

Report: Classic Academy (19th March 2006)

Matt Johnson

Winterguard took its last trip north this season for Classic Academy, hosted by Northern Academy at the Crystal Leisure Centre, Stourbridge. With a healthy field of 16 guards competing, several of whom had not met since the season opener in Stoke, the day's competition was thrilling and highly enjoyable across all of the classes.

Cadet Class

The **Avenger Cadets** opened today's contest with their show entitled "Mission: Impossible". Having had their first performance of the season in Chippenham, this would be the first time for me to see this show. The opening movement and rifle work had good characterization, with the flag work showing off some lovely accent work and some pretty good forms on the floor. The mood change into "Men in Black" was handled adeptly, and the appearance of an alien on the floor garnered much amusement from the audience! The execution throughout the show was perfectly passable with wisely conservative vocabulary, matching the abilities of the members very well indeed. The concept was very well "sold" to the audience, in what is best described as an elegantly simplistic programme for this very young guard. This was a fine second performance of their season which both the guard and audience enjoyed immensely, very well done! (*1st, 32.75*)

Atlantic Dawn were next – and last – to take the floor in today's short Cadet Class competition. The opening worked very nicely indeed, with a good change in form and combination of flag and movement work, albeit with slightly unsure timing. There was some really nice effect with the double flag feature, of which perhaps a little more could be made, along with some enjoyable and occasionally gifted ideas in drill and choreography, well-suited to the guard's abilities. Vocabulary and execution throughout the show were adequate and usually convincing, but the show didn't seem to have a particularly strong reflection of the soundtrack, nor any sense of development as it progressed. It is excellent to see these very young guard members performing and enjoying doing so! Atlantic Dawn has continued to make pleasing progress throughout this season; I wish them a successful day at Finals. (*2nd, 30.00*)

Junior Class

Atlantic Dawn were first to perform in today's Junior Class competition. The movement opening was reasonably strong – there were some differences in interpretation but nothing major. However, I nearly missed the solo flag at the back-right of the floor: the staging in this opening is very wide indeed. A strong sequence and accent followed, with passable vocabulary and some highly legible forms being manipulated. Timing and transitions were the Achilles heel for this performance: timing was generally rather ragged throughout, and transitions were rather chaotic at times and didn't really fit logically into the development of the soundtrack. The rifle work was reasonable – despite the differing technique and interpretation, the vocabulary being attempted was adequate. As we moved towards the conclusion, some good development was in evidence, with a double flag feature making good use of a timbre change in the soundtrack. The ending with its push to the front of the floor was highly convincing, but felt a little disjointed from the rest of the show. This felt like a significantly more confident performance than the previous performances, but technique and the mechanics of the show didn't quite live up to the billing. Nevertheless, this was a pleasant show to watch, and I look forward to seeing its next evolution at Finals. (*6th, 43.7*)

The Academy took us to the boxing ring next for “Round 1”. The movement at the beginning of the show felt much stronger, with a strong solo flag toss but rather variable timing throughout, including during a passable sequence. The big mood change into the “Ready to Rumble” section was slightly anticipated, but once into the new motive things settled well. There was some very good staging here – four silks staging a solo rifle, showing off some strong vocabulary and good execution and timing, later followed by a rifle, flag and movement combination. However, with only six members, trying to arrange three separate elements on the floor is hard and is perhaps a little over-sophisticated. The finale flag feature works very well indeed – the very end was a little weak, but overall it was a very satisfying end to the show. There was a big jump in the performance level – the show was delivered with much more confidence today, and is making solid and steady progress. *(5th, 48.2)*

