

DRAMATIC TOUCHES

When West End producer Eilene Davidson cast a Victorian civic building in London as her family home, she called in her longtime collaborator, interior designer John McCall, to set the scene for a beautifully bold transformation

TEXT **ELFREDA POWNALL** | PHOTOGRAPHS **ALEXANDER JAMES** | LOCATIONS EDITOR **DAVID NICHOLLS**

DRAWING ROOM de Gournay's 'Chatsworth' wallcovering is the backdrop for a Philip Naviasky portrait, which hangs above the 'Russborough' chimneypiece from Jamb. The George IV-style glazed bookcases were a Christie's find. Two Howard & Sons armchairs – one in Jane Churchill's 'Asta' in hot pink and the other in Zoffany's 'Curzon' velvet in duck egg – face each other across a coffee table with a 19th-century specimen top



DRAWING ROOM A pair of armchairs upholstered in Manuel Canovas's 'Anna' fabric in sauge and two sofas in Claremont's 'Armure Cannelle' in rose are arranged around a large custom-made buttoned ottoman from Dudgeon. **CONSERVATORY** A 'Verona' lamp from Pooky stands on the table beside a sofa in Vaughan's 'Thassos' embroidered linen. Eilene's collection of African masks is displayed on the end wall alongside a Twenties silvered mirror. The 'Globe' hanging lantern is from Jamb



The international theatre producer Eilene Davidson has a nose for a winner. The critics ran out of superlatives for her poignant 2020 co-production of *Uncle Vanya* starring Toby Jones and her sizzling version of the musical *Anything Goes*, currently on tour, was lauded as 'A flat-out triumph!'. Eilene knew she had found her perfect house within minutes of

opening the front door of this Victorian civic building in London in 2017. 'The house has gravitas,' she says. 'It has high ceilings and stone floors, and walls so thick it's completely quiet inside, yet it's only a five- or 10-minute cab ride from the West End.'

She rang John McCall, who has designed four family houses for her and gave him a deadline of 11 months – and a brief. 'There's a shorthand with John,' she explains. 'So when I say, "You can go really bold in here", he knows it means *really* bold. We are a lively modern family with four children [aged eight to 19] and two dogs and, for us, the kitchen is where it all happens – we had a group of 15 teenagers in here last weekend. I'm aware it's a grand house, but I don't want to draw attention to that, I want it to be fun, relaxed and colourful. And quite dramatic. I am in the theatre, after all.'

John has fulfilled all those demands and more. The front door opens onto a broad corridor, its walls painted a strong yellow and its stone floor strewn with antique rugs, leading to a glass door onto the garden – a private glade of tall trees and Italianate stone arcades. In the kitchen, the largest room in the house, John has amped up both the colour – with terracotta walls and cupboards in a strong lettuce green – and the scale, by introducing large cabinets in proportion to the room's vast dimensions. Brass wall lights from Soane, with custom extra-large shades, direct the light downwards to create an intimate atmosphere and appear to lessen the great height of the ceiling.

Beyond the kitchen, a conservatory opens onto the terrace. On the opposite side of the yellow corridor, the drawing room – also with yellow walls thanks to a de Gournay chinoiserie paper – opens onto it as well. The sofas here are pink – one of Eilene's favourite colours – and are 11-feet long, and you fall back into their pure down cushions with a satisfying 'plouffe'. A pair of Italian 18th-century cabinets, a Persian Ferraghan carpet and a specimen marble table provide a handsome backbone to a room of soft pastels and even softer upholstery.

Upstairs in the main bedroom, the warm blue of the walls and the rusty pinks of the four-poster bed hangings take their cue from the colours of a suzani John found at an antique textiles fair. He has used these colours for the embroidered curtains, a special order from Chelsea Textiles. A door leads to Eilene's bathroom. 'It's the best I have ever designed,' says John, of this light and beautifully finished room. That is quite a claim: a giant of interior design, John decorated his first houses in the Eighties and his current clients range from 30 to 90 years of age.

Eilene's dressing room next door is everything a leading lady's should be, with large wardrobes, their bulk made glamorous by swirling wooden tracery backed with distressed mirror. And there is, of course, a dressing table surrounded by light bulbs.

