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MOVIES**

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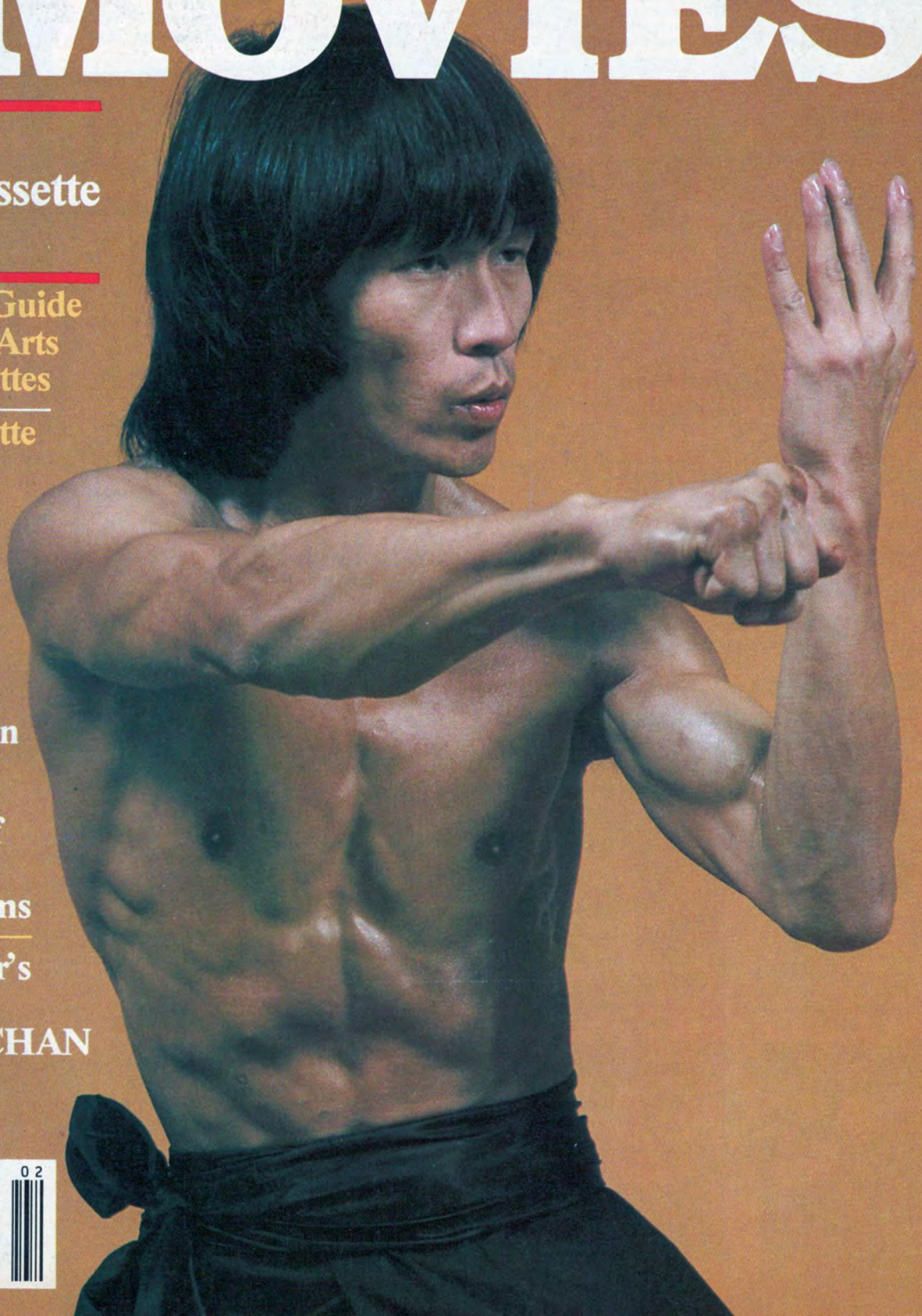
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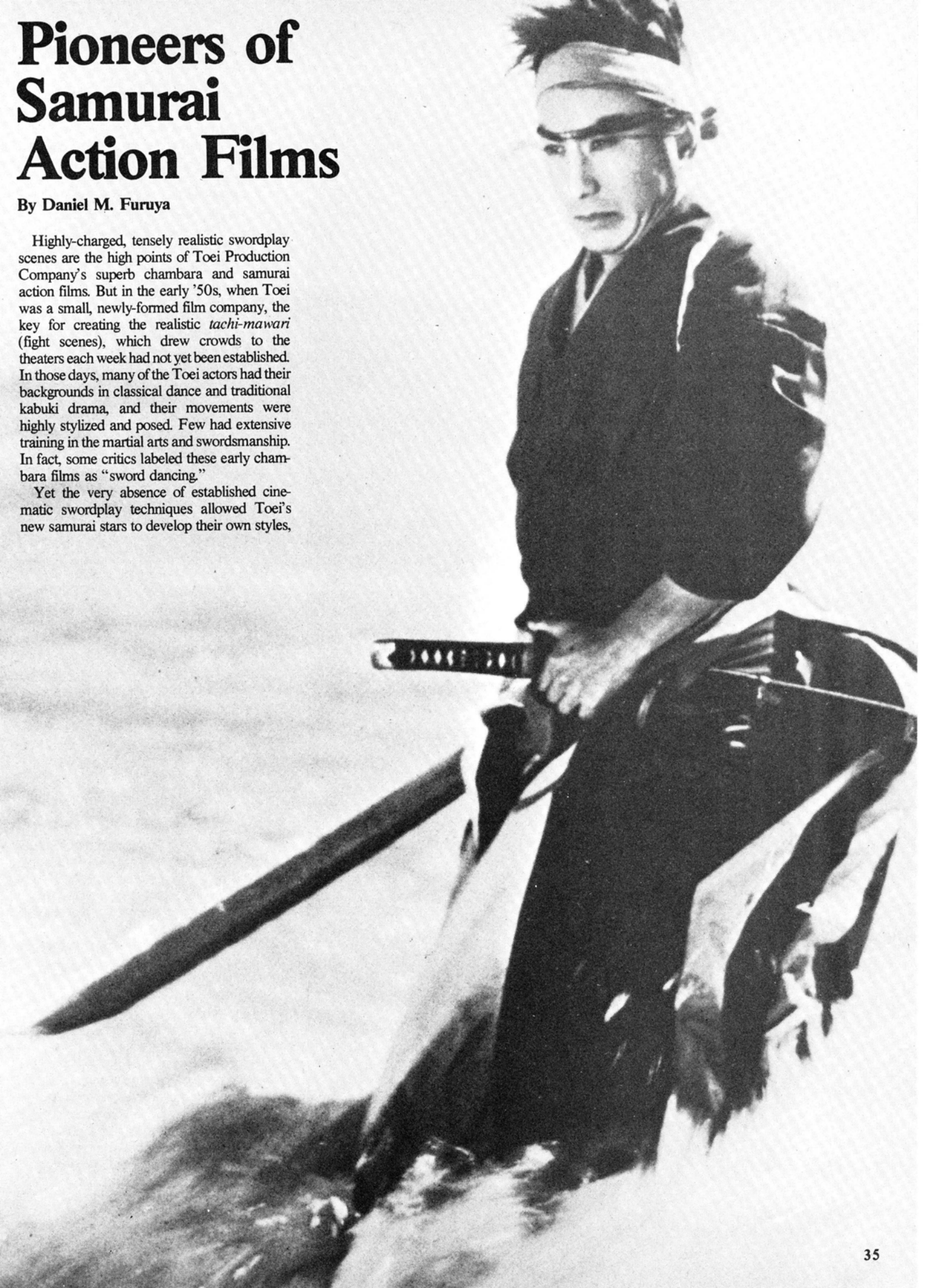


