

OUT OF AFRICA

By Julie Hahn

Mike Baltzell beams like a proud papa as he points out the three lions lounging in the warm fall sun at Zoo Boise. He wonders aloud if the sleepy bat-eared fox will peek out from its hiding place during his visit.

And he knows way more than your average theatre arts professor about how weaver birds build their hive-like, hanging nests.

If Baltzell seems protective, it's for good reason. He was essential in transforming the animals' house into a home.

Baltzell teaches design and technical theatre at Boise State. His years of experience designing sets for the Idaho Shakespeare Festival,

Contemporary Theatre and countless Boise State productions were invaluable for the largest project ever in the city of Boise in terms of size: Zoo Boise's new Jiji La Miti National Park, an African Plains exhibit. Over the course of a year, Baltzell, two assistants and a number of students transformed the new addition to the zoo into an African village, complete with a roadside stand, a one-room schoolhouse, a loading dock and much, much more.

"Years ago I thought I would like to do something at the zoo," Baltzell explains as he walks through the completed exhibit, which opened to the public on Oct. 4 — just a year after the project began.

Baltzell got his chance after a discussion between Zoo Boise executive director Steve Burns and Karen Bubb, interim director of the city's Department of Arts and History. As Bubb listened

to Burns' vision for the exhibit, she realized that what he really needed was a set designer. She immediately thought of Baltzell, who signed up for the project right away; he was excited not only for himself, he says, but also for the students who would work with him.

"It's really rare for them to find something that can be of service to the community and apply the skills they're learning," he says.

Burns was happy with the partnership for a different reason: hiring Baltzell gave the zoo a chance to keep the project local and sustain a reasonable budget.

Burns and Baltzell traveled to Seattle to visit that zoo's African



JOSEPH, Zoo Boise's 2-year-old giraffe, is part of the new African Plains exhibit designed by theatre arts professor Mike Baltzell, below with African map.

exhibit and consulted with a Masai tribesman in order to keep the look and spirit of the exhibit authentic. Authenticity is key, Baltzell says, so that visitors understand how animals and humans interact in Africa and why conservation is such a critical issue there.

Baltzell and his partners did hours and hours of research for the project, examining the Swahili alphabet and the traditional textiles, structures and living habits of African villagers. They made distressed fake weaver bird nests to hang in the trees. They even "rusted" the tin roofs on the buildings by using a special paint that won't harm the metal underneath.

Burns says that the team worked up until the very last minute, trying to get every little detail right. "I knew that this was a group of people who fully understood the concept of opening night," he says.

Burns couldn't be happier with the results, and he hopes that people who haven't been to the zoo in years will make a return visit to the exhibit. "I can assure (them) that this exhibit doesn't look anything like the zoo used to or anything (else that) we have now," he says. "It's really a step above anything we've done before." ♦



Carrie Quinney