



## **On stage: Healing the wounds of war**

Former Marine's new theater company aims at helping veterans cope with the emotional and psychological aftereffects of their service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

BY JIM FARBER  
RAVE!

On Sept. 10, 2001, Sean Huze, then age 26, formerly of Baton Rouge, La., was living the relatively carefree life of a cocky wanna-be actor and would-be writer in Hollywood. The most important thing on the horizon was his next audition.

Then came Sept. 11.

On Sept. 12, filled with patriotic payback fervor, Huze enlisted in the Marines. And a year-and-a-half later, infantryman Huze (nickname, "Hollywood") deployed with the 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion to take part in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Huze would see action in Nasiriyah and Tikrit, for which he would receive a Certificate of Commendation and the Marine Corps Achievement Medal, the Combat Action Ribbon, a Meritorious Promotion (to corporal), a Presidential Unit Citation, the Iraq Campaign Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, the National Defense Service Medal and the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon.

But when Huze returned to the U.S. in 2004 (remaining on active duty at Camp Lejeune, N.C.), it all began to fall apart. He suffered from recurring migraines (the result of a vehicle accident in Iraq), bouts of depression and outbursts of violence -- all symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Far from alone, Huze saw how other returning vets were suffering, attempting to, as Huze puts it, "self-medicate themselves" with drugs, alcohol and, in the most extreme cases, suicide.

Determined not to go down that road, Huze immersed himself in the creative process that almost certainly saved his life -- he began to write a play. The result was "The Sandstorm: Stories From the Front," a thinly veiled, brutally honest account of his Iraq war experiences.

After mustering out of the Marine Corps on March 7, 2005, Huze headed for Hollywood, where 10 days later he was on stage performing in the first production of "The Sandstorm." And when word began to spread about this first eyewitness drama written by a veteran of the Iraq war, Huze found himself in the national spotlight.

Tonight, the Marine-turned-playwright will celebrate the opening of his third Iraq war-related play, "The Wolf," which focuses on the devastating effects of PTSD on returning vets and their families. It's a premiere that also will mark the debut of the VetStage Theatre Company in Hollywood.

Founded by Huze, VetStage is the first theater company devoted to helping Iraq and Afghanistan war vets by using the cathartic power of playwriting and acting. And if all goes well, and ongoing support for the project can be found, Huze sees a day when VetStage Theatre may serve as a prototype for similar projects throughout the country.

"It's been three years and change since I got back from Iraq," says the wiry Huze, sitting in VetStage's makeshift office. "And although it's cliché-sounding, it feels like a lifetime ago, so much has happened in that time.

"Who would have thought that growing up with a strong theater background would save my life -- not as in I wouldn't be here anymore, but as in salvaging the quality of my life," Huze says. "Without a doubt, it's allowed me to back away from the brink. Theater gave me something to turn to. I didn't have to turn to cocaine. I didn't have to turn to alcohol. It didn't have to be suicide."

When talking with Huze about VetStage, it's virtually impossible not to be affected by his passion.

"I know it sounds corny, like 'Field of Dreams,' but I believe if we build it they will come," he says. "We've just opened the doors to this thing, and we've already got 16 members of the VetStage Theatre Company. I can't even tell you how they found it."

The goal, he says, is to provide a haven of creativity and exploration, where vets of every talent level -- from rank amateurs to seasoned professionals-- can come and learn in productions and workshops. It's all about theater as therapy.

Huze has a solid understanding of the emotional needs of these veterans.

Coming home should have been a happy time for him. But it wasn't. The demons he'd encountered in Iraq would not let go of his soul.

"When I first came back there was a lot of emotional detachment," he remembers. "It was very difficult for me to relate to other people," including his now ex-wife, Nikki, and their young son, Andrew.

When they visited Sean's home in Baton Rouge shortly after his return from Iraq, Huze says, they found the pillars of the old house covered in vast yellow ribbons with a sign proclaiming "Welcome Home!"

Initially, Huze recalls, it was a grand reunion, as everyone rejoiced at having their hero-warrior-son back. Then an uninvited guest, the Iraq war, made its presence felt.

"It's the little thoughts that go through your mind," Huze says. "I'm smelling meat cooking in a barbecue pit, and it reminds me of a guy we nicknamed 'Mr. Crispy,' that burned to death in his car during a fire -- it smelled exactly the same. That's not the kind of thought that's in keeping with a happy family reunion. There's a part of you that accepts that you're back. But there's another part that's constantly running through what you've experienced.

"Back in 2003," Huze continues, puffing hard on a cigarette, "serving in Iraq was something you felt you could hang your hat on. There are times now when the topic comes up that you just want to melt away.

"I don't know that any of us expected back in 2003 that we would be coming up on the four-year anniversary of this war and that we would still be there, and, if anything, that the situation we're looking at today is worse than it was when we declared 'mission accomplished' in May 2003. Now I think we're at a point where you have to cut your losses.

"It's really unfortunate and I hope it doesn't diminish the tremendous sacrifice our 1½ million men and women have made," he says. "But I would be willing to bet that the voices of the fallen, if they could be given a voice, would say they don't feel honored by having anyone else join them."

The big question, Huze says, is, "Was it worth it?"

"Everyone's got an opinion," he says. "But the fact that we're having to ask ourselves if it was right or wrong is a problem. When I started asking myself that, it made me dig deeper. I don't accept the rhetoric anymore."

The issue that plagued him the most, Huze admits, was how easily he adjusted to the horrors of war.

"I was amazed how coming from a background of the arts -- sensitivity and emotional expression -- that I could go to Iraq and very quickly -- I'm talking about during the first few days of the war -- completely shut down emotionally. No matter how bad it was, it didn't bother me. How could a father who places his child above everything else in the world, see a child lying dead by the side of the road and say '[expletive] it. That's how it goes'? I needed to understand that."

Grim as it is, the answer, Huze decided, was pure survival.

"Becoming cold or callous or unfeeling is actually a very normal psychological process in a war zone," he says. "The problem is when you get out of that war zone, your psyche wakes up and says, 'You know that stuff you didn't process at the time -- when I let you off the hook because someone was shooting at you, and I knew you couldn't think about the old lady caught in the crossfire -- well now you're sitting here watching the news, so it's time to think about it. Let me dump this one on you!'"

"Iraq will always be with me for the rest of my life," he says. "But I'm able to process it now and feel it and own it. I can take a full breath and let it go. And that's a result of the craft of theater."

Huze says he spent the first year-and-a-half out of the Marine Corps using rage to fuel everything he did.

"Now I can come from a place of love for my fellow veterans and my country," he says. "The next thing for me is to find a way to pass it on."

ON STAGE

**What:** "The Wolf."

**When:** Opens at 8 tonight and plays at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays, through May 5.

**Where:** VetStage at the Art/Works Theatre, 6569 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles.

**Tickets:** \$25.

**Information:** 323-960-5775 or [www.thewolfplay.com](http://www.thewolfplay.com).

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