With their show featuring “Beautiful Boy” and “Crazy Chick”, the **Anchormen** were next. Their opening movement feature was well-staged with a strong form and good accent work; there was a hint of difference in the interpretation but overall it was highly convincing, with a good range of vocabulary present. The introduction of the silks worked well, with solid execution and reasonable timing throughout, but perhaps felt a tiny bit expressionless; this continued into the mood change into “Crazy Chick”, which was passable but not great. The ensemble flag work in this new motive was quite strong, with some interesting vocabulary being delivered well. The movement section passed off reasonably, but there were noticeable differences in execution and interpretation which marred this somewhat. As we approached the ending, some of the staging didn’t really quite work out and there looked like there was something odd going on with intervals between the members. However, the show as a whole reflected the soundtrack very well, and developed strongly. This is a solid, Junior Class show which the audience certainly enjoyed and which I hope the members enjoyed performing too. *(4th, 63.2)*

The **Guardsmen Cadets** then took us back the school playground with their show. The flag feature at the beginning didn’t quite snap together, however this may have been related to the soundtrack being played more quietly than usual – the unit recovered well from this though. The ensemble flag and solo sabre developed really well, with some good characterization and convincing performance skills becoming evident; however some of the forms were rather unclear and not as clean as they could have been. The big mood change into “Baggy Trousers” was good, with the combination of sabres and silks showing off some very nice ideas in the equipment book. The staging change from silks to movement and silks was very elegant indeed, with much improved timing and execution; however, the subsequent change to rifle and silk was perhaps not quite so strong. The ensemble flag section closing off this motive was very creditable, with some interesting vocabulary and good execution drawing the audience in for the mood change back to the original motive and the finale, which with its solo flag and movement was very pleasing indeed. Indeed, both the technical books were impressive and earned them deserved caption wins “downstairs”. Overall this was a very good show with strong suits in development, its reflection of the soundtrack, and how it communicates to the audience. The members were clearly more confident in their performance, but it felt as if the show wasn’t quite as ‘snappy’ as it had been at Burgess Hill or as it should be at Finals to get maximum effect. That said – a very enjoyable show indeed, with the scores going very much in the right direction for a very good result at Finals. *(2nd, High Equipment and High Movement, 77.3).*

We then followed the “Yellow Brick Road” with **Pride Cadets’** show. The opening movement feature showed off a very good early sequence, with impressive timing and execution highlighting some good vocabulary. The programme developed very nicely in coordination with the soundtrack, building to a big double flag section which was very enjoyable indeed, with a great use of colour on the floor. The staging was generally very good indeed – at times it was perhaps a tiny bit wide – on one occasion I almost lost some solo feature movement at the front left and right due to the width involved. The transition to the new motive was good – the mood change was perhaps not immediate, but quickly became convincing. Both the flag and rifle work which followed was generally very good indeed, with a series of tosses being exquisitely staged and “cued up” for the audience! The transition and the push towards the audience on ensemble flag were excellent, and the finale itself with the change of silks was highly satisfying. This was a very clean and exciting show, with excellent development as the programme progressed reflecting the soundtrack very well indeed. Vocabulary and execution throughout were good with moments of brilliance, and the guard members are clearly showing how much they enjoy performing with this fun concept. A great performance, and an excellent preparation for Finals, where I am sure that this guard will shine. *(1st, High Ensemble and High General Effect, 79.7)*

Northern Academy concluded the Junior Class with “The Sound of Silence”. The opening feature with its individualized movement was very good – this can be hard to get right, but here it felt cohesive. The solo flag work is staged well and provides good development into the main part of the music. The transition to full ensemble movement felt rather on the tight side, however, the set pieces themselves were convincing, providing very nice ‘tableau’ scenes at cadence points. A sabre and silk section followed, with good vocabulary and execution in both disciplines, but with the section feeling just a little unclear – that said, the sabre tosses at the front of the floor were a highlight. The mood change that is reflected in the music is quite strong, but I didn’t really see it reflected in the program – the timing on the flag line following this was perhaps slightly on the ropey side but still very passable. Throughout the second half of this show, the guard put a lot of effort into some tricky vocabulary which was on the whole very well-executed. At times the ensemble didn’t quite feel like it was meshing very well, and while accents were delivered with conviction they were perhaps a little ragged. However, the concept and its delivery are both very good indeed – the mature interpretation of the soundtrack into the concept for this programme is truly gifted and is well-sold to the audience. This was an enjoyable and enthusiastic performance, which has scope to improve in the next two weeks – while they will take the top seed going into Finals, NAPA absolutely must not be complacent and will need to work hard to secure the placing they deserve. *(3rd, 71.5)*

