

**From Aapua to Africa and Back –
The Swedish report on the project
TALKING TONGUES 2007-2009**



Tornedalsteatern
Tornionlaakson teatteri

Tornedalsteatern, Tornedalsvägen 12, 984 31 Pajala
+46 978 102 99 +46 70 248 52 70
teater@tornedalsteatern.com
www.tornedalsteatern.com

Formulating the project

In February 2006, Busisiwe Chaane from Johannesburg came to Tornedalen to find out whether the regional theatre Tornedalsteatern would be interested in a joint project within the framework of the cultural exchanges between South Africa and Sweden.

A couple of days' discussion resulting in a decision to jointly examine myths and stories from minority cultures. The Finnish-speaking minority in Tornedalen has developed its own language – Meänkieli – but because of its as yet fairly unexplored history still has an unclear historical identity. Tornedalsteatern warmly welcomed the idea of investigating its own identity in a comparative perspective in this project. Work began to formulate the project **Talking Tongues**. Here are some excerpts from the project application:

“Myths and legends enjoy a particular place in all cultures of the world as longstanding means by which people have explored the complexities and challenges of everyday life. Whether life was lived in the 15th or 18th century or thousands of years before that, traditional myths and legends and stories with songs have always been more than just anecdotes. These fables contained gems to aid understanding within them, dealing particularly with life full of contradiction and flux . In modern times, there seems to be a dearth of answers to seemingly intractable problems the world over. Many people across the world seek a new way to understand life events and problems, faced with the apparent prospect that fear and helplessness is all there is.

What fulfils the important role storytelling used to occupy, when real fires have been replaced by electricity, grandmothers with email? What can custodians of these cultural practices tell us – before they die out?

We want to research, collect and interrogate myths and legends, to understand why their relevance has endured and if those stories can help us mediate today's modern challenges or how to find meaning in our lives.

Are there universal truths myths and legends set out to explore and explain? Can these truths be useful today? Although South Africa and Sweden sit almost at opposite ends of the earth, and have vastly different geographical, political and cultural realities, the challenges faced in both countries in recent times are much more convergent than might otherwise be thought.”



Busisiwe Chaane

In the application we also formulated project objectives and expected outcomes.

Project objectives

- To encourage creativity in individuals and society
- To instil a sense of pride and knowledge in the marginalised languages of Meänkieli in Sweden and African languages in South Africa.

- To invest in and sustain the culture and traditions of previously marginalised areas so as to instil pride in one's roots
- To create greater value in the regions for tourism, through more interesting, better told and more accessible stories.

Expected outcomes

The Talking Tongues Project should achieve the following outcomes:

A better understanding by South Africans of some of the traditions and cultural systems of linguistic and cultural groups within the country and in other parts of the world. In Sweden, this understanding will relate to minority groups such as the meänkieli, but also to an understanding in both countries of each others' common life experience.

A greater awareness of the diversity of each language group, including the possibility of correcting misperceptions and enhancing self-acceptance and knowledge and a non-hierarchical and non-judgemental curiosity and interest in other people within one's national borders. An interest in the cultural and linguistic forms of various language groups within South Africa and Sweden.

The partnership with a Swedish organisation engaged in a similar enterprise will enable the cultural and linguistic ideas and systems from that country to be made accessible to South Africans, thereby affording an organic way for South Africans and Swedes to communicate and learn from each other about their various cultures..

One important outcome would be increased self-confidence and positive self-regard, particularly of individual young and old South Africans and Swedes in terms of understanding and appreciating the value of indigenous cultures and languages and as an opportunity to rekindle a spiritual approach to questions of identity and purposeful belonging in today's world.

Starting the project

To begin the project, Tornedalsteatern through newspaper advertising and its web site invited culture workers to send in suggestions within the framework of the project. A dozen suggestions were submitted and were judged by the artistic leader and the board of the theatre. Two projects were granted funding to enable continued work.

1. (The Faravid Conundrum) *Faravids gåta* – author Bengt Pohjanen should compile scientific fact and anthropological research into myths and legends. It is fairly easy to substantiate that science has not sufficiently studied prehistory in Arctic Scandinavia. Bengt Pohjanen used the arts to unravel some of this untold story and gave us a scenario on which to ruminate.