Nothing could be more theatrical than Eilene's office in the garden: built on the site of a former swimming pool, it has a wall of bronze and glass doors that open completely to the



HALL Walls in a custom-mixed yellow emulsion set off the red of the antique Ersari carpet from Robert Stephenson. **CHILDREN'S SITTING ROOM** A framed theatre costume hangs above a sofa in C&C Milano's 'Palea Unito' in cherry





KITCHEN A soft terracotta wash on the walls by decorative paint artist Hughie Turner brings out the specially mixed green and dark tan on the cabinets. Above the oak table, which was made by I & JL Brown, is an oak-leaf chandelier from Richard Taylor Designs. The dining chairs are covered in Bennison Fabric's 'Fronstage' while the Edwardian wingback chair is in Claremont's 'Kilim Stripe' fabric



DAUGHTER'S BEDROOM The headboards and curtains are in 'Banyan' green/pink linen from Bennison Fabrics. **EILENE'S OFFICE** The 'Bois Paradis' wallpaper by Christian Lacroix from Designers Guild echoes the garden outside



greenery. She says visiting actors adore the glamour of its pink and black Christian Lacroix silhouette wallpaper, the theatrical posters and a Thirties cut-velvet sofa, which looks like it is straight from a Fred Astaire film. Meanwhile, a pile of hefty books on her office table – biography, poetry and history – reveals a more serious side to her work.

Remaining at garden level, John, with the help of Smallwood Architects, has created a sitting room for the children, carving out the space from a warren of tiny rooms – previously a kitchen, larder, scullery, laundry and store rooms – and adding french windows. 'It was a lot of work. I think the beam in here might be holding up the whole of the street outside,' he says wryly. Two sofas in cream and scarlet, with Penny Morrison cushions, face an ottoman with a suzani-style tapestry top from Susan Deliss. There is a good sound system, walls of books and a huge TV, plus a tiny kitchen nearby. It is teenage hangout heaven.

A handsome bedroom for one of Eilene's sons is next door, with one wall covered in John Rocque's 1746 map of London from Iksel. And round the corner is the most theatrical room of all, a home cinema, which has a huge curving seat and appears to contain props from every Hollywood epic ever made. The velvet on the walls is printed with a Middle Eastern carpet design, there are sandstone Indian carvings, a piece of a Zulu door, Moroccan stools, and tribal masks and African baskets on the walls. The elegant metal wall lights, from the former Annabel's nightclub, bring a tawny glow to this extraordinary space. The dining room upstairs, with its rich red damask paper and gilt mirror, is also an evening room, with more than a whiff of *La Traviata*. With a crystal chandelier hanging above a large circular mahogany table, it is a room for grown-up dinners, conversation and entertaining.

John was well aware there was no question of missing the deadline Eilene had given him. First, he and Smallwood had to get planning permission, as they remade spaces, not only on the garden floor, but throughout the house. Ceilings were taken down, floors taken up for underfloor heating, and walls moved. It was an immense job. He does not have a large staff in his office, but he does have a vast contacts list, and a huge number of people worked on the house, all under his meticulous direction. No detail is too small. For Eilene's youngest daughter's bedroom, John made a pair of curved four-posters and, after searching for a simple cotton pom-pom trim to edge the voile hangings, he found an Indian artisan who makes fringe by hand at her kitchen table. He sent off the money in advance, with some trepidation and, weeks later, a perfect 18th-century-style fringe arrived in the post.

The real test comes, though, two days before the family is due to move in: 'The builders are always a bit late, ironing out final details,' he explains. John gathers a chorus of helpers who work with him and the family's staff, for two long days, making beds, unwrapping sofas, hanging clothes in the wardrobes, putting their preferred soaps in the bathrooms, cutlery in drawers, wine in fridges. 'We have vans arriving every two hours to take away the packing boxes. Then, as the owners land at Heathrow, we walk out of the back door.' The family arrives and sits down to lunch in their immaculate new home.

A critic wrote of one of Eilene's shows, 'I would give it six stars if I could.' John's clients say the same of him □

John McCall Interior Design: mccalldesign.co.uk
Smallwood Architects: smallwoodarchitects.co.uk



MAIN BEDROOM The large antique patterned suzani that lines the bed canopy inspired the colours for this room, with outer bed hangings in 'Tapa' by Fortuny from Claremont and walls in a blue linen-effect paint finish by Hughie Turner. Hughie also painted and grained the metal rafters to look like wood. The bedside tables were made by Jonathan Sainsbury to a design by John