

Report: The Academy Awards (12th February 2006)

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After a long dry spell in the South, the heavens unfortunately chose to open over London, and torrential downpours were the order of the day for Winterguard's first ever visit to the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre for this year's Academy Awards, sponsored by the Academy. As has been the case for several years, the London competition attracted many guards, and we were treated to a great competition in all four classes.

Cadet Class

After several problems with the venue's sound system delayed the beginning of the competition, once the problems were resolved the **Guardsmen Nippers** took the floor with their show to music from Disney's "Beauty and the Beast". The early flag and streamer work was noticeably more confident, with this young guard clearly starting to enjoy their performances. The movement work throughout was also generally strong and the show concept is now clearly understood. Progress is slowly being made, and while the writing is perhaps not as complex as that in the majority of other Cadet Class guards, the work being asked of the members seems to be a good match for their abilities. The ending still felt a little abrupt, and I hope to see further development of this promising programme as the season continues. *(4th, 30.50)*

Moonlight were next to perform, with their show using music from "Billy Elliot". The opening movement feature to stage the solo sabre worked very well indeed, and the early sabre toss was very convincing indeed, cueing up the use of streamers to good effect. Ensemble silk work was generally good – some of the timing was a bit rocky, but on the whole the vocabulary was legible with accents particularly well-delivered. Movement was delivered with some aplomb throughout; this along with staging and characterization through the various changes in motives were particularly strong elements of this significantly improved show. As we moved towards the conclusion of this nicely developed programme, the double flag feature was very strong, with some great timing and good visual effect, with the staging responsibilities in the ending being carried off very well indeed. This was a very good performance, with real expression being portrayed and strong understanding of the concept – this show has significant promise. *(3rd, 56.25)*

The **Southern Knights Rugrats** set us a "Puzzle", with plenty of new props including puzzle pieces on the floor and several new colourful flats, all adding to the concept. The opening flag work was very convincing, moving to a strong split stage for movement, sabres and flags. Some of the movement work showed some rather questionable timing, along with the later double flag feature; but this was the exception rather than the rule. There was a very solid sequence between silks, sabres and movement on the right of the floor, and good development using the three separate stages. There seemed to be a lack of confidence and perhaps some of the transitions felt unseemly rushed; however, given the number of changes made to the show this is not unreasonable. The new ending with the puzzle being visibly "put together again" is elegant and provides a showcase for some elegant movement work. This performance was full of character, but not without its rough edges today; once the members are happy with the changes I am sure that the show will continue to develop and come into its own. *(2nd, 64.25)*

Our final performance in Cadet Class today was from the **Starlights**, taking us for a trip on the “Starlight Express”. The ample scenery sets out the show’s concept from the very beginning; the streamers at the opening are very effective, and segue into an impressive rifle section with very good vocabulary and execution. The ensemble silks were very strong throughout, with generally good timing with only occasional glitches, leading into some partner work which was legible but occasionally unstimulating. The changes of motive were handled well, with good characterization and expression permeating the show. Staging of different elements was generally good and occasionally gifted, with only one or two unclear moments where the audience is perhaps not directed as clearly as they could be to the action on the floor. The tempo change late in the show is slightly unconvincing; it’s well on the way to coming across, but right now it isn’t quite there. The finale itself is very enjoyable, with close staging and strong forms coming to the fore, topping off an exciting show. Today’s performance was clearly the class winner, although whether it should be in Junior Class (as seemed somewhat obvious after their first performance at Stoke) is perhaps somewhat debatable considering the rate of improvement of the other units in this class. An excellent show with great use of concept, but the guard cannot afford to be complacent as the competition is certainly catching up. *(1st, 71.75)*

Junior Class

The Academy opened the Junior Class competition with their show entitled “Round 1”. Opening with a movement feature showing off some classic boxing “round cards”, this led into an ensemble silk section which was much more coherent than in previous shows, along with a very convincing sequence; although there were still significant hints of timing problems and issues with the forms on the floor. The movement section involving the towels was reasonable – there were a couple of interval problems which didn’t really help this. The following introduction of the rifles was well-executed, but the vocabulary was noticeably weak and the staging was rather unclear. The finale of this show is markedly stronger than the remainder of the programme at the moment, with some generally good and powerful ensemble flag work giving reasonable effect – however, timing was rather poor. The ending landed at a very agreeable tableau, indicative of the concept as was much of this show. While this programme continues to struggle, this was a significantly stronger performance from TA’s Juniors – there was more evidence of the concept being fleshed out, with choreography added to large portions of the show and good characterization from the members on the floor. With this type of show, the guard will continue to have problems amassing high effect with a small number of members; that said, the slow improvement is promising and I look forward to seeing this guard “knock out” a fine performance in the future. *(8th, 35.1)*