‘A’ Class

Electrix began the day’s ‘A’ Class contest with their show based on the film and musical “Billy Elliot”. The opening movement feature reflected the soundtrack very well, but the use of multiple stages was not really convincing. The ensemble flag work which followed was passable, but the timing across the ensemble was not very good at all, with the program and the soundtrack parting ways. The mood change was handled well, with a big, albeit rather loose, solo toss followed by some enthusiastic movement and good accent work. The weapons work was not great – the sabre vocabulary was noticeably weak, while execution on both weapons was passable. There were a few staging problems – in a section with silks, sabres and rifles the weapons dominated to the extent that the flags were hardly noticeable. The evolution to the finale was reasonably constructed, with movement and rifle transitioning to an ensemble flag feature, but the ending itself was not adequately developed – it felt like the show rammed to a stop rather than reaching there with elegance; development throughout this show was a rather weak element. Despite the weak transitions and their deviation from the soundtrack, the set pieces throughout were really quite good and reflected the music well. The sheer enjoyment and effort from the members of the guard really shines through, and while this may not be the strongest show in ‘A’ Class this year it has undoubtedly been enjoyed by the crowd. For their first year in Winterguard, Electrix are having a good outing, and I wish them all the best for Finals. *(4th, 38.4)*

Next were **The Academy** and "The Starry Night". The opening movement and flag work was solid, with good vocabulary and execution, but slightly rocky timing. The staging of the solo sabre was effective, and then the introduction of the full ensemble flag had very good effect and timing. Accents and sequences were generally well-timed and convincing, but transitions were occasionally less so. The sabre entry at the beginning of "Starry Night" looked a little awkward and inelegant, but the vocabulary being demanded was tricky and, on the whole, the challenges were being answered, with some very good tosses and overall very good reflection of the soundtrack. Bringing the easels onto the floor is a double-edged sword; their presence does very much change the staging dynamic, and the white flag accent from behind the easels is highly effective. However, they do "clutter" the floor somewhat, and cause members further back on the floor to be obscured. The closing movement sequence worked very nicely indeed, concluding an enjoyable and generally elegant performance – significantly improved compared to its previous outings. Movement throughout was perhaps rather inelegant – there is certainly scope for improvement here. There were minor issues with timing throughout this show, but overall this is a very good programme, with very good development and excellent orchestration and reflection of the soundtrack. This show has the possibility of challenging for a medal in two weeks – this relatively young 'A' guard are clearly enjoying performing a "mature" concept, and hopefully they will be driven to put in the work needed to push for the top rankings at Brentwood. (*2nd, 70.2*)

Pride of Bristol were next, with their show to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody". The movement feature to open featured generally good interpretation and pleasing vocabulary, and segued well into a very solid ensemble flag feature. The mood change which followed was convincing, and the multiple staging with the introduction of rifles and sabres to join the silks worked very well, reflecting the soundtrack strongly. Some of the forms being used were rather conservative and occasionally didn't quite hit the mark, with a few interval issues also noticeable. Some of the later flag work was perhaps not as strong as the earlier ensemble feature, with some rather ragged timing and interpretation differences. However, a strong wedge form with the silver silks was very strong indeed and provided great effect. One thing which didn't quite work out is the very challenging mood change in the last section of the show – coming "down" from a high energy section to a calmer element is tricky, and there was still "too much" power coming from the guard and perhaps not enough contrast here. The movement finale itself was good and provided a very satisfying ending. Development throughout was acceptable – there were a few illogical moments; however, the orchestration and reflection of the soundtrack was very good indeed. There was tons of enthusiasm and expression from the guard throughout, but with a programme designed to be a crowd-pleaser from the get-go it could perhaps be said to lack subtlety – this may, however, not be a bad thing! This was a hugely enjoyable performance and the members are clearly having a blast with this show – I am sure that under the lights at Finals this show will shine. (*3rd, 69.0*)

