



YOU
Can't Do
That on TV!

Chevrolet invests months of work and millions of dollars in a high-octane TV commercial for its new 2005 Corvette —then suddenly pulls the plug as “A Boy’s Dream” gets an unexpected rude awakening.
by Arthur St. Antoine



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Two thousand years ago, Roman author Pliny the Elder wrote: "The only certainty is that nothing is certain."

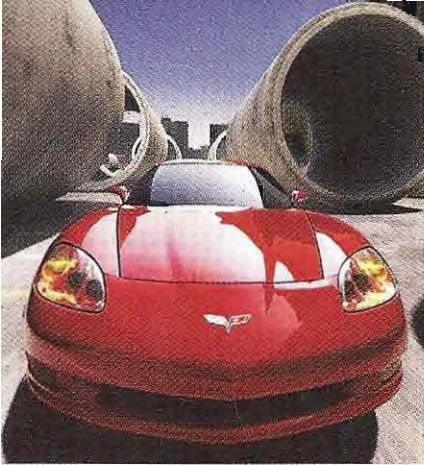
He was undoubtedly talking about car advertising.

Fast-forward to August 2004. Chevrolet has dropped a staggering sum—more than \$3 million—on "A Boy's Dream," a splashy new 60-second TV spot that's A-List all the way: New York City as backdrop, Guy "I Married Madonna" Ritchie as director, pricey special effects, a rippin' Rolling Stones soundtrack, and, as its star, the new 2005 Corvette—a model the automaker hasn't advertised on TV since 1997.

So pumped are Chevy execs over "A Boy's Dream" that they've peppered it throughout the prime-time schedule of the 2004 Athens Olympics (cost: about \$1.5 million per showing), scheduling the ad's debut for the opening ceremonies, where it will be seen by some 40 million Americans. Certain? Hey, might as well break out the champagne now.

Less than two weeks later, "A Boy's Dream" was gone, pulled by GM from TV, the Internet, and theaters and ash-canned after pressure from a small number of angry viewers and a coalition of outraged consumer-safety advocates—the latter deeming the ad's dreamy depiction of a 10-year-old boy hurling his fantasy car through New York streets "among the most dangerous anti-safety messages to be shown on national television in recent years."

You could almost hear the collective "What the—?" from Chevrolet headquarters. Had Chevy's advertising team really crossed the line of good sense and responsibility? Or had the line, so to speak, crossed them?



Nobody spends more on Olympics advertising than GM. For the Athens Summer Games, the General planned to spend 10 times its usual two-week ad budget. The spotlight was on Chevrolet, with 10 new commercials to be sprinkled over 200 spots. The highlight: an ad for the maker's flagship, the all-new C6 Corvette. It was now January 2004; the Olympics were eight months away. Chevy needed a blockbuster.

"We put together about 100 proposals for Chevrolet to review," says Robin Todd, senior vice president/associate creative director at the automaker's ad agency, Campbell-Ewald, based in Warren, Michigan. "We wanted to create the ultimate fantasy of owning a Corvette, to capture the feeling we've all had of looking at a beautiful sports car and imagining driving it."

By May, Chevrolet had approved the agency's top concept. "I was nine years old when I saw my first Corvette on TV," recalls Brent Dewar, general manager of Chevrolet Motor Division. "And that led to the discussion that it's every boy's dream to own a Corvette. Certainly it was mine! We thought it was important to communicate this idea."

To bring the dream to life, Campbell-Ewald turned to Anonymous Content, a premier, Los Angeles-based maker of commercials and music videos that includes on its roster such ace Hollywood directors as Gore Verbinski ("The Ring," "Pirates of the Caribbean") and David Fincher ("Seven," "Fight Club"). Campbell-Ewald chose another Anonymous star, Guy Ritchie, director of "Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels" and "Swept Away" and perhaps best known as Madonna's husband. "We like Ritchie's films," says Mary Ellen Krawczyk,

Campbell-Ewald senior vice president/executive producer. "The energy. The hipness."

Ritchie immediately added his imprint to the project, deciding to shoot the ad entirely in New York City. "Guy felt filming in New York would be an interesting opportunity to break out of the typical L.A. scenario," says Dave Morrison, head of Anonymous Content's commercial division.

After three weeks of preproduction—scouting locations, securing permits, finding the perfect star (the casting director hired a 10-year-old with no previous acting experience)—the crew was ready to begin filming in June. "It doesn't get any more complicated," remembers Morrison. "Driving stunts on New York City streets, shutting down roads in midtown Manhattan, closing off the 59th Street Bridge. Fortunately, we didn't have any 'holy shit!' dramas."

scratch their precious car. "They said there were only like five of 'em built so far," Hessler says. "So I talked with a suspension guy I know, and we came up with a hydraulic bump-stop system we attached to the A-arms—added about another inch of ground clearance. We took off from a 16-inch ramp and flew the car 50 feet, maybe two, three feet in the air. Didn't break a thing."