Next to perform were **Essex Marching Corps** with their show “A Latin Sway”. The silk feature at the beginning showed off some very good forms and reasonable execution, but timing and vocabulary left a little to be desired. The transition to movement and then to smaller group flag work went smoothly; the set piece itself was good but there was a hint of unease present at times. Accents, sequences and forms were generally good throughout, and were occasionally excellent – the writing, while using somewhat trivial vocabulary at times, is showing good promise with hints of strong presentation at cadence points and good form manipulation. The lack of weapons here continues to be a bit of a concern, but the guard are performing the silk and movement work being asked of them very solidly indeed. The finale was convincing – there were a few timing flaws but these did not detract from the overall effect. This was a good performance from this debutante organization – they are starting to climb the somewhat steep learning curve that is Winterguard, and the members are putting in a lot of effort, which has been rewarded with the significant improvement in score. This should turn out to be a solid first season for EMC, on which they will be able to build as time progresses. *(7th, 39.3)*

Moonlight then sought to take us on a supercalifragilistic tour with their show to music from “Mary Poppins”. While there was still ample scenery on the floor, I got the feeling that there were fewer props laid out and the floor felt less cramped – hopefully my instincts are correct! The opening with the chimney sweeps showed off some good timing and movement skills, and presented strong characterization and mood by the members which would continue throughout the show. The gradual tempo increase was handled reasonably, and eventually led into a silk feature which proved to be slightly on the rocky side; this would be rectified by the very long but very strong ensemble flag section later on which showed only slight timing issues. Weapons were adequate but not great – the sabres in particular were rather messy at times despite the work being delivered throughout with great aplomb! Staging and transitions varied from excellent to slightly awry – some features were not adequately “signposted” to the audience. The track develops for a long while up to the conclusion of the show – this is not always reflected in the action on the floor, but equally the amplitude being built throughout is going to be hard to match! The introduction of double flags and another tempo acceleration brings us into the finale proper, which is a tour de force: a big three-element sequence which transitions to a big front push works very well indeed, with some excellent execution and lots of power. The show feels really quite long; I have to wonder whether it is close to the time limit for this class? Nevertheless, this performance showed big improvements; the members have really bought into this programme and they will undoubtedly continue to make it one of the real crowd-pleasers of this year’s Junior Class. (6th, 42.9)

Taking the floor next were the **Buttercups** with their show entitled “Spring Is Here”. With a yellow floor with flower motifs, the concept came over early; the movement opening reinforced this with good visual effect with the green cloths, and solid vocabulary and execution being exposed in highly legible forms. The silks were introduced next – while execution was very competent, there were perhaps few real demands being made in the vocabulary. After a convincing sequence, the colour on the floor changes, with some truly incandescent orange flags heralding another strong movement. Sickie rifles were used in a brief foray into weapons, with good work on show with only a few differences in interpretation across the small ensemble. Some forms later on in the programme were a little ragged, but staging throughout was clear and concise. The finale featured a noteworthy double flag feature at the front, staging some good movement work very well indeed. This performance was a great improvement over the guard’s previous outing at Stoke, and this guard’s predilection for rich movement books shone through, gaining them the High Movement caption award. The show has great promise, and is technically well on the road – effort now needs to be placed on portraying the concept and gaining effect in order to make the next step forward. (5th, High Movement, 58.2)

We were welcomed to the “**Alliance Park**” next, with a sign entreating us to “Keep off the grass” during their “Autumn Dreams” show; the new props and scenery changes add much to the communication of the concept from the get-go. The opening segues elegantly from ensemble movement to silks, with some very strong staging and sequence work early on. This split stage continues with the introduction of the sabres, with the unit handling the weapons very competently indeed. The timbre change in the soundtrack was reflected in a good mood change on the floor, and was swiftly followed by a big silk accent – admittedly with little relation to the soundtrack, but I could see how it fitted into the development of the show. Forms were strong throughout, with an impeccable gate manoeuvre well into the performance just one example of this. Sequences were also convincing, and the guard performed confidently throughout. This young Junior Class guard already have a solid understanding of what they are being asked to do, and carried off their performance with some panache and good characterization. The slightly weaker points in this programme are the movement book and effect composition, but the big improvement from the Burgess Hill show was plain to see. While the top of this class is going to be very tight indeed, I have no doubt that Alliance will push hard as the season progresses – this unit may well turn out to be the “dark horse” of the year. (3rd, 62.9)