Finally, we were taken to "The Corners of the Earth" by **The Avengers**. The movement opening was very elegantly staged, aptly at the four corners of the floor and involved some tricky vocabulary – however, the timing of it was not particularly impressive. However, this was only a momentarily glitch, as with the introduction of the ensemble silks there was an exquisite accent and phrase with very solid timing indeed, featuring some very good staging and a wide range of vocabulary. The transition to introduce the rifle was rather unclear, but the set piece had excellent interpretation and oozed expression. Another feature from the corners of the floor reflected the soundtrack well, and staged the rifle work in the centre of the floor very nicely indeed. This was swiftly followed by some good connecting work between the silks and the sabres – performance was generally very good with only a few small issues. The late sequence work was particularly noteworthy – but the very few final forms were perhaps slightly chaotic and not as clear as they could have been – a big diagonal line form wasn't fully reached. The ensemble movement which concluded the show was excellent, with great execution and timing, bringing to a close a programme with a striking sense of development, use of colour and phrasing. A clear winner on the day, this performance was very enjoyable and will undoubtedly set the pace for this class in two weeks time. (*1st, with a clean sweep of the captions, 81.7*)

Open Class

The **Guardsmen** opened today's Open Class contest, with their show all about "Today". The visuals for this show have been improved with the addition of a new picture, which develops and changes as the show progresses. It's a lovely idea, but the fact that they have to get a member over to the picture to manipulate it can be slightly off-putting. The movement opening was very well accented and handled solidly, leading into an impressive sabre entry. The addition of the flags was good, but less snappy than the other elements; indeed, the silks were rather ragged for much of the show in comparison to what appeared to be a much improved weapon line despite a few sabre drops. There were some good ensemble moments and very strong reflection of the soundtrack here – staging was also solid, with some multiple stage work involving flags, rifles and sabres showing off some nice ideas in transitions and forms. Solo work was highly enjoyable, with several features really shining. The finale was also handled more elegantly, with a much stronger sense of closure to the show – this, along with the several other changes made throughout the programme has really improved the development and interpretation of the concept. The big win today was on performance values – Guardsmen had a real presence on the floor today and this carried over to the audience. Development is now very strong indeed, and the writing reflects the soundtrack very well throughout, with elegant understanding of amplitude and orchestration. This was a dramatically improved show – my only nit would be that there is perhaps not too much scope for contrast here, but that issue may be overcome through sheer competence in delivering what is provided. With this particularly good result, snapping at the heels of the first place guard today, I shall not be at all surprised if this unit medals at Brentwood – they now have the programme, the means and the will to do so! (*2nd, High Equipment, 77.9*)

The tragic story of Carmen was then retold by **The Academy**. The opening movement feature was pleasing, with good expression coming to the fore; however, staging was perhaps slightly unclear. The introduction of weapons went smoothly, with some solid and elegant vocabulary and execution shown off early; the silks were then added in with good development into the transition followed by a good resolution into the next set piece. While the "higher skills" of interpretation and timing were generally very good in this first section, the execution was perhaps not quite as clean as it could have been. Accents, transitions and forms were all handled very strongly indeed, and hence development of the show was smooth and convincing. Staging was generally adequate for its purposes, but there seemed to be a little nervousness or uncertainty coming across at times which occasionally compromised the effect. The pivotal movement duet in the middle of the show was enjoyable – technically very strong, but perhaps lacking a tiny bit in expression – likewise the following ensemble dance feature. Weapons were generally good to very good; there was some occasional rockiness on the sabres but overall the delivery was very competent indeed. Silks throughout were very strong and convincing, with some excellent accent work particularly in the finale. While the level of performance certainly improved and the show undoubtedly pleased the audience, there was something about the delivery today which didn't quite work out. There is still plenty of scope for cleaning here, as well as further introduction of emotional contrast which perhaps isn't exploited as much as it could be. This was a good, but not outstanding performance – there is definitely the potential here for this to steal a good portion of the limelight at Finals, but in order for that to happen, lots of work is required. (*4th, High Ensemble, 71.5*)