**MYTER,
LEGENDER,
BERÄTTELSER
i Tornedalen**



Tornedalsteatern
Tornionlaakson teatteri

Tornedalsteatern har fått medel (ca 600 tusen) för ett projektsamarbete med en partner i Sydafrika.

Projektet går ut på att i sin egen region finna berättelser, myter och legender som säger något om den kulturella identiteten. Utgångspunkten är att vi blir starkare på alla plan om vi får bättre kunskap om våra rötter. Vi inbjuder nu kulturarbetare och andra intresserade att komma in med förslag på arbeten som skulle kunna vara intressanta att göra inom detta projekt. Det kan vara förslagsidéer med eller utan budget. Uppslag som man själv vill arbeta med eller som man tycker någon speciell ska göra. Tanken är att projektet skall utmynna i en teaterföreställning men även andra konstnärliga idéer är välkomna.

Lämna in förslag senast 10 mars 2007 till Styrelsen för Tornedalsteatern,
Tornedalsvägen 12, 984 31 Pajala
eller till e-post teater@tornedalsteatern.com
Frågor besvaras av teaterchef
Ulf Fembro 0978-102 99 eller 070-248 52 70.

KULTURRÅDET



The advertisement

2. Kaamosaika – choreographer Jenny Abdelkader and composer Erling Fredriksson were invited to continue work on their concept of an improvisation performance dealing with light and dark, something which is so special in Arctic Scandinavia, with its long summer days and long winter nights. The idea however did not attract enough support among the amateur actors in the theatre, so the theatre decided together with the originators not to proceed in the present form in the framework of the cooperation project.

Having come this far in our work, we discovered that our South African counterpart ALL (Association for Long Life Learning) had not received payment of its economic funding, which is why we broke off the project and waited to see developments with our cooperation partner.

One proposal came from mr Birger Winsa, working at the University of Stockholm, born in the meänkieli population to publish a book about the things we asked for in the advertise. Publishing books was not possible within our project's limited budget so we had to say no to his proposal. But mr Winsa published the book anyway, about some of these myths, "Manalaisitten Kirja/Andarnas bok" (The book of Spirits), (publisher: Meänkielen förlaaki, Stockholm 2007) This book was really useful in our continuing work.

A journey to Johannesburg

In August 2008, three representatives from Tornedalsteatern travelled to Johannesburg to take part in a series of seminars arranged by ALL. There were several days of experience-sharing, where both parties on equal terms could find considerable similarities in the realities we encounter, despite all the differences of population density and climatic conditions. The fact that the linguistic heritage in



Tornedalen, with a minority language based on oral production, risks extinction, resembles the process for several of the different traditional languages in South Africa. As the languages gradually become less used, useful and important cultural awareness is lost. Something else, which is not so well known in South Africa, is that our part of Europe has not enjoyed prosperity for a particularly long period. Many Africans believe that all white people come from a culture that has enjoyed a long tradition of wealth.

Contact with myths, legends and traditional narratives, however, seems much stronger in the different language cultures in South Africa than up in Tornedalen. However, with each generation, more knowledge is lost.



The task that all the people are given for the future is to create sustainable development. In our seminars we spoke a good deal about this, and in particular what we within our cultural sphere can contribute. In our particular project we said that the return to old storytelling that we are making brings to light an ancient adage which says that we have responsibility for future generations, a responsibility which has partly vanished in today's media-driven consumer society.

Another thread in our discussions was about portrayal. How shall we pass on the old stories? A director from Johannesburg was commissioned by ALL to present a number of African stories together with a number of younger actors. With the use of modern narrative, they skilfully performed some stories for us. In the following discussion, the idea arose that one could perhaps use old modes of dress to give the audience a clearer picture of how things were in the past, while the director held that the most interesting aspect is that with the modern theatre form we work with, we encounter the old stories and can and give them the meaning that we see in them today. In Sweden we can also see a difference between folklore and modern theatre, museums and art.

Another part of the visit to South Africa comprised a visit to a place for storytelling in Soweto, an impressive collection of sculptures, huts and paintings based on South African mythology and designed by a well-known artist. The discussion was in part about how such places can support links to storytelling as well as interest in the past.



Another important discussion was about feminine and masculine. There are in South Africa a number of tales about strong, brave women who challenge authority. This is in spite of the fact that in reality such behaviour is not encouraged among girls. It is the boys who are encouraged. In Swedish perspective, we had no contact with such stories or myths from the past, only from obvious example – the modern world of Astrid Lindgren’s stories, of which however the South Africans had no knowledge.