Mayflower then invited the audience to get “Funkadelic”. The movement opening has good effect but is perhaps slightly pedestrian, but then moves into a strong flag section, with good staging, timing, vocabulary and execution – a solid early feature. The split staging used here is continued, introducing the sabres and a much stronger movement element with some aplomb, with reflection of the soundtrack being a key part of the success of this opening. As the music switches to “Play That Funky Music”, the guard gains much more confidence and we hit a strong stage with silks surrounding the sabres, made even stronger by very good equipment work in both disciplines. When we eventually reach the full ensemble silks, the accents are very powerful indeed and are timed very well with the soundtrack; this develops into a mixed movement and silk section which was much clearer than in previous performances. The finale has a big hit which is generally well-handled by the guard, but perhaps there is a slight mismatch in the amplitude of the effect. This was a much better performance than at Burgess Hill, rewarded by the commensurate increase in score from the judges. The technical work being asked of the guard members is noteworthy – if they can give that much rigour to the overall effect then this will very much feature in the mêlée for the top places. (*4th, 62.5*)

“Carpe Diem – Seize The Day” was the motto on the updated floor from the **Southern Knights** – and it would be fair to say that the guard certainly did that today. Opening with a very strong T-form, the early movement feature was particularly noteworthy; the vastly improved clarity that the clock faces bring to the concept behind the choreography added much to the effect, as well as some excellent timing, expression and characterization. The “big accent that never was” at the end of the first section didn’t quite happen today, but this was recovered by the solid mood change and elegant flag work which followed. The sabres throughout were very strong indeed, and perhaps showed up some timing flaws in the silks that might have otherwise gone unnoticed! The full ensemble flags then ran headlong into another mood change and a *big* accent – lots of power was clearly evident, but timing was occasionally rocky. Forms throughout were good to excellent, and always legible, and understanding of staging responsibilities were also strong – this undoubtedly contributed to their High Ensemble award. The use of the clock face in the finale movement sequence worked very well indeed, topping off a very solid and enjoyable show. With some great vocabulary and execution across the board, this was a joy to watch. (*2nd, High Equipment, High Ensemble, 68.0*)

The **Guardsmen Cadets** took us back to the school playground for our final performance in Junior Class. The ensemble silk opening is incredibly effective, with some great timing and accents on show from the very first beat and strong staging of the movement solo. The sabre work which followed featured good vocabulary and generally good execution, although there was a hint of a timing problem at times. Sequence work was generally excellent – there were some stutters, but at this level that really is a nitpick! The big mood change into “Baggy Trousers” was masterfully handled – the guard really “let go” and they looked like they were really enjoying their performance; getting to this stage is half the battle of getting the show over to the audience! The flag and sabre work here was very well staged and timed, allowing the members to show off some strong vocabulary and highly confident execution. The introduction of the rifles saw some very tough work being demanded – and on the whole being delivered. The change back to “This Used To Be My Playground” was rather rocky though, but the finale involving movement and silks was very convincing indeed. This was a very good performance indeed, and has the potential to be much stronger once some of the technical issues are dealt with. Guardsmen deservedly edged out SK today, but they must work rigorously now to keep on the pace. The programme is certainly capable of winning this class – it’s now down to whether the performers can deliver; personally, I entirely expect them to do so, with some panache. (*1st, High General Effect, 68.8*)

