

Salman Rushdie : Moderator describes 'tragic irony' and 'horror' as violence on Rushdie unfolded

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Ralph Henry Reese, co-founder of project that offers exiled writers refuge, says attack should serve as wake up call - and call to action.

Moments before Salman Rushdie was nearly murdered at a public event in western New York on Friday, he had signed up to become a roving envoy for writers in mortal peril, agreeing to travel across the US to encourage cities to provide asylum and protection for artists in need.

The bitter irony - that within minutes of having made this pledge Rushdie was himself stabbed 10 times on stage - was revealed by the event's moderator, who was also injured in the assault.

In his first press interview since Friday's violence, Ralph Henry Reese - co-founder of a Pittsburgh project that offers refuge to exiled writers known as the City of Asylum - told the Guardian that shortly before going on stage he and the novelist discussed expanding the program across America.

"I asked Salman would he be willing to travel to promote the idea of cities of asylum and grow them in the US," Reese recounted. "He signed up."

Reese said that Rushdie, 75, was in effervescent spirits when they arrived at the venue, the Chautauqua Institution. The author's prior work has attracted death threats for years. But, Reese said, "He was very upbeat in the green room, the way he is."

They had been looking forward to continuing the discussion about the importance of offering asylum to imperiled writers when the event began, taking their seats on stage at 10.45am. "We go out minutes later on stage," Reese said. "He wanted to talk about welcoming writers in exile into communities and how positive that is for everyone."

Then a man leapt up on the stage and rushed towards them. "It was a tragic irony in so many ways," Reese said. "The horror of it, all the layering of the realities."

He went on : "Here was Rushdie who had lived this already, who was speaking so courageously for many years, who was about to talk about his experiences and the value of protecting writers, and now we have this extraordinary materialisation happening right on stage. It was so resonant of why we need to defend precisely those values."

Reese declined to talk about what he saw or heard during the attempt on Rushdie's life, saying he may have to testify in future legal proceedings. But he did describe the surreal sense as the violence unfolded.

"Initially I thought this was somebody coming up doing the worst case joke in the world, a joke on

what had happened in the past, not a real thing," Reese said. "Looking back on it, I suppose I should never have thought that given Salman's life story. Then, obviously, it became very real."

Reese, during Rushdie's stabbing, suffered facial injuries that required hospital treatment. He said his ailments were "meaningful enough, but not anything like those Salman suffered".

For 48 hours, Reese had no idea whether the novelist would live or die. Over the weekend it was revealed that Rushdie had been stabbed ten times in the neck, an eye, the abdomen and thigh.

Reese woke up Sunday morning to a statement from Rushdie's son, Zafar Rushdie, which said that though the writer was still in critical condition in hospital in Erie, Pennsylvania, he had been taken off a ventilator and was able to say a few words.

"His usual feisty & defiant sense of humour remains intact," Zafar Rushdie said.

Reese laughed heartily when he read those words, saying, "It is joyous that Salman is in recovery. 'Defiant humour' is quite him. If you can imagine living with such a threat over your head for years, if you didn't have defiant humor, as he does, I don't know how you would cope and contribute so much to the pursuit of freedom of thought."

Rushdie has been subjected to a fatwa calling for his death since 1989, when the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued it in the wake of the publication of the novel *The Satanic Verses*, which some Islamic leaders regard as blasphemous. As a result, the Indian-born, British-American novelist spent much of the following decade in hiding.

In 1997, while Rushdie was under deep British government protection, he gave a speech at the University of Pittsburgh at the invitation of the English writer Christopher Hitchens, who was on the faculty at the time. Reese attended and heard Rushdie talk about the critical value of offering help to endangered writers.

That inspired Reese to set up City of Asylum.

The group currently supports five exiled writers on the programme, having converted several abandoned homes in Pittsburgh into refuges.

Reese hopes that the shock and horror of Friday will act as a wake-up call – and a call to action – for people in America and beyond. He hopes that in the short term additional security will be provided for Rushdie "at the very minimum until they understand what's going on here, and until he can express his own wishes".

In the longer term he hopes that writers around the world will continue to create in the spirit of Rushdie.

"A spirit of fearlessness and truth to yourself – don't be intimidated, if anything you should be re-energised by what we have just been through, and challenged not to let yourself down," Reese added.

For himself, Reese plans to move on and redouble his efforts to provide homes for writers under threat. He quotes a fellow advocate whose mantra is that joy is an act of resistance.

"At the end of the day," Reese said, "that should inspire us all."

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P.-S.

- The Guardian. Sun 14 Aug 2022 23.00 BST :
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/aug/14/salman-rushdie-attack-moderator-describes-horror>

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