worked with him in that role, and then shooting it practically. That doesn't happen very often. But I feel like you hear a lot of filmmakers talking about how they want to get away from all the CG and try to go back to doing stuff, and you see some filmmakers doing that. I don't know. I don't know if it is repeatable. Would *Speed* come out on Netflix now, rather than the cinema? I have hope that things will slip through like *Speed*. But, yeah, it saddens me. I really miss it. I think the '90s was a golden age. I don't think at the time people really appreciated what a golden age it was in terms of action movies, with this and *Con Air* and *Face/Off* and *The Rock* and so many. But I think it just comes down to the idea that someone has a brilliant high-concept idea to do it, and that's all it comes down to, I guess. You just need people to come up with great ideas. All of those movies I just named just have a one-line, great concept.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's my point, too, about that era. It's like, the elevator pitches were out of control. I mean, the *Air Force Ones*, the *Rocks*. You know, it was a period where the concept was king, and yeah, character was important, but those concepts sold tickets, and they had to work and be smart. And it's hard to come up with them. I mean, it's not like you can just come up with a new one every day, so, yeah, you're right. But regarding the '90s, I think you've got your sequel book on tap. You ready to you're ready to write a new one?

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Starting with *Speed*?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, start with *Speed*. *The Next Action Heroes*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

The Next Action Heroes. Yeah, we found some more.

KRIS TAPLEY

There's a book in that.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Yeah, potentially. Potentially. Yeah, you've given me an idea.

KRIS TAPLEY

There you go.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

You've given me an idea. Yeah, the Nicolas Cage era.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's it.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

"Put the bunny back in the box."

KRIS TAPLEY

The book is called *The Last Action Heroes: The Triumphs, Flops and Feuds of Hollywood's Kings of Carnage* by Nick de Semlyen. Please pick it up if you haven't already, because it's awesome and it's just full of banger after banger. Thanks for coming on here, man, to talk about the book and to talk about *Speed*.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

Thanks for having me. This was fun. Thank you.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's Nick de Semlyen, everyone.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

It's high time we met the passengers of Bus 2525. All of them

DAVID KRIEGEL

Who the hell would have thought that when we were making this stupid movie on a bus that it would become a cultural icon?

BETH GRANT

I did not like my character. I was glad she died. All she did was care about herself and whine. “What about the rest of us? What about the rest of us?”

KRIS TAPLEY

The ensemble of *Speed* recalls the day-to-day of production and how they were bearing witness to movie history.

HAWTHORNE JAMES

I told Sandra, “Your life is now going to change. You can’t do a movie with Stallone and not have a life change.” Little did I know it wasn’t that movie, it was the one we were shooting that would forever change her life.

KRIS TAPLEY

But it wouldn’t all be wine and roses as the script’s 11th-hour rewrite left a lot to be desired.

CARLOS CARRASCO

Everybody just was confronted with this decision of, like, “Oh, we got cast as principles and now we’re all extras. What does that mean? What do you do?”

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.