'A' Class

The **Squires** opened today's 'A' Class competition, with their show to John Dankworth's "Further Experiments with Mice". The opening movement feature was reasonable but not great – there were major differences in interpretation across the ensemble despite generally adequate execution. The following transition to the first motive proper was, however, really rather ugly. The introduction of silks and sabres showed off some reasonable skills but in some regrettably limited vocabulary, with a lack of ensemble cohesiveness continuing throughout the show. The next feature with pink silks showed up some good staging involving a circular form and suddenly indicated some real promise for development, but frustratingly it went nowhere and ground to a halt. While the performance itself was fine, again the demands being made on the members were minimal. Later sequence work was rather unsure and unclear, with transitions between set pieces within each feature looking very messy indeed. The rifle work late in the show was executed well, but the vocabulary in use was alarmingly light. The finale involving the blue silks showed some developmental intention and reflection of the soundtrack, and featured a good combination of forms, but had serious timing issues across the ensemble. Overall, this was a passable performance, but it lacked expression and development as the show progressed was almost entirely absent. The effort being put in by the members is noteworthy and obvious; I suspect that they could both deal with greater challenges and improve significantly if the timing issues were resolved. (*8th, 25.5*)

Next were **Moonlight**, performing to Nelly Furtado's "Try". The opening movement staging two sabres provided a strong stage and good forms, and the progression to movement and silks worked very nicely. Vocabulary and execution were generally good, but the whole opening was pervaded by notable interpretation and timing differences. The introduction of the weapons was reasonable but rather messy – there were a few intermediate challenges present in the sabre work, but the rifle section seemed to be over in a flash. The performance took a little time to warm up, but as it did so the timing and expression of the guard improved significantly, with some strong accent work and very competent execution from the ensemble silks. Indeed, the flag line was undoubtedly the strongest element of this unit – the latter half of the show offered some solid and powerful work with good levels of vocabulary and confident execution. Likewise, the work on the floor bore more resemblance to the soundtrack as the performance progressed; several of the later accents were particularly well orchestrated. The finale was particularly convincing, with excellent staging of the solo and a highly effective sequence leading to a pleasing closing tableau. This performance continued Moonlight's slow improvement this year, with a program showing many good aspects but which occasionally falls flat in some areas. The writing in particular shows promise and the confidence of the performers in the concept is growing rapidly – I look forward to seeing how this show evolves. (*6th, 36.5*)

Cohesion then took us to "Brooklyn". The opening was a combination of movement and silks – the silks were reasonable and fulfilled their staging responsibilities well, but the movement itself was a bit of a mess and looked rather unchoreographed. This improved rapidly, with a good progression with more flags and movement, with better vocabulary and execution, leading to a strong split stage between sabres and movement. Something bugged me about the blue flag feature that followed... my notes said something was illogical here, but unfortunately I can't expand on what. The vocabulary and execution on the flags was quite clearly the stronger of this guard's disciplines; weapons work was reasonable but lacking in vocabulary challenges, but movement looked rather weak and unconvincing; a key ensemble movement feature late in the show seemed to lack enthusiastic delivery. There was also a lack of development and horizontal orchestration in much of the show, but some promise was shown in the last third of the programme in the production leading up to the finale and the finale itself. The ensemble flag ending was really quite strong, with good timing and development characteristics, and led to a satisfying conclusion – this could not rescue the entire show, however. The guard is putting in a lot of effort and a fair bit of enjoyment into their performance, but there seems to be a lack of rigour at times. My gut feeling was that the show, while entertaining, doesn't seem to necessarily "tick the boxes" that are demanded of it. (*7th, 29.1*)

Next were **Garrison**, with their show of contrasts. Their opening sabre feature worked very well indeed, with some very solid development through the introduction to the first big mood change. The introduction of very bright orange and yellow silks was solid, and the subtle rifle work showed off some good vocabulary, albeit with a few differences in interpretation and timing. The Irish theme saw some fine and powerful work on the silks, but the following transition to ensemble movement was rather precarious. One of the highlights of this show was the “Bombay Dreams” section with some excellent movement, with great timing and expression throughout, closed out with a very elegant sequence. Movement, weapons and silks were equal partners in the show, but some of the execution could have been better. The finale had a very big accent – massive amplitude, which fit the soundtrack very well indeed and made for a fitting ending. The various styles of music in the soundtrack were generally reflected well, but given that the concept seems to be the disjointedness of the various types of music it is very hard to see any sort of development as the entire show progresses. There are many good and some excellent moments in this show, and while set pieces are generally strong but slightly conservative, the transitions (or lack of them) between motives seem to be a problematic area. The guard have clearly bought into the show though, and their enjoyment while performing was absolutely evident – this counts for much in my book! This was a solid improvement over the previous performance, with plenty of scope to go further in the future. (5th, 42.4)