Pioneers of Samurai Action Films

By Daniel M. Furuya

Highly-charged, tensely realistic swordplay scenes are the high points of Toei Production Company's superb chambara and samurai action films. But in the early '50s, when Toei was a small, newly-formed film company, the key for creating the realistic *tachi-mawari* (fight scenes), which drew crowds to the theaters each week had not yet been established. In those days, many of the Toei actors had their backgrounds in classical dance and traditional kabuki drama, and their movements were highly stylized and posed. Few had extensive training in the martial arts and swordsmanship. In fact, some critics labeled these early chambara films as "sword dancing."

Yet the very absence of established cinematic swordplay techniques allowed Toei's new samurai stars to develop their own styles,





basing them on Western acting, sports, and the martial arts, as well as on traditional dance and kabuki. In recent interviews published in *Chambara Graffiti* by Makino Hiromasa (Kodansha, 1981), four of the top stars of Toei chambara, Ichikawa Utaemon, Ohkawa Hashizo, Kataoka Chiezo, and Nakamura (Yorozuya) Kinno-suke, explain how they produced the new "fighting style" which became Toei's trademark and entertained millions of avid fans for several decades.

Ichikawa Utaemon: The Bored Samurai

The "bored samurai" was the famous character created by Ichikawa Utaemon in the 30 films of the *Hatamoto Taikutsu Otoko* (*Bored Samurai*) series, beginning in 1931. An extremely popular and prolific actor, Ichikawa celebrated the completion of his 300th film in 1958 by embarking on a second series of *Bored Samurai* adventures. Some of the most popular films in this series are *Mystery of the Dragon-God Pass*, *Mystery of the Ghost Island*, *Mystery of the Foreign Drum*, and *Mystery of the Snake Princess Mansion*.

In the years between 1954-64, Ichikawa made 73 films with Toei. The last two were *Kondo Isamu* (*The Bloody History of Shinsengumi*), in 1963, and *Shinobi no Daimyo* (*The Daimyo Spy*) in 1964.

Saotome Mondonosuke, the ennuyeuse hero of *Hatamoto Taikutsu Otoko*, is a well-to-do samurai who, growing bored with the dull and stiff aristocratic life in the castle, goes out among the people to seek adventure. The character became equally famous for the sinister crescent scar on his forehead and for his unusual two-sword style, known as the *moroha ryu seigan kuzushi*, or two-sword eye-slashing cut.

According to Ichikawa, this fighting style does not appear in the original novel upon which the film was based. "The famous stance I used was difficult to develop and was inspired by the name that I chose for it," he explains. "The stance is really my own invention."

In developing this style, Ichikawa first researched traditional Japanese forms. "I started training in classical dance from the age of five years, and directly entered the world of the stage and classical dance," he says. "I studied many forms used in the kabuki, and also the forms used in real swordsmanship. By combining the forms from dance and swordsmanship, I developed the fighting style that made my movies popular."

However, Ichikawa realized that the movements which work on stage will not necessarily work on film. "On stage or in classical Japanese dance, everyone sees the same pose from whatever angle you are viewing it. But the films are quite different from a stage production or kabuki; you have many close-ups and angle shots. If the camera zooms in on a close-up shot during an action sequence and you lose the

With sword held close to his face, Ichikawa Utaemon takes the eye-cutting stance he developed for his "bored samurai" role. The sword, intense facial expression, and famous crescent-shaped scar will be clearly visible from every camera angle.

movement of the sword, the action has no meaning at all," he says.

So Ichikawa learned to make his style cinematically exciting by studying camera angles. "Whenever I take my fighting stance, I hold the sword close to my face. Therefore, from whatever angle the cameraman takes, he is always sure to catch the sword and the intense facial expression during the action. This was one of my ideas, and this is why I call my style 'eye-cutting.' All the action starts from this one stance. In whichever way I cut with the sword, the camera can always catch the action. It doesn't make a difference which way my feet are.

"When I first discussed this with the director and cameraman, they found that in which ever direction I cut, they never lost the actor or the action. They gave me carte blanche on all the action sequences I did. So even today, I still use this very same method to create fighting sequences, and it still works out well."

Ohkawa Hashizo: The Spirit of Cutting

Although he was later to shine as a samurai detective, Ohkawa Hashizo gained his greatest fame as Aoi Shingo, the illegitimate son of the reigning Tokugawa Shogun. In the eight films of the *Aoi Shingo Juban Shobu* (*The Ten Duels of Aoi Shingo*) series from 1960 to 1965, Ohkawa tries to gain honor and self-respect by mastering swordsmanship. Throughout the series, Shingo clings to his belief that his growing fame as a swordsman will eventually help him to see and be reunited with his mother and father.

In a less romantic vein, Ohkawa played a samurai detective in the *Waka-Sama Samurai Torimono Cho* (*Cases of the Young Samurai Detective*) series. Toei produced ten films in this hit series, each with a detective-thriller title reminiscent of Mickey Spillane: *Mystery of the Bloody Mansion*, *The Beautiful Corpse*, and *The Mystery of the Spider Lady*.

The last of the 67 films Ohkawa made for Toei between 1955 and 1966 was *Zenigata Heiji*. Again playing a detective, Ohkawa defended himself by throwing coins with lethal accuracy. This series was immediately taken over by television, and became a popular, long-running series.

Like Ichikawa, Ohkawa was originally a performer in kabuki theater. However, Ohkawa found that his specialty in kabuki, *onna-gata* (female roles) was a handicap in trying to create his more masculine film characters. "My film debut was in 1956 with *Fue-fuki Waka Musha* (*The Flute Playing Warrior*)," he recalls. "I had never done a fight scene before. When I saw the rushes, I couldn't believe how bad it was. I was really embarrassed and ashamed of myself. It looked like a little girl swinging a stick around trying to fight or something, I don't even know. My footwork and the way I held the sword were all too feminine

Once a specialist in female kabuki roles, Ohkawa Hashizo later combined realistic martial arts moves with dance-like grace for his film role of Aoi Shingo.