What became clear during the seminar were the concrete tasks that each party was to carry out.



Tornedalsteatern decided to produce a theatrical performance for children, based on stories from Arctic Scandinavia and from South Africa. ALL will publish a book with CD, containing tales from different language areas in South Africa, and will include stories from Arctic Scandinavia. We agreed to exchange stories around the end of autumn.

The strongest impression of our journey was that from a theatre production in Kliptown, Soweto. A group of young people performed a story about their residential area in the past and in the present. This was under the leadership of some fervently committed artists. They put on a performance with a high artistic standard and a good deal of humour and skill in the residential area especially for us and a number of children and adults who had gathered in the African evening. The obvious importance of this community theatre gave us energy which has stayed with us. If the cooperation with South Africa continues in new programmes, a great deal of highly interesting exchanges remain to be carried out. The similarity to us up here is multilingualism – what it means to the audience.



A seminar about myths in Tärendö

A month after our visit to South Africa, we had the pleasure to receive our hosts on a visit to Sweden. Busisiwe Chaane and Vusimusi Khamalo was participating in a seminar where the authors Bengt Pohjanen and Birger Winsa should present their work, mr Pohjanen his work within the Talking Tongues-project about the riddle of Faravid and mr Winsa presented his book mentioned above.



The ALL-representatives arrived to Stockholm, where we visited the Swedish Arts Council and the publishing company Tranan. This was a highly appreciated meeting, and where we have a possible future cooperation, both within and outside the project. Up in Tornedalen, in Tärendö, we arranged a seminar on the project topic. The representatives from ALL shared their thoughts on the project, and were also interviewed by radio and the newspapers.

"When I was 20, I sent off for a family tree. It contained some Swedish names that I had no wish to be connected with, which I ignored. For a long time, I thought that my name Bengt Pohjanen told of who I am. That "Bengt", being a Swedish name, said that I was a 100 per cent Swedish citizen, and that "Pohjanen" said that I was 100 per cent of Finnish-Ugrian origin, but of course it wasn't that simple.

Polemising with historians who, even though combware has been unearthed here in the North, asserts that northern Sweden was long populated by savage nomadic tribes, Bengt Pohjanen has turned to the legends in search of ideas that can help fill the gaps in historical research. In his search, he has found King Faravid of the Kvän people, described in the Icelandic sagas. In cooperation with Tornedalsteatern he is in the process of delving into the mystery, and here in Tärendö he takes us on an exhilarating journey through the centuries, following the myth of King Faravid.



Along the way, Bengt Pohjanen reminds us of the great singers of the Kalevala epic, Väinämöinen and Joukahainen. The young Joukahainen knows it all, has unlimited knowledge, and challenges the old Väinämöinen who only sings about what he sees.

"The encounter between realism and myth takes place in every artist. You have to know everything, but the same time nothing more than that which you have absorbed in this beautiful valley," says Bengt Pohjanen.

"The Greek word for theory, *theoria*, says that knowledge is gained through contemplation, and the ancient Greeks also distinguished between "reason" and "understanding", between

logical and intuitive knowledge. Our Tornedalen word for shaman is "tietjä", one who has knowledge, and this is a figure that is found in most cultures. The tales which surround us contain both magic and fact, since they have been told by people who have written down what they have seen, but have also added something which makes it into a good story.

All over the world, many of us live in multilingual areas," said Bengt Pohjanen, who is convinced that sooner or later history will be rewritten.

"I think that the legends can guide us, and researchers will certainly discover this long after I am dust."



Birger Winsa spoke of how he has collected narratives and words from elderly people in Tornedalen, through interviews that he himself conducted in the 1980s, and through taped recordings made in 1957. The narratives showed that people believed in an underground world that observed and watched over people. The "Noyds", who "knew", were of particular importance. In his book he has now compiled all these words used in narratives. Many of the narratives must be seen as parts of a linguistic and mental network that people in Arctic Scandinavia belonged to and which formed their identities and structured their perception of the world.

