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Extremely vertical rock climber O'Neill doesn't hold back

By **Greg Bishop**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Timmy O'Neill gingerly places one foot on a piece of nylon rope and tries not to look down at the ground 1,000 feet below.

He knows this is crazy — even for a man they call the Urban Ape, even for an adrenaline junkie of national acclaim, a guy who climbed limestone cliffs in Cuba, granite monoliths in Greenland, college dormitories in Philadelphia, a Titan 1 missile in Colorado and the Pabst Brewery building in Milwaukee.

The nylon shares the same diameter as a Tootsie Roll, and it stretches 70 feet between two sandstone towers in Indian Creek, Utah. A helicopter hovers nearby to capture the scene for O'Neill's latest climbing-adventure comedy. When O'Neill walks — or slack-lines, as the climbers call it — across the nylon tight-rope, it looks like he's walking on air.

"That's what normal people might call pushing the envelope," O'Neill said. "It just gave me an incredible Jesus complex."

O'Neill lives for this, for cheating death. He laughs when he says it, knowing it may sound a bit melodramatic. But it's there, on the films — the delight in danger, the elation in extreme.

O'Neill's latest climbing film, "**Return2Sender**," makes its Washington premier at 7 tonight at the Neptune Theater in the University District. Distributed by Seattle's Lenticular Pictures and presented by Montrail, a local climbing-shoe company, the film shows the world of rock climbing from O'Neill's point of view.

"What sticks in my mind are those times when you're just cheating death," O'Neill said. "Those times where you're suffering immeasurably because you're so cold and wet and hungry and so freaking far away from safety. It's like living in terror. You're about to die."

That quote stayed with me as I stand at the base of a rock wall at Seattle's Vertical World yesterday. O'Neill, 35, is fixing my harness, telling me to "stay



enlarge THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Extreme climber Timmy O'Neill scales the 32-foot walls at Seattle Vertical World. O'Neill is in the Northwest promoting his new rock-climbing movie, "**Return2Sender**."

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in the moment" and "watch your feet and not your hands." He tells me there's no rush like this rush.

"This is the birthplace of indoor rock climbing," O'Neill says, gesturing around walls with knobs and holds scattered about in different color combinations. "This is your Everest."

He pauses.

"Dude, you are so dead."

He's right. As I ascend the wall, I can hear his words echoing inside my head, about the "maverick lifestyle of climbing." How it forces you to "be in the moment. There is no future. There is no past. There is no point in having a savings account."

O'Neill climbed trees growing up near Philadelphia, scampering up maple and sycamore and oak. His parents raised seven "free spirits" who eventually climbed with real spirits at the local Fernwood Cemetery. O'Neill would go there, ascending gravestones and tombstones and monuments.

At 19, he decided to study at Temple. But he says it felt like the "13th grade." Reading a National Geographic in his dorm room one day, O'Neill stumbled across an article about fires in Yellowstone National Park. One photograph showed park employees fleeing.

"Park employees?" O'Neill wondered. "They have park employees?"

So O'Neill purchased a one-way \$69 ticket on a Greyhound bus and took a job in the gift shop just outside Old Faithful. He met a friend there who told him about a free climbing clinic in Montana.

And for the next seven years, O'Neill lived without a savings account — without anything, really, except a backpack, a climbing harness and a thumb perpetually stuck in the air on the side of Highway 101.

"I couldn't not rock climb," O'Neill said. "So I lived like a dirtbag, like a bum. And I loved every second of it."

O'Neill climbed the "nose" of El Capitan in three hours and 24 minutes in 2001, a 3,000-foot climb that takes a normal person five days. Of course, O'Neill isn't exactly normal.

"Timmy, well, he's insane," said Riley Morton, president of Lenticular Pictures.

Peter Mortimer approached O'Neill to make a film titled, "Front Range Freaks." He climbed buildings in urban Philadelphia. Without a rope, hundreds of feet off the ground, he would knock on the window of a girl's college dorm room, tell her he had lost his dog and ask if she had seen it.

The rest is climbing history. O'Neill's currently on a 14-city tour that travels next to Vancouver and three cities in Oregon before wrapping up in California. He's traveling with a broken kneecap (from flying over his bike handlebars) and a serious credit-card bill (for a triple rollover car crash).

At once, danger and delight.

"I look at climbing as a form of self-expression," O'Neill said. "I'm a hyper-loquacious kind of dude, and that's how I express myself. I'm not into being suicidal. I'm into taking risks. That, my friend, is what life is all about."

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