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Friday, April 16, 2004

## Tribute to a man for all seasons

**Exhibit honors businessman, producer who left mark on Seattle theater, skyline**

By [BILL VIRGIN](#)  
 SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Some men make their name in the arts. Others find their niche in government. Still others achieve success in business.

Roger L. Stevens did all three -- and then some.

Consider:

- In the arts, Stevens was a Broadway theatrical producer of more than 100 plays and musicals, including such legendary works as "West Side Story," "A Man For All Seasons" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."
- In government, Stevens headed development of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and became its first chairman; later he was Lyndon Johnson's choice as the first chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.
- In business, Stevens was a major player in real estate, heading a consortium that bought what was America's most famous skyscraper, the Empire State Building in New York.

His accomplishments weren't limited to East Coast venues. Stevens led an investment group that in 1953 successfully bid on the contract to manage the University of Washington's 10-acre Metropolitan Tract in downtown Seattle. That group, University Properties (later Unico), launched a major redevelopment wave that saw construction of such downtown landmarks as Rainier Tower (resembling a pencil stuck in the ground) and the IBM Building.

One of the buildings on that tract was The 5th Avenue Theatre, which by the late 1970s was a fading movie house. Stevens and Unico helped organize a group of businesses to renovate the theater and its glorious Chinese-themed decor and revive it as a live-performance venue.

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For all that, Stevens isn't well known in Seattle. His death in 1998 received scant mention locally.

Unico Properties Inc. is seeking to change that. To mark its 50th anniversary, it is bringing to town a Library of Congress exhibit, "Roger L. Stevens Presents," a reprise of a 2002 exhibit with additional material on Stevens' Seattle accomplishments.

The exhibit will be unveiled later this month on the mezzanine level of The 5th Avenue Theatre, where it will be on display during performances. In the middle of June the exhibit will move to the lobby of Rainier Square (the retail center at the base of Rainier Tower) where it will be on display through Labor Day.

Stevens got his start in both real estate and theater in his native Detroit. His strategy for melding and balancing the two careers: "I worked on real estate in the morning when the theater people were asleep, and on theater in the evening when the real estate people were relaxing."

David Cortelyou, the retired president of Unico, remembers that Stevens would joke that "he dabbled in real estate to support his love of the theater."

Kay Schellberg, executive assistant at Unico and an archivist for the company, says Stevens remained actively involved in the company through 1992 (his daughter still serves on the Unico board). On his visits to Seattle he would stop long enough to get his bags to his hotel room, then go out walking, pacing off the dimensions of buildings. "He was fascinated by architecture and real estate," she says.

While he was closely involved with show business Stevens was not, by most accounts, a showman or self-promoter.

Schellberg says Stevens was known for a "no-nonsense, cut-to-the-chase style." But Stevens was not, by those accounts, bound up by red tape and protocol.

While touring The 5th Avenue Theatre, Stevens, who knew a few things about theaters, tested the acoustics by having Cortelyou and other Unico executives speak and sing from the stage.

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"He was very focused; he had a very sharp mind and a photographic memory of figures," Cortelyou says. "He did a lot of intuitive things I'm sure must have driven the accountants and the financial people crazy."

In a 1998 remembrance, Cortelyou wrote that Stevens "had little patience for lengthy legal contracts and was often known to conclude his deals, whether it was for a Broadway play or the development of a real estate project, with a handshake." Indeed, the bid proposal for managing the Metropolitan Tract consisted of a two-page summary and a cover sheet, Schellberg says.

Stevens had his own summation for the secret to his record of accomplishment, as related in a 1957 interview, recounted in the brochure for the 2002 Library of Congress exhibit: "The Stevens angle is this: Whatever I get involved in happens."

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