Chiezo Kataoka helped develop the one-cut killing style for his role as Tsukue Ryunosuke in *Daibosatsu Toge*. Here, temporarily blinded, Chiezo uses a spear to defeat his enemies.

because of my long experience as an *onnaga*.

"Realizing that this wouldn't do at all, I immediately started training with stuntmen who were experts in fight sequences and the martial arts. It was a very long and difficult process for me. By combining the realism of the martial arts with my background in kabuki and its beautiful movement, I was finally able to develop a strong but graceful fighting style."

After more than a decade of film fighting experience, Ohkawa now believes that the actor must convey the spirit of swordsmanship to the audience in order to create a powerful and convincing fight scene. "Realism is the foundation of chambara films. When you cut with a sword, you must do it with the real intention and spirit of actually cutting," he says. "But the films are also entertainment and fantasy, so there are techniques to get around this without really cutting someone. I think each actor has his own way of accomplishing this, whether it is

realistic-type swordsmanship or the more poised, dance-like forms.

"As for myself, I like to consider the beauty of the movement. So in using the sword, the most important consideration is to get a realistic 'mood' for each action shot."

Kataoka Chiezo: The Silent Sword

His appearance in two of the most coveted chambara roles, Miyamoto Musashi in *Kengo Nito Ryu (The Swordsman of the Two Sword Style)* in 1957, and Oishi Kuranosuke, the leading role in *Chushingura (The Loyal 47 Retainers)* in 1961, suggests the immensity of Kataoka Chiezo's popularity. However, he is probably most famous for his role as Tsukue Ryunosuke in *Daibosatsu Toge (Daibosatsu Pass)* made in three parts from 1957 through 1959.

A veteran of 77 Toei films from 1954 to 1965, Kataoka has also taken numerous roles outside of the chambara genre. Although pro-

fessedly preferring these non-chambara parts, Kataoka nevertheless has strong ideas about how fight scenes should be performed.

"First of all, I don't think the movements should be too complicated or intricate," he says. "Although now the movements are simpler and stronger, in those days there was a lot of banging and clashing and waving the swords. This is how the chambara got its name. 'Chan-chan bara-bara' is the sound of clashing swords in a fight scene."

According to Kataoka, a more simple and realistic fighting style was developed to show the sword fights between the young hero of *Daibosatsu Pass* and the film's star and arch-villain. "When I did this movie, we had a very difficult time with the script," he says. "The author spent a great deal of time consulting expert swordsmen in writing the original book, so the fight scenes had to be more realistic than anything that we had done before.

"Tsukue was supposed to be a master of the

'Otonashi no Ken' (Silent Sword Style). There is no way to engage in any clash with this style of swordsmanship. As soon as you touch the sword, it slips away and goes in for the kill. The Otonashi no Ken never clashes with another sword.

"Therefore, the young hero who finally kills Tsukue had to develop a style that was more direct and simple. For the first time, we had to show fighting with swords without any clash or contact.

"It was a very difficult problem, and we had to call in many experts to make it work. This marked the development, however, of the more direct, one-cut killing style that you see in *chambara* movies today."

Nakamura Kinnosuke: Timing, Speed, and Footwork

Nakamura Kinnosuke may be best known to an American audience for his role as Samon, the Shogunate spy in Hideo Gosha's masterpiece, *Goyokin*. However, arguably the best of the 71 films he made for Toei in the period between 1954 and 1966 was the five-part *Miyamoto Musashi* directed by Uchida Tomu. In the title role of this superb rendition of Eiji Yoshikawa's epic novel, Nakamura shows the development of a lowly farmer who sets off to battle to gain fame and fortune, and finally directs his whole life to mastering the sword. Because of the popularity of the five-part series (made from 1960-66), a sixth film in the series, called *Shinken Shobu* (*Death Match*) was made in 1972. This film costarred Mikuni Rentaro, who had himself played Miyamoto Musashi in an earlier film production.

