

## “Sacred mischief”



Tracey Schmidt in a barn near Asheville, NC. Photograph by David Dietrich  
Tracey Schmidt stands in front of a painting that includes a Hafiz quote from one of Daniel Ladinsky's collections of translations. Photo by David Dietrich

"Great poetry can be like spending time with the grandeur of nature, and really, in a way, having beauty speak to you," says poet Daniel Ladinsky, who is well known for his renditions of the works of 14th century Persian lyric poet, Hafiz.

Ladinsky recently published *A Year with Hafiz: Daily Contemplations*, and will present these poems during a post-Valentine's Day event at Malaprop's, along with local poet Tracey Schmidt and musician Chris Rosser.

The words of Hafiz read like missives to a sweetheart: *Love Is the great work Though every heart is first an Apprentice*

So writes Ladinsky in his translation of "The Great Work."

But, Schmidt notes, Hafiz's poems, written in a style known as a ghazal, were meant for

his Sufi master. "Gabriel then directed Hafiz to a spiritual teacher who lived in Shiraz," Ladinsky writes in *A Year with Hafiz*. "The angel told Hafiz to serve this teacher in every way and his wish would be fulfilled."

If serving a teacher sounds like the antithesis of all things romantic and poetic, Schmidt offers this take: "If you're trying to write about spiritual things, sometimes it can get very ungrounded and preachy, neither of which I really care for. I realized poetry lends itself to paradoxical thinking." And, in the case of Ladinsky's Hafiz renditions and Schmidt's own elegantly simple freeform work, the subject of teacher or nature or the experience of being human in the wide world can also serve as a metaphor for romantic love.

"I'm so aware that the unseen worlds are alive and well and it's the privilege of the artist to share that with people," says Schmidt. "Poetry seemed the perfect way to express those unseen worlds in a way that lets you bypass the mind and go right to the core of things."

In her book, *I have fallen in love with the world*, she offers this verse: "*Lock the Door,*" *She said. But the Fox at my heart Said "Open" And I did.*

Schmidt, who is a photographer by profession, started taking The Artist's Way course from sometimes Asheville-based poet and teacher James Navé in 2000. These days she teaches her own creativity classes which, she says, "allow you to own it. As an artist, there is nothing worse than getting into a block."

Schmidt's photographic exhibit, *The Awakening of Turtle Island: Portraits of Native Americans*, opened in Atlanta during the '96 Olympics. When it was suggested that she turn the collection of images into a book, she decided to pursue writing classes. When poetry was first mentioned, she thought, "There's something I don't need: a hobby that makes no money." But then, says Schmidt, "I had an experience where I realized poetry had the power to tell me what I was feeling when I didn't know what I was feeling. And I just said, 'I'm in.'"

Ladinsky says that he first learned of Hafiz and Rumi (another mystical Persian poet who predates Hafiz by more than a century) as a student in 1969 when he read the book *God Speaks* by 20th-century India spiritual master Meher Baba. Ladinsky lived, for a time, in India among Meher Baba's disciples. In his 2006 book, *I Heard God Laughing: Poems of Hope and Joy*, Ladinsky recounts talking with a long-term member of Meher Baba's circle who revealed that the spiritual teacher considered Hafiz "a perfect master and a perfect poet."

In 2005, Ladinsky wrote the essay, *My Portrait of Hafiz*, in which he says, "I think this old great Persian master and I once shared some bread together, and some magnificent wine he poured into me, that is still there and fermenting." This, the poet muses, "caused all my words, vision and (hopefully) sacred needed mischief. Millions have now come to hear his name through my work."

Some scholars and critics have spoken out against Ladinsky's renditions, which are not technical translations as Ladinsky doesn't speak or read the Persian language, nor does he adhere to the format of the ghazal. Instead, Ladinsky's interpretations seek to (as he explains in *God Laughing*), "reflect in English the sweetness and profundity of Hafiz's poetry. ...I wanted to find ways to release that spirit in our own language."

To *Xpress* he says, "Good poetry can be vital company: Very healthy (both grounding and uplifting) for one to read and imbibe. Real poetry can be a great teacher and friend." *A Year* was written with the idea of a reader sitting quietly with the book.

Having contemplated Hafiz for two decades himself, Ladinsky says "There is a lot of me in my Hafiz work." But his newest writing takes him away from the ancient Persian poet and into new territory: that of haiku. He says that he has recently presented his editor at Penguin with proposals for five books of haiku (including the titles *Tattoos on the Buddha*, *Haiku the Ink* and *A Bee Carried Off the Rose Garden*), though these are his own creations rather than renditions of already existing verse.

"No doubt I am influenced on many levels, as anyone is, by a teacher who touches their heart and soul," he says. "So every poet I have ever worked with I feel has helped, in some way, to train (and prepare) me to write haiku." One of his new poems is: *Cuddled as they were the falling snow melted before it touched them.*

The immediate future holds a rare author tour. Ladinsky and Schmidt, who met at a retreat in South Carolina, will share a number of dates, include the Malaprop's reading, where they will be accompanied by locally based world musician Chris Rosser. Says Schmidt: "Music and poetry are a perfect combination."

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**who:** Daniel Ladinsky, Tracey Schmidt and Chris Rosser **what:** Celebrating *A Year with Hafiz* and other poetry **where:** Malaprop's **when:** Saturday, Feb. 18 (7 p.m., \$10 per person includes \$5 Malaprop's gift card. <http://www.malaprops.com>

### **About Alli Marshall**

*Alli Marshall is the arts writer and editor at Mountain Xpress. She's lived in Asheville for more than 20 years and loves live music, visual art, fiction and friendly dogs.*

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