Reflexions then took the floor, performing to music by Gwen Stefani. The slightly mind-bending opening movement feature shows off some individualized work which functions very well in the mood which the guard is trying to set. I’m not convinced that I “like” the mood, but it’s certainly making me think, which I suspect is its intention! The early movement and rifle work is solidly staged, and the rifle work is particularly praiseworthy, including a flashy transfer, although the feature trick catch didn’t quite work out. It is very hard to gauge expression in the first motive; I’m somewhat unconvinced that the members are happy with where they are supposed to go with this at the moment. However, the second motive is much more obvious and “feels” much stronger, although the tempo change was not handled particularly well – this was somewhat rescued by a very strong accent immediately afterwards. While the set pieces were very good indeed – lots of powerful work on show, with fine vocabulary and execution – the various transitions between set pieces looked rather messy and cramped, and staging of the individual features was rather weak. The ensemble silk section feels *really* long – I don’t know whether that’s because it is, or whether it has a subtle lack of development that doesn’t make it feel as if it is going anywhere. The finale involving the “starburst” solo sabre is really elegantly staged and caps off a generally impressive show; the new finale makes much more sense, but is still a little on the rocky side. The show is clearly on the way up – there’s still a lot of cleaning to do and maybe some thinking to be done on how effective some elements of the show are... the “car” skit is really rather cheesy! However, this is an intensely likable programme, and I am sure that Reflexions will acquit themselves very well as the season progresses. (4th, 51.7)

The Academy then took us on an artistic journey through “The Starry Night”. The opening, with its strong backline staging and clear early forms, is very strong, with a good sense of development introducing the movement soloists. The silks add “colour” both literally and figuratively, and then the sabre work adds some complex vocabulary to the mix. The sabre toss in the middle of the floor gets a little obscured by the flag work at the front, but in other respects it works well, amidst a lot of solid timing. The change of flag colour with the change of timbre in the music is an elegant feature, and the following ensemble silk work is reasonable – generally well executed, but had some differences in timing and interpretation. The motive change introducing the easels does rather clutter the floor and interrupts several of the otherwise good ensemble forms – I can understand the motivation behind doing this, but part of me really doesn’t like it. The sabre work is very strong indeed – great timing and precision throughout, with an impressive ensemble toss following later. Transitions are occasionally tight but passable, but set pieces are generally strong, notwithstanding the easels in the way. The equipment work and ensemble skills being exhibited by the guard are very strong elements in this programme, whereas movement is occasionally not as rigorous as it could be, and effect is occasionally slightly lacking. That said, this was a very strong performance of a great concept, of which the guard already show an immense understanding. Their second place today is richly deserved. (2nd, 64.8)

“Eden” was the destination for **Mayflower’s** performance. The movement feature to open was very strong, with good expression and timing, and used some very clean forms indeed. The introduction of the flags was subtly accented, and split elegantly into two stages with good visual effect. As the sticks came into play, some tricky vocabulary was on show and was generally handled very well; the transition to the rifles also went very smoothly indeed. The weapons programme throughout was generally good, with solid execution and a wide range of vocabulary on show, but there were more timing issues and a little more messiness than in other disciplines. As we moved through the show, the big green flag entry was reasonable but rather untidy, and the contrary motion feature was okay but not entirely convincing. However, the pink flag entry coinciding with the change of motive was very powerful indeed, with lots of commitment and expression on show; the partner work which followed was intricate and very strongly communicated. The finale worked well, but while the soundtrack builds quite a bit of tension, that wasn’t entirely reflected on the floor. This was a very good performance indeed, and a good step up from the previous outing at Burgess Hill. That said, it did feel a bit on the ‘flat’ side and was perhaps a tiny bit expressionless at times. The concept and programme here are perfectly robust and are undoubtedly capable of winning at finals; **Mayflower** must beware that they are not outpaced by other units in this highly competitive class. *(3rd, 63.6)*