The seminar was very well attended and ended with an open discussion. The discussion was partly about why the narratives disappeared. Was it due to the findings of science? Or was it for the sake of the Church? Was it perhaps that they became a threat to the Church while the Church began to adopt a modern scientific view of the world? Today, when science is modifying its view of the world, where things previously seen as "supernatural" perhaps are not, even though the Church maintains its old view of the world – perhaps there we find the explanation for the renewed interest in old tales?

The Meänkieli language and identity is also represented in Norway and Finland, and some of the seminar participants from those countries shared their experiences of the minority language issue.

Preparations for a production

During the autumn, we at the theatre searched for and read material in preparation for a production. It was exciting reading, but not so easy to select material for our production, and the stories that are best suited to be sent to Johannesburg. Our starting point was that many tales are passed on from maternal grandmother to children and that there is much-needed wisdom to be gleaned. One idea that crystallised in a conversation about events in South Africa after apartheid: we asked our friends how it came about that there was no surge of revenge after the liberation. They answered – well, there's an old African saying: once the enemy is defeated there is no need to pursue him.

In the preparations we sought cooperation with a mask- and doll-maker in Stockholm, Oskar Hejll, who had previous experience of work with Nordic myths and stories, at the same time to find new expertise for our drama group.

Theatre Production

At the beginning of December 2008, we received 18 stories from our South African Partner. On 11 December, we ran a seminar with Carina Henriksson, an opera singer from the north of Sweden, trained in London, who runs her own company which developing different kind

of productions within opera and folk music. Another participant in the seminar was Gun Olofsson, a well known professional folk music singer and Oskar Hejll from Stockholm, who had been involved in theatre productions of old Swedish legends and myths. He works with puppets and masks, and trained at the National Drama Institute (Dramaten).



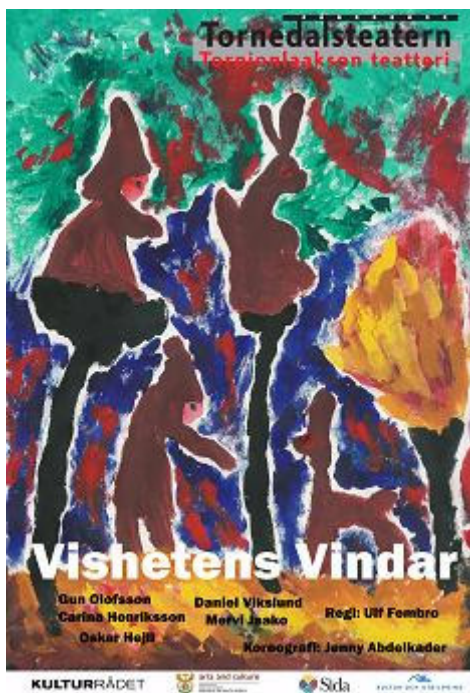
Those participating from Tornedalsteatern were Ulf Fembro, artistic and managing director and Mervi Jaako, actor and project leader for work with children in theatre projects. In the seminar, we read the stories from South Africa and discovered that in our essentially northern culture, old stories are not so easy to find. But we had some stories that we read and discussed. We decided to go on with a production, the rehearsals starting on 13 January, and to urge everyone to go on trying to find more stories and music from our own culture and also to digest the South African stories.

Two more people were invited to participate in the production. Daniel Wikslund, a folk musician from the region, and Jenny Abdelkader, a choreographer who tried to start a project in an earlier phase of Talking Tongues, which for various reasons, had had to stop. In January, work began and a lot of very interesting discussions about the material took place. Soon, we decided to tell the stories from our point of view, not pretending that we were Africans, or telling the stories in an attempt to imitate the African way of doing it. Instead, we decided to tell the stories through form, and our choice of music. For instance, in one of the stories we chose, *Jabulani and the Lion*, where a lot of African animals feature, we changed the animals to our regions' animals.

When we had chosen seven strong stories, four from our culture and three from South Africa, we asked ourselves, why do these stories interest us, what do they tell us in the modern age?



The hypothesis of Talking Tongues is that these old stories are of importance, and in being retold could make a great impact. We found out that in these seven stories this is the case, but in an artistically interesting way. The stories are not immediately clear and obvious, they are complicated. They force you to think, making it good material from which to create theatre. The intention is not simply to teach young people things – we want to start debate and discussion.



