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.

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 Jii La Mit 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 exhibit and consulted with a Masai tribesman in order to keep the look and feel 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 desks for the schoolhouse and created 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.”

Creating for the Community

By Julie Hahn

Creating art for your town is both challenging and rewarding, Fox says. “I do believe in starting locally and getting the people who live here excited about art,” he says. Another commission, a bronze bench in the shape of a sprout at Morris Hill Park, was designed with the park’s trees in mind — but also the beginning and end of life, given the park’s proximity to Morris Hill Cemetery.

That kind of site-specific thinking is one of the boons of hiring local artists, Bubb says. “It’s another level of uniqueness of our place, that they really understand the place.”

Graphic design professor Stephanie Bacon says that she had kept her eye out for public art projects before finding one that both suited her style of work and also allowed her to expand beyond her usual two-dimensional medium. She was given six months to complete art for the Collister branch library. “I felt like I could have worked on it for a couple of years; it was such a great project,” she says. “It brought together so many of my interests and strategies.”

Those kinds of collaborations — that enrich both the artist and the place — are made easier by having Boise State in the city, Bubb says.

“The city and BSU benefit from collaborating and we are both stronger for it,” she says.

“What is created defines us.”

Clockwise from left: Tiled benches at Cassia Park; a bench inspired by a tree sprout at Morris Hill Park; a column at the Collister Branch Library.