The **Southern Knights** concluded today’s ‘A’ Class competition, with their show telling the story of “The Giving Tree”. They opened with a movement feature which was superbly timed and with excellent expression, which introduced the silks making adept use of multiple stages along with some elegant vocabulary and great execution – a really solid start. The ensemble flag feature which followed had some exquisite timing, and then the weapons were introduced on a solid stage and with some very good sabre tosses showing off consistent technique across the ensemble. The soundtrack is reflected well throughout – the music and narration generally match well, and are exploited amply in the programme. The double flag and rifle feature offers up a great visual – there were some tiny tears in the timing, but it was still great to watch. There was real expression on show throughout here – there were a few more timing issues in the gold ensemble silks, but the sequence work and the movement staging were very nice indeed. The use of forms throughout was generally good, but degraded a little as the show progresses. The movement finale is very elegant, and absolutely in concept – it works very nicely indeed. This show took a little while to “grow” (oh dear) on me, but it now grabs me – there is good, if perhaps a mite simplistic, reflection of the narration on the floor, and there is some “make you think” value at work here too, all adding to a convincing programme. The Knights are once again in the hunt – it will be interesting to see how they compare to the guards in the other half of the class who are also making the pace this year. *(1st with a clean sweep of the captions, 73.7)*

Open Class

Moonlight began the day’s Open Class competition with their show entitled “Feelings”. The movement and flag introduction starts well, with good expression and accents but rather questionable staging at times. The addition of the weapons was reasonable, but had some rather messy execution and timing, leading to a sequence nearly getting lost in the mix. The rifle tosses were rather high and loose – this may have been an attempt to reflect the soundtrack but unfortunately it was not convincing. There was some good partner work as we reached the end of the first motive, but I really had to look for it as the staging didn’t really provide strong enough direction around the floor. The change of motive brought a different guard out to the floor – much more enjoyment and enthusiasm was on show. Some of the technical work here was really very ragged though – several forms were very lax, and the flag transfer was very messy indeed. The ensemble flag work proved to be a strong set piece, and the big mood change back to the first motive worked quite well, even if it is slightly on the illogical side. The run into the finale has good development, with some good partner work and a convincing conclusion. This was a significantly improved performance, however, I’m still not overly happy about how the “concept” hangs together – it explains away the combination of music, but that’s about it. However, the guard are working really hard and the performance improvement really shows – slow and steady progress being made here. *(6th, 42.6)*

Next were **Alliance**, performing their show “Trust” to various versions of Kylie Minogue’s “Confide In Me”. This would be their first show with uniforms – black with silver accents, fitting well with the colours already on the floor. The opening movement section showed good ensemble timing, but some of the execution on the solo was a tiny bit ropery with the hint of a staging issue as well. The transition introducing the silks was very solid, with excellent accents and strong forms being produced. The subsequent introduction of the sabres also went well, with a slightly skewed-looking form but very convincing execution and several good tosses. The rifles, on the other hand, were still a bit messy at times, but showed moments of excellent timing and execution. The ensemble silk work throughout was generally good – perhaps slightly unremarkable in comparison to the remainder of this class, but perfectly adequate and well on the way to being clean. The trick vocabulary on silks was strong and showy, gaining significant audience approval. However, forms and transitions on the floor were highly variable; perhaps there was too much reliance on the patterns being shown on the floor, as several forms were very hard to read. Movement work was probably the weaker partner here – the vocabulary is reasonably strong, but execution at times looked notably inelegant. The development into and through the finale was a notable element – an enormous rifle toss is the leading edge of the building to the conclusion, with a very strong and occasionally excellent ensemble flag feature providing good tension and resolution with snappy timing and execution. Alliance are climbing the learning curve that is Open Class admirably; while realistically the top places are out of reach, they might surprise some longer-established units in the race for the middle places. For their first season at this level, they are acquitting themselves very well indeed. (*5th, 61.1*)

Guardsmen then showed the value of “Today” in their show. The opening movement feature reflects the soundtrack very nicely indeed, with some good ensemble interpretation and strong forms. As the sabres entered the floor, they were staged well by the continuing movement, and although there was a big toss, it didn’t really feel effective. This segued to a sabre and silk feature which was generally pleasant to watch, with plenty of power coming from the flag line, but with quite noticeable timing issues meaning that it looked rather messy and unclear. The ensemble silk section was very busy – perhaps a little too busy and rather hard to follow, but the staging was very strong indeed, with good indication of where to look and very good development as the show progressed. The change in the soundtrack was elegantly reflected with a change of colour on the floor, and the weapons feature with rifles and sabres was very solid, with the rifles perhaps looking a touch cleaner than the sabres. The three line stage of flags, rifles and sabres is very effective and gives maximum visibility to all three elements – once the differences in interpretation are cleaned up this will undoubtedly be a central set piece for this programme. As we enter the final motive, the rifle toss keys this in very nicely and is followed by a very strong ensemble silk feature. While it is clear that there are different types of work going on, and the vocabulary is notably tricky at times, the amount of motion which is going on makes it hard to differentiate. The finale with movement and the solo silk is indeed very elegant, but fell a little flat and was not a particularly satisfying conclusion. While this is a very good programme with plenty of challenging technical work, today’s performance was not Guardsmen’s greatest, and perhaps felt slightly weaker than their last performance at Burgess Hill – I suspect that a large number of changes to the show may be part of the reason for this. This was a very enthusiastic, generally good, and certainly enjoyable show, but it didn’t quite come together today. Hopefully the pieces will come together for the next contest, as this programme has much promise. (*4th, 68.3*)

