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FRANK SINATRA

AN EXCLUSIVE TOUR OF THE LEGENDARY PERFORMER'S PALM SPRINGS ESTATE



THEATER LIFE IN LOS ANGELES

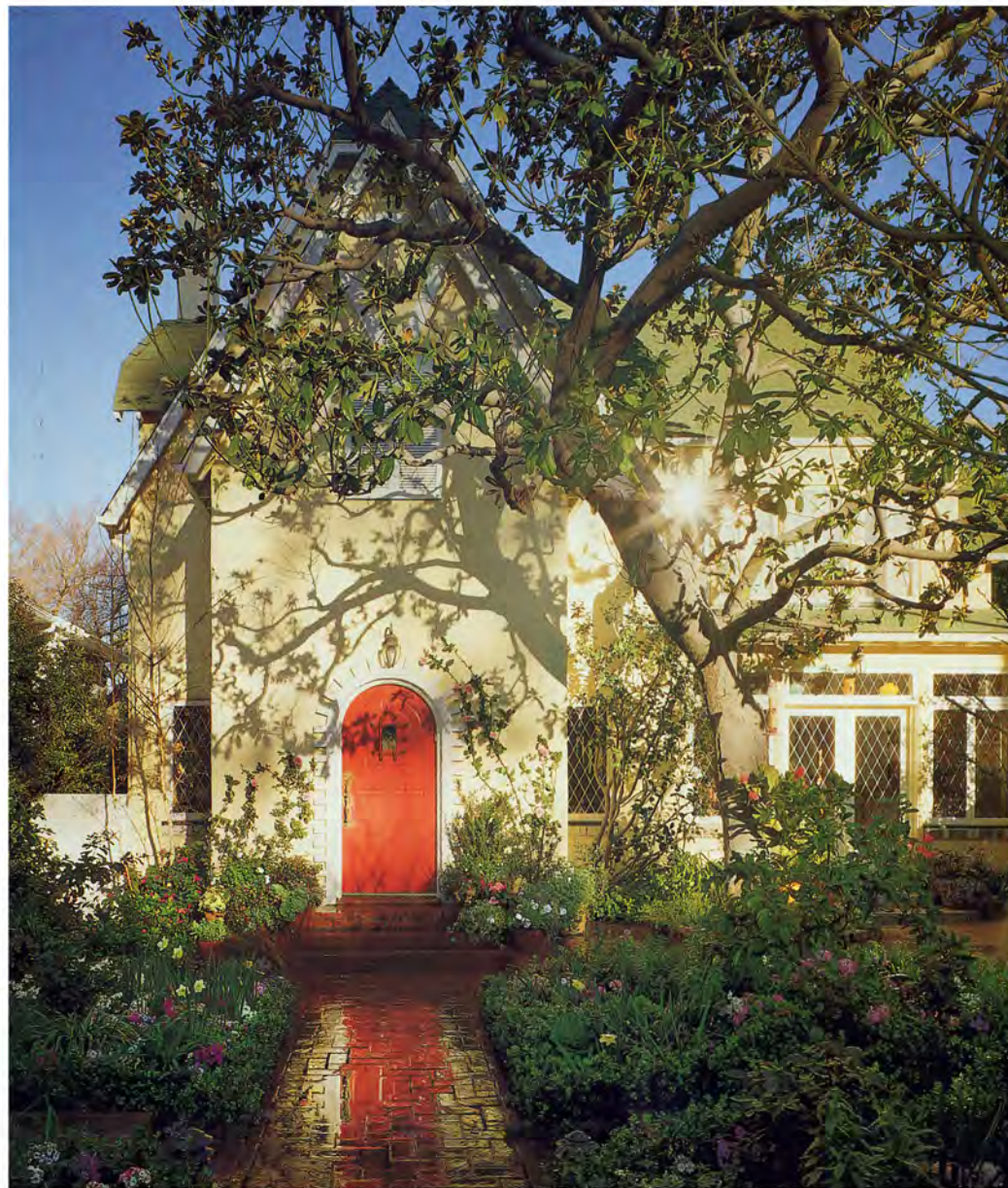
JUDI AND GORDON DAVIDSON'S STORIED SANTA MONICA CANYON RETREAT

Text by Irene Borger
Photography by Christopher Dow

On January 17, 1994, a drama took place in Los Angeles at the home of Gordon Davidson, artistic director and producer of the Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre. "I think it's the big one," his wife, Judi, said. "What big one?" Davidson wondered just as the bookshelf over their heads collapsed. It was 4:31 A.M.

