

SET & LINK

An Unexpected Invitation



Melissa Das-Arp



Toronto Tabla Ensemble:

A charitable, non-profit organization promoting culture and art in Toronto. Their CDs and videos have won numerous awards.

Melissa Das-Arp of the Toronto Tabla Ensemble was intrigued by Rob's YouTube videos of Scottish country dancing. A project began to take shape. She proposed producing a collaborative four-minute music video where Indian and Scottish dancers would perform together.



The video is to promote the ensemble's new CD album, called *Unexpected Guests**. We (RSCDS Toronto) thought this a good publicity opportunity — the Ensemble has an effective marketing system, and it was a chance for wider exposure to other cultural groups. The green light was given, and on January 26, Scottish and Indian dancers met for the first time.

We were introduced to the project and told how it would unfold. Most importantly, we heard the music: a unique fusion of bagpipes and Indian tabla. The tabla is a pair of small hand drums, one slightly larger than the other, played by using the fingers and palm of the hand to create different sounds. Through this constant drumbeat, the 'pulse' of the performing music, we hear the bagpipes.

The music track was supplied by Ritesh Das and Craig Downie, of the Celtic pop group Enter The Haggis (Craig is son-in-law of piper Peter Cotton, well known to Toronto dancers). The pipe tunes we would dance to were *Bonnie Ellen* (strathspey), *Durham Police* (pipe march), and *Sleepy Maggie* (reel). There was an initial challenge: Do we concentrate on the melody of the tune, or take our cue from the incessant beat of the tabla? The pipes, of course, won the day — the Scots side would not be found wanting! With both musical instruments strong and dynamic in their own right, you might wonder if they could

possibly blend. But blend they did and the result is striking and dramatic. Arlene Koteff, along with Moira Korus, coordinated our dancing; Jaya Chawla led the Indian dancers. There was quite a range of ages in our sets as young dancers from the Rosedale youth group were involved, and it was a pleasure how seamlessly we all blended together.

Video recording began in earnest on February 23 at Pie In The Sky Studios on Donlands Avenue. We arrived early in the morning, some of us desperate for coffee, and with great relief found it kindly provided.

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Rehearsal photo by Donald Holmes



After the caffeine wake-up, it was time for the ladies' makeup and hair styling treatment. The men had it easy, they only had to endure a discreet touch of powder – if absolutely necessary! Then, beauty treatments completed, we waited. Once technicians finished testing for lighting, sound, camera angles, etc., they were ready for us.

Walking onto the film set seemed like entering a surreal world. Everything – floor, walls, ceiling – was painted white; long white drapes hung around the sides. If it wasn't for the unforgiving concrete floor, it was almost magical. Huge bright lights lit the area. The only things breaking up the whiteness were three dark pseudo rocks, one with a black tree behind it. We wondered if this scenery could represent RSCDS dances; *Rocks of Gibraltar*, or perhaps *The Haggis Tree*?

Our dancing instructions were strict: heads up, no looking at the camera, and smile... smile... smile. A technician reminded us, seriously, that the camera was on us ALL the time and from that moment, smiles were set on faces.

With the camera rolling, and after what seemed like 389 dance tries (perhaps a slight exaggeration), came the welcome words, "Thank you, that's a wrap".

Our short dancing piece (figure of eight, reel, setting and crossing, inverted triangles, hands across) was now "in the can".



The video would be edited and integrated with the Indian dancers and Tabla Ensemble's performance. We were finished, for now. We had a few hours free time while the crew recorded the tabla group, with dancers performing Dandiya Raas (*dandiya* are sticks, *raas* means emotions).

Late afternoon, and we're back again. We now joined the Indian group, and to the sound of bagpipes and tabla, we all danced together forming one large circle. As the drum beat gradually slowed down, so did we, and began dancing in Strathspey tempo. This change of pace signalled the performance was drawing to a close. It ended on a lovely multi-cultural note— a simple, yet very effective gesture of friendship. Our youngest dancer, Samira from Rosedale, and Syom, a 12-year-old Indian boy, meet in the centre of our circle where... [ah, but you must wait to see the video!]*

It was a great experience; nothing ventured, nothing gained. By stepping into a different world, we highlighted Scottish country dancing and introduced ourselves to new audiences. We hope they will enjoy the video as much as we enjoyed being part of this creative effort. ... Sheena Gilks

* The CD release date is June 19, 2020 – available on iTunes. The video will be posted on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram.
 • The CD release party is planned for Sept. 19, 2020, at the Harbourfront Centre. If social distancing is still in place, the back-up plan will be detailed in September's *Set&Link*.



Thanks to the Toronto Tabla Ensemble for photos of this event