The Academy then took the floor to recount “Carmen: A Lover’s Story”. There is an awful lot of scenery with this show – it is all at the back of the floor, certainly, but it is a little distracting at times. The opening movement showed generally good vocabulary and execution, with solid interpretation among the small group. The introduction of the rifles worked well, but some of the forms were a little ropey, with one key linear form only just reached. The rifle and sabre feature which followed reflected the soundtrack well, and was generally executed with some aplomb. The introduction of the silks followed, with the injection of colour this brought fitting very well into the programme’s development. The quality of timing on equipment was variable from slightly dodgy to excellent, generally being really quite good. The central movement feature acts as an important pivot point between key motives of the show and was handled very well; the sabre feature nearby is great fun to watch, with some excellent effect being produced and quite a lot of tricky vocabulary being performed on the whole very well indeed. The finale with the red flags brings another big splash of colour and *lots* of power to the floor – there were a few timing issues, but these did not detract from a very convincing ending. Some of the execution was a little messy and awkward – the books are, however, very challenging and given that this was the exception rather than the rule, the cleaning process will undoubtedly help here. Interpretation and timing across the ensemble was generally reasonable, but there were a few key areas where tears were visible which definitely need to be resolved. While there was a tremendous amount of enthusiasm evident – and I am sure that “home show” syndrome is partially responsible for that – there is scope for real contrast between the various marches and slower motives which is not yet being exploited; it felt at times that the slower and more passionate sections were a tiny bit expressionless, with the guard keen to get on to the flashy and fast bits! This was a very solid performance of a highly adept and complex programme which I suspect will take time for guard, audience and judges to fully appreciate – cleaning the show and fully understanding its nuances will be the way for the guard to take this show forward and push for the medal places. (*3rd, 72.6*)

With their “Hymn to Love”, the **Southern Knights** were next to perform. The movement feature opened with a very strong form, and showed off some very elegant execution and consistent interpretation across the ensemble. The rifle section which followed, however, was not too great – there were noticeable timing issues, however, this was partially rescued by a very well-timed toss. The silk work which followed also seemed a little uneasy as far as timing was concerned – while the vocabulary being asked was tricky and the challenges were generally being met, the section felt rather rushed, despite reflecting the soundtrack very well indeed. Staging and forms were very strong, with generally precise placement and highly legible transitions proving to be the norm throughout the show. Weapons and movement were generally equal partners throughout this show; the snap timing on rifles and sabres was particularly good, however, with the sabre vocabulary being particularly noteworthy. The blue flag feature in the second half of the show was particularly strong, with the wedge form providing lots of power and with hints of SK’s usual strength in this area coming to the fore, although perhaps not in as prevalent a fashion as one would usually expect. This was swiftly followed by an exquisitely timed and highly convincing sequence, providing excellent development. The finale with the company front movement created an excellent accent, and the conclusion was very solid indeed, and a very satisfying note on which to end the show. This was a good, but perhaps not great, performance from the Knights – it felt rather messy at times, and the usual snappiness and precision one expects to see from this guard were not at their usual level; I entirely expect this is a mid-season aberration. As far as the concept goes – I can see where it is going, but it’s admittedly not the kind of concept I rave about. However, the work on show and the sheer excellence in the programme with the manipulation of effect, tension and resolution mean that this will undoubtedly challenge for the top spot this year. I look forward to seeing how this product progresses as the season continues. (*2nd, High Ensemble, 77.1*)