When it was light, the Davidsons saw the devastation. Two chimneys were down. A neighbor's house was visible through an upstairs wall. Making their way through masses of broken pottery, they stared at the dining room's leaded-glass windows, twisted and blown out. "By then I had a headache," recalls Judi Davidson, founding partner of the arts and entertainment firm Davidson & Choy Publicity. "But Gordon, with his amazing ability to see past what's awful, said, 'Well, we'll make the dining room a little bigger.' It was as if the whole cloud lifted. 'Great idea,' I said. 'We'll get an architect.'"

First they got a structural engineer. Latitudinally, every wall in their Santa Monica Canyon residence was fractured. "Longitudinally, it was fine," says Gordon Davidson, whose stage directing credits include *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Shadow Box*, which won a Tony Award. Second, third and fourth opinions suggested that perhaps

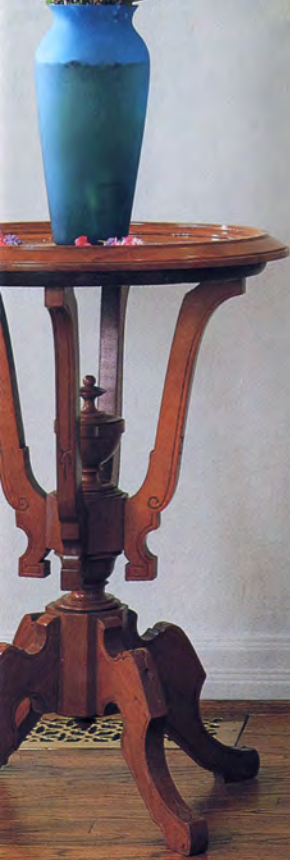


the house would have to be torn down. Not an option, the Davidsons said. Their house contained history.

In Los Angeles, the George Washington Slept Here factor hinges on the movie industry. Legend has it that the

1920s house was constructed for movie mogul Irving Thalberg's mother. Later, the half-timbered Tudoresque cottage became home to émigrés Berthold and Salka Viertel and a salon for artists, directors and intellectuals. Sergei

ABOVE: Gordon Davidson, artistic director and producer of the Center Theatre Group, and his wife, Judi, live in a 1920s Los Angeles house built by Irving Thalberg and once owned by John Houseman. OPPOSITE: In the living room are works by Ed Moses and Ed Ruscha.







LEFT: Lithographs, drawings and etchings are arranged above the mantelpiece. "We commemorate important events with works of art," says Gordon Davidson (right, with Judi). "We bought the moon face by Rufino Tamayo when our son was born." Glant sofa chenille.



BELOW: Ladderback chairs that belonged to Houseman surround the table in the dining room, which architect Lewin Wertheimer expanded after the Northridge earthquake. "It was a subtle but important change," Davidson says. Clarence House wallcovering.



Eisenstein and Igor Stravinsky came to dinner. Johnny Weissmuller and Arnold Schönberg dropped in for table tennis and tea. Bertolt Brecht and Salka Viertel wrote together in the living room, and family friend Greta Garbo stayed at the house in 1933 while she was looking for a place to live. "Their utopian dream was of a subtropical English village with Montmartre manners," Christopher Isherwood, a guesthouse tenant, said of the canyon milieu.

Salka Viertel dryly wrote in her memoir, "Contrary to predictions, moving to Santa Monica did not impair our social life." Nor that of the Davidsons, who found the house through a friend in 1971. Their own merry fetes have included Haskell Wexler, David Hockney, Tony Kushner and a trio of Kenneths: Tynan, Branagh and Noland. Arthur Miller has written out back. "It's not a salon," Gordon Davidson says, "just people we care about." "It's the way we grew up,"



ABOVE: The master bedroom was redesigned with “soothing, warm earth tones,” Davidson notes. RIGHT: Posters from plays he has worked on—including *The Shadow Box*, for which he won a Tony Award, *Children of a Lesser God* and *Zoot Suit*—line the stair hall.

notes Judi Davidson. “Even when we had a one-room apartment in a New York tenement, everyone came over. I never thought, John Houseman shouldn’t walk up five flights of stairs.” (Before the Davidsons moved into their canyon residence, they discovered that Houseman, Gordon Davidson’s mentor, had once been an owner. “It’s back in the family!” he exclaimed.)

The couple considered remodeling in the mid-1970s,



OPPOSITE: The rear porch, trellises and balconies are among recent additions. “The house isn’t particularly Californian,” Gordon Davidson points out. “The gables, the layout, evoke another place.” The sculpture is by Woods Davy. Lloyd/Flanders Wicker porch furniture.

when their two children were preteens, and they asked Frank Gehry, a friend of theirs, to recommend an architect. “What about me?” he said. “I could use the work.” So Gehry drew up plans. “Naturally, they were interesting,” Gordon Davidson says, “but even then we couldn’t afford him.” A member of Gehry’s design staff ended up adding a second-floor sitting room that created a sun porch below. More substantive chang-

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