Therefore we started to improvise a situation – in the little village where we live, some young people drive around on snowmobiles at night, stressing some very rare animals to death. The situation we invented was: imagine that a young girl comes home in the morning after such an animal hunt, to her mother, who lost the girl's father in an accident some years ago. The mother has started drinking a bit too much and the girl has lost respect for her. In the morning, they have a violent argument. In our improvisation, we let some characters from the stories visit the mother and her daughter and the director's instruction to the actors was that they should try to tell these stories with the purpose of helping the two people.

It was not easy, but in our improvisations we found out that we ended up with a situation that was both very dramatic and very funny. In the first phase of rehearsals, the musicians also contributed with good traditional folk music, but also with some new, quite beautiful songs. Some highly advanced physical improvisations, guided by Jenny Abdelkader, gave us very good material to work with to tell the stories.

We had found a working title by the time we visited Johannesburg last August - *The Winds of Wisdom* - after an interesting discussion. In translation, *Vishetens Vindar*, it sounded a bit too pretentious at first. But, having worked for some weeks, we decided that our title is not pretentious and we kept it.

There was a period of two weeks without rehearsals, while the artists saw to their other engagements, leaving Ulf Fembro responsible for creating a manuscript of the improvisations and the stories. All went very well and more traditional drama rehearsals started.

A month later we were ready to perform for an audience. It can be difficult for someone who does not know the very north of Sweden to understand how much snow falls here and how cold it can be. Since the ensemble lived in two places with a rather long distance

between them, we found a halfway place and drove there every day. Sometimes we had to rehearse in a room where the temperature was just 12 degrees centigrade - rather cold to be perfectly creative.

But we have had a very good period - with a lot of fun, and a lot of good friendship - and spring arrived. We performed for pupils in different schools, and certainly were very pleased that our efforts were so appreciated by our audiences. With 22 performances, almost every child between 11 and 16 years old in our region saw our production and after the performances we had discussions after the performance.

The play can just as much be understood and appreciated equally by adults and young people. That is because of the high value of the old stories, which was the meaning of the project Talking Tongues. If we had been unable to travel to South Africa and to infuse our own stories with the perspective from the South African stories, we would never have been able to present as good a performance as we have.

To Johannesburg again

Tornedalsteatern was keen to give the performance for children in Johannesburg, to see how they understood and accepted the tales. So we asked our South African counterparts about going there.



Our partners arranged for renting premises and contacting schools in Johannesburg and Soweto to ascertain interest in seeing the performance. Our visit there took place at the end of October 2009. We rented the Market Theatre Laboratory for three days and received pupils from different schools, who came to see

our performance. The results were good – the performances were followed by interesting discussions and question and answer sessions. We were not far apart, and the understanding of the tales drew us closer. The performance often ended with the audience singing for us. The same thing happened when



we performed for schoolchildren in Soweto. One question we asked was whether they could tell which of the stories were from Africa, and they could recognise two of them, but they were practically certain that one of the stories from Arctic Scandinavia was African.



It was pleasing that the theatre we performed at was the Market Theatre, since we attended a performance there on our first visit, and it provided a lot of design-related inspiration for what would become The Winds of Wisdom. We found also that the long-term cooperation between the Market Theatre and the theatre Stockholms stadsteater as well as with the drama school Teaterhögskolan in Luleå were of great importance.

Our final performance was in Kliptown in Soweto. We performed on the street and this poor district. Children of all ages sat and watched the entire one-hour performance. Here too, the content was discussed, Bob T Nameng acting as moderator. To us northern Swedes it was a gripping experience to hear the children's perceptions of and lessons learned from our performance. The same applied to the excellent workshop which the children and young people in Kliptown presented to us the



evening before. For two hours, we were treated to song, dance, gumboot-dancing, and psycho-drama. Then we spent some times with the orphans living at the centre that Bob T Nameng has been running and supporting since the 90s.

The children here receive food and accommodation in return for their promise to attend school. After school they have training in drama, song and dance. Some members of the collective have had artistic training at a highly advanced level, and one has recently received a scholarship to study further in Europe.

Bob T Nameng and his helpers function as artistic leaders, but must help in so many other areas that the children and young people need. They come to Bob with all sorts of problems, and he listens and gives them guidance.

The value of culture is sometimes questioned in Sweden. We feel that a visit like this to one of the poorest areas in Johannesburg would convince even the most anti-culture critics. The pride, zest for life, curiosity and dignity that these young people radiated – this more than anything is what we theatre people take with us from the project. If there were a chance to continue the project, it would be together with these young people and their leaders.