Mayflower completed today's competition, with their show to Benjamin Britten's "Sea Interludes". The opening movement feature is nothing short of outstanding – very elegant, with highly complex vocabulary being executed with impressive levels of control by the guard. The introduction of the sabres was a tiny bit rocky with the very first toss being noticeably early, but the other tosses were a great reflection of the soundtrack and were precisely timed. The silk entry was very strong indeed, and integrated well with the continuing sabres; both showing good vocabulary and execution, and built to a great tension and resolution shortly afterwards. The rifles were equally good, with impressive tosses and detailed vocabulary, but timing was occasionally awry. As we moved into the second half of the show, there was a significant improvement in the clarity of forms and transitions over their last performance, with legibility greatly increased. The technical challenges being asked of the guard are demanding, and while they are doing very well there was a number of noticeable drops throughout the show. The ensemble flag feature in the second half works well, but the "low" flag work is not entirely clear. There is a very convincing increase in tension, and the integration of the leg spin is really well-timed and logical in the development of the programme. The final movement feature is a joy to watch – while the forms could be slightly better, the technical excellence in the book is absolutely captivating. Now the guard is approaching full understanding of the direction the show is taking, particularly in the second half, there is a greater clarity to the interpretation of the music and I now find it far more comprehensible. It is fair to say that it is not as effective as it could be, but the "wow factor" from this show is going to come at the point where the equipment and movement work are both immaculate, rather than necessarily the gross visual effect and the written visuals. This in itself means that the show is "hard to sell" because the effect isn't immediately obvious, and as a result even more effort than usual will need to go into cleaning. This show has the potential to go places and potentially even romp away with the title at Finals, but by no means is it at that point yet. (*1st, High Equipment, High Movement, High General Effect, 81.5*)

We were also treated to an exhibition from the **Forgemen Percussion Theatre** between 'A' Class and Open Class, and a Latin dance exhibition from Darren and Steph which wowed the audience!

Despite the highly inclement weather, a very recalcitrant sound system and a handful of other logistical issues with the venue, the day was a great success with excellent performances from all the attending guards. Many thanks go to Lisa Darton, Ken Mansfield, Lorraine Gray and The Academy for sponsoring and running the show, to the volunteers from TA and the Black Knights who helped, our hosts at Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, all the WGUK staff, tabulators and judges (plus our visiting judges from the Netherlands), all the staff and members of the competing guards, and to everyone who came along to applaud and show their appreciation for an enjoyable day's entertainment.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the following week's **WGI European Regional** in Drachten, the Netherlands, where 14 British units travelled across the Channel to compete against their Dutch counterparts and also to see both **Pride of Cincinnati** and **Oracle** compete in a World Class competition! The day was tremendously successful, with guards from both countries acquitting themselves admirably. The Dutch took all three "European" classes, with **Sensation** winning Cadet Class and **Mayflower** being the top finishing British guard in 3rd, **The Pride** winning 'A' Class with **Southern Knights** coming in 3rd, and **Beatrix** winning Open Class (with what must be said to be a highly impressive and memorable performance) with the **Southern Knights** taking 2nd. In World Class, **Pride of Cincinnati** edged out **Oracle** by two points, but I think everyone will agree that to see both guards performing in Europe was a great privilege in itself. Indeed, many guards will have a keepsake of Pride's visit, as they decided to "abandon" their floor and welcomed all-comers to take home a souvenir!

We have also since had the next WGUK contest, Winterguard West at Chippenham, sponsored by Pride of Bristol, where the story of the day must be **Pride Cadets** significant win in Junior Class, with a score of 81.7 and 349 in General Effect! **Starlights** took top honours in Cadet Class; **The Avengers** took the 'A' Class and continue to make the running, and **Pride of Bristol** continuing to make excellent progress in Open Class with a win over **Alliance**.

With less than a month to go until Finals at Brentwood, most guards find themselves with only one competition left before the big day on April 1st. Sunday 12th March sees us return to Burgess Hill for this year's second Southern Classic event sponsored by the Southern Knights, and then Sunday 19th March takes us north to our last show of the season in Stourbridge, for Classic Academy sponsored by Northern Academy. The very best of luck to all guards in their preparations for the end of the season!

*I intend to write reports from both Burgess Hill and Stourbridge competitions; however, due to the number of guards performing at Burgess Hill, it is not at all likely that that report will be completed before the Stourbridge show.
It is possible that the Stourbridge report will be released **before** the Burgess Hill report...
please watch the usual places, as the reports will be released when they are completed!*