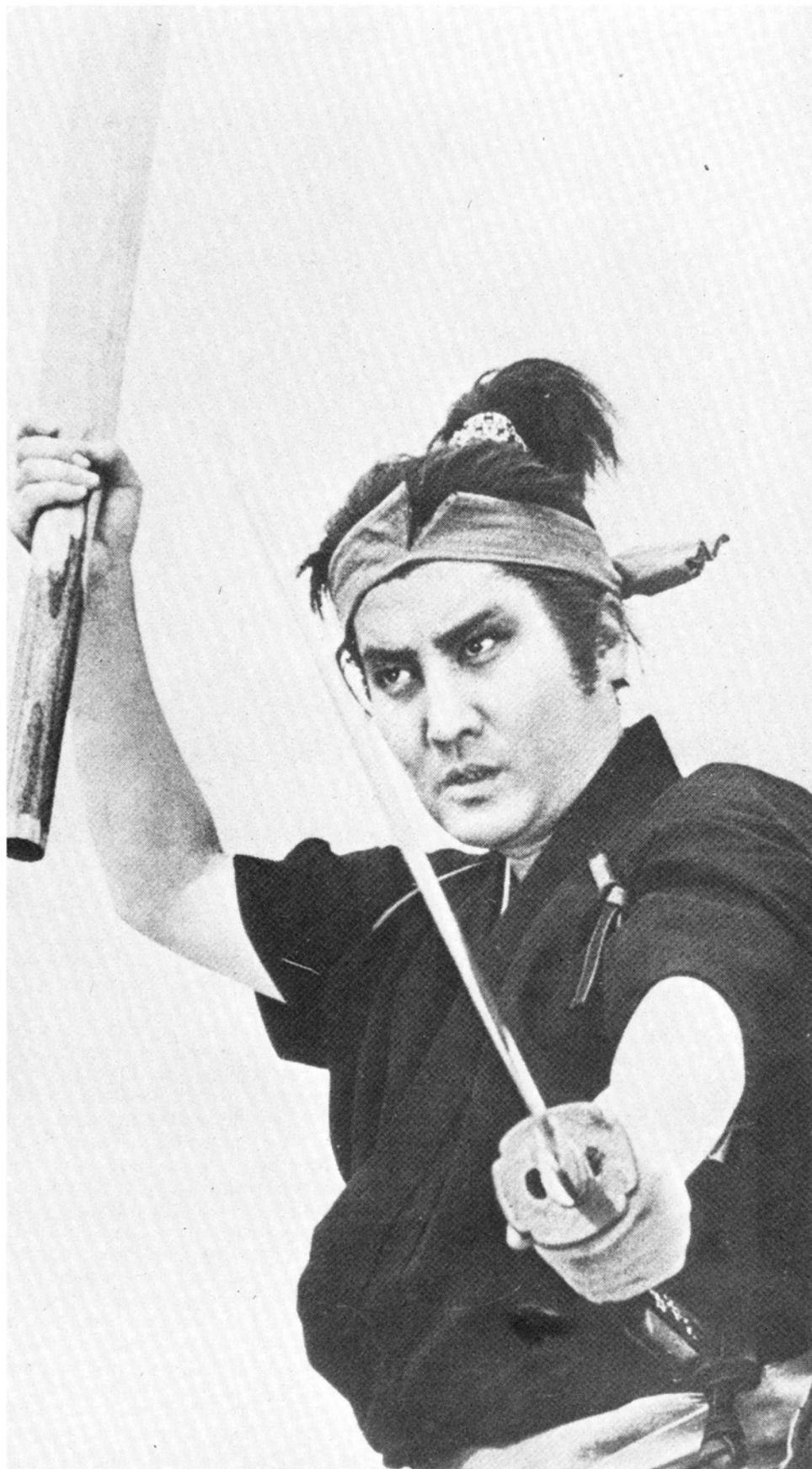
After gaining proficiency with two swords from his *Miyamoto Musashi* role, Nakamura starred in another popular series as Genji Kuro, the two-sworded samurai dressed in white. Nakamura continued his *chambara* career onto television, starring in the TV version of *Kozure Ohkami* (*Lone Wolf with Child*), and *Yagyū Inmo* (*Yagyū Family Conspiracy*).

Recently Nakamura changed his name to Yorozuya Kinnosuke. Changing one's name to indicate a growing mastery of one's art is common in kabuki, the tradition from which Nakamura stems. His father was a distinguished kabuki actor, and Nakamura himself made his kabuki debut at age four.

Like Miyamoto Musashi, his most famous character, Nakamura has attempted to probe the underlying essence of swordsmanship. "The backbone of swordfighting is timing, speed, and footwork," he says. "I consider these elements most important.

"You cannot muddle up your footwork. In taking just one step, already two or three people must be killed. It has to be this kind of timing. It's not just to strike like one, two, three, four, and so on. That's why, when I have cut down two people, I feel inside of me that I have already cut down five.

"Timing and speed don't apply to *chambara* films alone. They are the very basis of all Japanese arts."



As Miyamoto Musashi in Uchida Tomu's five-part epic, Nakamura Kinnosuke combined timing, speed, and footwork to master the two-sword style.