In five days, principal photography was done—but the project had barely begun. Still to come: a slew of special effects by Hollywood's Digital Domain. "Our task was to create a couple scenes where the car was doing things even a stunt person couldn't do," says Fred Raimondi, digital effects supervisor at the company behind such visual-effects feasts as "Titanic" and "I, Robot." "When the Corvette is driving upside-down inside a big pipe, that's all 3-D computer graphics. Same for when the boy meets his dream girl in mid-air [another Guy

Ritchie addition]. The cars were software models—we had to create the paint, the windows, the tires, every little reflection. We had just four weeks, which is really short for a project with

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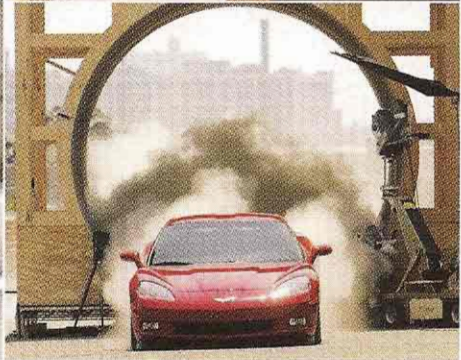
JANETTE FENNEL
FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT
KIDS AND CARS

Despite the scope of the project, the ambitiousness of the stunts, and hungry *paparazzi* (Madonna showed up to watch filming one day), the production went incredibly smoothly. On the very first day, a Sunday, the crew knocked off three of the project's most difficult shots: a bridge fly-by from a helicopter, a jump on Park Avenue, and a reverse-180 skid into a parking space. "A forward 180 is simple," says Cort Hessler, the stunt driver on the ad. "But a reverse 180 is different. I'd never done one before. Bnt I practiced a few days and dialed it in."

The producers also asked Hessler to jump the Vette—then added a caveat: He couldn't

so many effects shots." All told, Chevrolet dropped an estimated \$750,000 on the Digital Domain tab alone.

With the visuals in the can, all that remained was finding the right ear-candy. The producers experimented with hip-hop and heavy metal, but, hey, the average Corvette buyer is 53 years old—how about something they could actually tap their toes to? Campbell-Ewald finally opted for the tried-and-true "Jumping Jack Flash," securing the rights to the iconic song for the IKEA-low price of only about \$500,000 (the Stones were feeling generous—and they had a new greatest-hits album to promote).



"A Boy's Dream" finally premiered during the opening ceremonies of the Olympics—to largely enthusiastic reviews. "The ad was missing some bragging rights; I don't think it was clear how the 2005 Corvette was different from the 2004 model," says Jean Halliday, Detroit bureau chief for *Advertising Age* magazine. "But it was a cool commercial."

Very soon, however, all was not rosy in boy's dreamland. "I started receiving complaints on our Web site," says Janette Fennell, founder and president of Kids And Cars (www.kidsandcars.org), a group formed in 1997 to promote child auto safety. "People were saying, 'Have you seen this ad? It shows a kid driving. It should be pulled off the air.' I hadn't seen it, but my nine-year-old son had. I asked him to describe it, and I took notes. When I finally saw the ad a few days later, it was striking: my son had remembered it verbatim."

Fennell says her only objection to "A Boy's Dream" was its use of an underage driver. "I think the Corvette is cool. I'd give the ad an A-plus for creativity. But they did show an illegal act—a boy driving. Kids are impressionable. Kids learn from what we show them. We have many incidents of kids getting the keys and driving cars and getting injured or killed. I was shocked to see a commercial like that on the air."

Fennell called friend Judith Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (www.saferoads.org), an alliance of consumer, health, and safety groups and insurance companies. "I had a personal reaction to the ad," Stone says. "It bothered me that they were using children—despite the fact that it's a dream sequence. After talking with a colleague in the highway-safety community, we decided we should do a joint letter."

Stone drafted a protest to GM chairman G. Richard Wagoner, chiding the ad's depiction of a boy driving a car and asking GM to pull the

commercial from the airwaves. "Ads glorifying speed and high performance are common enough these days, but this is one of the worst and most reprehensible produced by the auto industry," wrote Stone. "Auto industry ads promoting these illegal behaviors, especially in sports and other muscle-type cars, are suspect because they target young people, and this ad unabashedly sinks to a new low." Among those also signing the letter were Fennell, Clarence Ditlow (executive director, Center for Auto Safety), and Joan Claybrook (president, Public Citizen).

GM never officially acknowledged the letter, but by the next morning the company had pulled the ad. Company officials decline to confirm the exact number of times "A Boy's Dream" aired, but it's a safe bet that it played at least six or seven times before getting the hook. With production and airtime costs, that means Chevrolet probably spent at least \$14 million just to see its blockbuster ad go up in smoke (the company had also gone to the expense of mastering the ad in high-resolution 2K format, intending to show it in movie theaters as well).

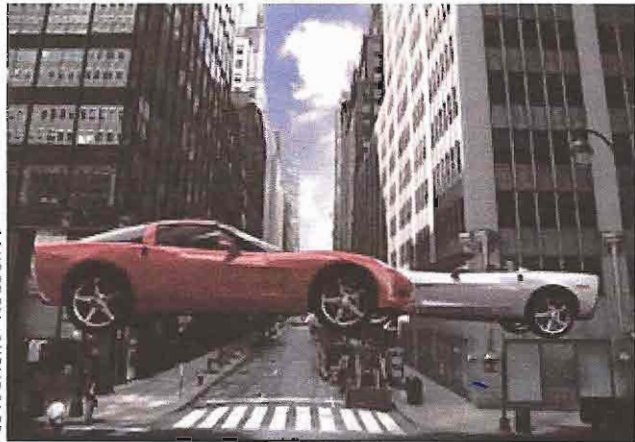
"I'm glad they did it [pulled the ad]," says Stone. "I heard GM also posted a note on its Web site saying it would never again use kids driving or cars flying through the air."

"Safety is a big part of our position," says Chevy general manager Brent Dewar. "We were very thoughtful that the execution of the ad had to be a dream. We try to push the envelope, but we don't want to offend. If there is some concern, we'll respect that and move on. But I don't want this boy to stop dreaming. It's not about dreaming about driving a car, it's about the passion of what a Corvette is. Me, I'm still dreaming. That's our role."

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Chevrolet Corvette

British filmmaker Guy Ritchie directed this prime-time ad, which showed an underage driver having fun breaking traffic laws in a Corvette. General Motors pulled the ad after consumer and safety groups wrote a letter to the company.