

## **Ulla Von Brandenburg**

Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, Sweden

There is something specifically European and old-fashioned about Ulla von Brandenburg's stage settings, themes and sound. Her latest performance *Chorspiel* (2010) could have been taken from a Thomas Mann novel. The Buddenbrook family came to mind when you saw the four performers on stage: the old grandfather, the chubby grandmother, the mother and the young daughter, all passing their time in the same living room – playing matches, resting on the couch, disputing or trying to untie a large knot. Everything is at once structured yet loaded with the heavy burden of being part of a family. As the play progress however, the family's life is interrupted by a young man – the Wanderer – who comes to play a central role in the play as the potentially dangerous and unknown element, but also the one who could grant the family a new life.

*Chorspiel* was shown four times over three days at Malmö's Lilith Performance Studio, the first combined production studio and arena in Europe for visual art performances. Here performance art can explore its full potential rather than being relegated to comic relief at a vernissage or the painful scene of some art party. The venue is dedicated solely to this particular genre of visual art and is completely transformed for each performance. In this case, Von Brandenburg realized a 70-metre wall painting depicting black and white natural scenery populated by shadowy figures, creating a structured wilderness that engulfed the audience. This backdrop seemed to mimic the rather dark tone of the play and the strange symbolism of the dialogue, which had more in common with the lyrics of an opera than with the speeches of a play.

As in *Singplay*, her 2007 performance at Tate Modern, the characters mimicked a song that was being performed live on stage. But in *Singplay* it was Von Brandenburg herself who sang all the lyrics, which created a disjuncture between the character of the young man who seemed to speak with the female voice of the artist. In *Chorspiel* – as the title suggests – the lyrics were sung by a choir consisting of both men and women. The music, also written by Von Brandenburg, was arranged as a classical canon, which also underlined the sense of something archaic, and it filled the whole studio with the beautiful sound of something that came close to an elegy.

The faces of the actors trying to follow the sung lyrics created a strange heterogeneous effect, as the words of the choir and the facial expressions of the actors rarely managed to correspond. It is these little displacements that seem to be of essential importance in Von Brandenburg's work, as is the concept of time. In this performance, it is nearly as if time is a physical presence, showed very specifically by the strangely slow gestures of the actors – the three-generations of the family continuously trying to untie a knot, which became almost an illustration of their individual lifelines and mutual interconnectedness. And, as the choir intoned, 'We have not chosen it ourselves, life is done to us ... now we are here, but for how long?'

## **Maria Kjær Themsen**