We think that young Swedes could gain a good deal of inspiration from these South Africans. So could many political representatives, when they consider and debate what is important in people's lives.

Findings

The reactions to our performance, both in Sweden and South Africa, indicated that the stories we chose are highly relevant to modern-day people, both those in the more prosperous part of the world and those in poorer parts. There is wisdom in them that we should take with us into the future.

It is a great misfortune that the northern tales have disappeared to such an extent from our collective memory. The minority languages are slowly vanishing, and with them a treasure-house of human experience. Cultural policies and long-term efforts can however make this process more apparent, and part of that which has been forgotten can be saved.



In the world of research, more and more archaeological finds show that the history of Arctic



Scandinavia needs to be revised. In the future, we expect much received knowledge to be re-appraised. This re-appraisal can in turn lead to many tales for the enjoyment of coming generations, in books, films and visitor destinations. We have been able to note a similar possibility in South Africa – here too, languages are disappearing, while at the same time a counter-culture is emerging and creating new opportunities, also for the experience industry and tourism. The latter was indeed one of the

project goals we set , and even though our project is a small one, we can see definite signs that initiatives like those completed made would be worthwhile in these areas.

Conclusion

The Talking Tongues project has been an enormous learning process for Tornedalsteatern – one can speak of a sea change. Above all the encounter with Johannesburg and its people has given unforgettable inspiration for our own creative work. To also have the chance to search our own roots and to meet people in the minority that surrounds these issues has been a valuable experience. It has been a considerable privilege to be able to create the rich production that we have managed in and with The Winds of Wisdom.

We would therefore like to thank our partner ALL, as well as the Arts Council, the development authority SIDA the Department of Arts and Culture, Republic of South Africa, for enabling us to participate in the project.

Ulf Fembro

Artistic and managing director

Tornedalsteatern, project leader for the swedish part of Talking Tongue



Tornedalsteatern Projektredovisning

Projektnr: 801

Projekt: Talking Toungues 2006/2891

Period: 07-01-01 - 09-12-14

Intäkter

Erhållna bidrag		
3985	Statliga bidrag	796000,00

S:a Erhållna bidrag		796000,00
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S:a Intäkter		795999,60
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Direkta kostnader

4010	Inköp material och varor	-13304,00
4111	Ensemblekostnader förtäring	-3226,00
4113	Ensemblekostnader logi	-1535,00
4630	Översättningsarbete/teatermanus	-5541,00
4631	Inköp manus	-53000,00

4632	Inköp skådespelare	-105654,00
4633	Inköp dokumentation (film)	-25350,00

S:a Direkta kostnader -207610,00

Personalkostnader

7210	Löner fast personal	-76320,00
7211	Löner för korttidsanst	-249307,60
7290	Förändring semesterlöneskuld	-27156,03
7321	Tr skattefria sv	-5479,00
7322	Trakt sv skattepl	-5495,00
7323	Trakt skattefria utland	-23023,00
7331	Egen bil ersättning, skattefri	-4428,90
7332	Egen bil ersättning, skattepliktig	-1710,64
7510	Sociala avgifter	-99124,70
7519	Uppl arbgivaravg	81,88
7680	Projektarbetstid	-73000,00
7690	Personalkostn övrigt	-261,00

S:a Personalkostnader -565223,99

Övriga kostnader

5015	Hyra övriga lokaler	-21161,00
5614	Milkostnad Tote-bil	-10000,00
5810	Allmänt färdmedel	-126828,00
5820	Hyrbil	-8740,00
5831	Logi/kost inrikes	-30365,00
5832	Logi/kost utrikes	-43854,00
5890	Övriga resekostnader	-35225,00
5910	Annonsering	-21619,00
6072	Representation	-115,00
6390	Övr kostnader	653,00
6480	Deltagaravg vid kurs-konf o dyl	-18700,00
6550	Konsultarvoden	-16642,00
6603	Styrgruppskostnader	-210,00
6970	Facklitteratur/böcker/tidningar	-600,00
6993	Presenter-gåvor	-762,00

S:a Övriga kostnader -334168,00

Summa kostnader -1107001,99

Resultat före avskrivningar -311002,39

Underskott täcks med egna medel samt biljettintäkter