

PERSON OF INTEREST: TIM BAIR

words KIMBERLY WINTER STERN | photo MATTHEW TAYLOR

Park Supervisor

It started with a pair of \$1 brown slip-ons from Goodwill, a crafty mom who put bottle caps on the soles and the Kansas City, Kan., kid who taught himself to hoof "Tea for Two" in the family rec room with the makeshift tappers.

And he liked it, he really liked it.

That's how Tim Bair, producing artistic director for 43-year-old The Theatre in the Park (TTIP)—the country's largest outdoor community theatre—remembers his auspicious start in the arts. From that basement epiphany, Bair graduated high school, studied at Graceland in Lamoni, Iowa, and worked summers at a Canadian amusement park. He returned to KC following college and received a life-transforming SOS call.

"A friend of a friend working as a cruise ship entertainer said they needed a tapper, stat," says Bair, who jumped on a plane to Los Angeles the next day, boarded a boat and sailed the world for a year. From there the vagabond performer lived in New York City, joined a dance company, toured Europe with "42nd Street" and "My One and Only," and freelance directed at Pennsylvania's Millbrook Playhouse. He lived in New Jersey, Phoenix and California and somewhere along the line launched a graphic design firm—his creativity runs deep. One day the equity actor clicked his brown slip-ons and repeated, "There's no place like home."

Bair landed back in KC in November 2010 following a breathtaking 25-year whirlwind of song, dance, acting, directing and honing a worldview of theatre. He auditioned for and got his dream role: a theatre of his own.

It's one of the nation's most-celebrated outdoor theatres, set on 10 acres inside sprawling Shawnee Mission Park. He appeared on its stage in "Chorus Line" decades ago. Bair is in his second season of presenting ambitious Broadway-style productions at TTIP—like this year's opener, "Sweeney Todd," directed by respected KC veteran arts pro Mark Swezey—and he's deliriously happy.

But then Bair's constant state is one of nirvana. He talks with a smile and emanates positivity like Joseph's amazingly bright dreamcoat, despite the typical challenges of working with public and private partnerships and a group of artists with other lives but a pulsing passion for theatre. He thrives on the whole process' synchronicity.

Nearly 50,000 people will pass through TTIP's gates this summer to enjoy quality, affordable entertainment. Bair suspects for many first-timers it will be an eye-opening experience.

"People will see a single, molded vision of wonderful theatre."

Bair's in his element and—despite the brown slip-ons that have long disappeared—believes in the sheer magic of possibility.

FAVORITE THINGS: "I love working with actors and artists—even if they're not professional theatre people. Watching how they stretch themselves during rehearsal is remarkable."

DREAM WORKS: "I want TTIP to be the most professional non-professional theatre in the country. For that to work you must have respect, compassion and mindfulness because cast and crew are volunteers." ♦

Visit theatreinthepark.org for more information.



Tim Bair on the stage of "Sweeney Todd" at Theatre in the Park.