The last time I saw **Pride of Bristol's** Open guard this year was at the season opener at Stoke. Since then, the programme has undergone very many changes, and today's exclamation of "Let There Be Light!" was fundamentally different fare than its predecessor – and much stronger. The movement opener included some very good ensemble interpretation with good control across the individualized work, and very good execution. The introduction of the sabre with a very solid toss worked well and proved an apt reflection of the soundtrack – and then the big mood change switches the direction of the show entirely! The rifle and flag feature showed off some lovely sequence work on both pieces of equipment, with good vocabulary and execution but really rather pedestrian forms. The next motive brings a big ensemble flag feature, with excellent timing and lots of enthusiasm coming from the floor – one thing that Pride consistently do well is the projection of power and enjoyment to the audience! There was a nice moment where a single soloist in the centre of the floor is staged by the remainder all around the boundary of the floor during a very convincing sequence – compared to the slightly repetitive block forms the rest of the show holds this is a very big contrast. The use of multiple stages undoubtedly makes sense with this size of guard, and a split between flag, movement and sabre works reasonably well – but it feels to me that perhaps the movement element could be handled slightly more strongly. Weapons throughout were handled well, perhaps with a few differences in execution and interpretation but nothing too bad at all! The silks were consistently well-timed and executed very strongly indeed, but it looked to me like some of the vocabulary was perhaps not as stretching as it could be. This was a very well-performed show indeed – very convincing, with solid and confident delivery. The concept perhaps doesn't quite mesh with all of the elements of the show, but this is a great improvement over the product at the beginning of the season. *(3rd, 75.4)*

Northern Academy concluded the day's proceedings with their show "JFK". The opening movement featured an excellent sequence and very consistent quality of execution across the ensemble, despite perhaps a couple of slight issues in timing and interpretation. The sabres then joined the fray with a good mood change, showing off some good vocabulary and technique. The ensemble silks work which followed was nicely timed, and then we entered a solid layered work section with multiple stages reflecting the soundtrack very well. Mood changes throughout were handled very well indeed, with the "chaos" in the track being illustrated – yet in a controlled way – on the floor. Rifles were very strong – there were some slight differences across the line, but when working with the flag line they were heavily dominant. Movement work was very good indeed, with lots of expression, contrast and characterization evident, with some very good understanding of the staging responsibilities necessary. The finale is very convincing, but the big overrun of the action on the floor at the end doesn't seem to fit very well. Overall, this is a conceptually very strong show – NAPA clearly know where they are going and what buttons they are trying to push with the audience here. Development through the programme is generally very good, with excellent orchestration particularly at accent points and set pieces. The use of forms on the floor is also strong – there is perhaps some variation in clarity, but this certainly did not detract from my enjoyment of the performance. This was an excellent performance, but it needs to go a big step further in order to compete for the highest places at Brentwood – NAPA are certainly capable of this, and I look forward to seeing the results of their efforts. *(1st, High Movement, High GE, 78.0)*

Between Junior and 'A' Class we were entertained by the **Kidsgrove Scouts** with their inimitable delivery of "Moondance", and the **Forgemen Percussion Theatre** with a pacey and sharp performance!

The day's results only reinforce that the outcome at Finals could really be anyone's this year! With Guardsmen now very hot on the heels of Northern Academy, Pride Cadets opening up a large gap at the head of Junior Class, and the Avengers making the pace in 'A' Class, Finals will be a closely contested affair! Thanks go to Mark Nicholson, Paul Morgan, Nicola Garlick and all at Northern Academy for sponsoring and running the show, our hosts at the Crystal Leisure Centre, Stourbridge, all the WGUK staff, tabulators and judges, all the staff and members of the competing guards, and to everyone who came along to enjoy, clap and cheer all today's performances. See you in Brentwood!

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