

# Weekend

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Remember the '60s television show about a samurai and ninjas who threw stars around?  
MATTHEW FRANKLIN reports on its star



● Koichi Ose reflects on his past.

# The Samurai takes a bow

**K**OICHI Ose, 53, might have the best-known Japanese face in Australia.

Koichi who? His real name might mean little, but in his on-screen role — as Shintaro of the 1960s television show *The Samurai* — Ose was a genuine superhero for a generation of Australians.

*The Samurai* made him instantly recognisable to an army of television-watching Australian children and their long-suffering parents.

The program was vintage 1960s. Screened in black and white, it told the tale of Shintaro, the heroic Middle Ages samurai warrior, and his never-ending battle with black-pyjama-wearing ninja assassins.

The ninja spies wandered about the countryside tossing small ninja throwing stars at Shintaro and yelling out in blood-curdling voices: "Shintaro — you die!"

The ninja were experts in traditional martial arts. They could move in the blink of an eye and leap 10 metres into the air to escape an attack. But thanks to his unmatched skill with the sword, Shintaro always beat the ninja, becoming a role model for thousands of Australian children, who restaged his epic battles against evil in backyards across the land.

*The Samurai* was still regularly seen on Australian television as late as the mid 1970s.

These days Ose, who retired as an actor in 1969, is a successful businessman and property developer.

But reminiscing in Tokyo this week, he could still clearly remember the day in 1967 when he landed at Sydney Airport on a visit to promote *The Samurai*.

"Nobody told me how popular the program was," Ose said.

"When I got off the plane I saw a lot of Australian children dressed as ninja and holding

toy throwing stars. They were waving bubble-gum wrappers with my picture on them."

Ose said he appeared before big crowds in Sydney and Melbourne during the two-week trip.

"Before that I didn't even know that my film was being shown in Australia," he said.

Part of *The Samurai's* cult appeal was the often-atrocious dubbing of English voices over the Japanese sound track.

Shintaro regularly moved his mouth for long speeches and the English audio would deliver one or two words.

Similarly, fearsome ninja would often move their lips for short words and the English audio would gush out complete sentences.

Ose said most of *The Samurai's* appeal lay in its fast movement and action.

"In ninja films there is always a lot of action — people throw ninja darts and there are quick tricks," he said.

"Traditional samurai drama (in Japan) is more to do with swordsmanship.

"All the action in ninja films makes it natural that little children will like them."

Filming took place in Japan from 1962 to 1964.

"All sorts of tricks were involved and there were quite a lot of injuries to myself and the ninja," Ose said.

"We often used fire crackers to look like bombs and that meant you had to make sure your timing was right or you would be standing next to them when they blew up."

**W**HILE countless Australian children mimicked Shintaro in the 1960s, Ose achieved genuine superstar status in his own country.

His career began in 1958, when he starred as the hero in the Japanese version of the United States television series *Superman*.

*Gekko Kamen (The Moon-*

*light Mask)* was the first television series produced for Japanese television and was very successful.

Then came *The Samurai* — called *Onmitsu Kenshi (The Spy Samurai)* in Japan.

"My films were big business in Japan," Ose said.

"I used to wear a wig in *Onmitsu Kenshi* but the difference between my real face and my face with the wig was not very big.

"Whenever I walked down the street I was recognised."

Ose acted in about 20 feature films for cinema after his television career and also performed in theatre before retiring suddenly in 1969.

"I have a personal theory that entertainers should retire at their peak time," Ose said.

"They climb mountains and they reach the peak and then they have to lose their popularity."

"I couldn't endure that downward road."

Ose threw himself into business with his wife, famous Japanese actress Hizuru Takachiyo, whom he had married in 1964.

**I**N 1971, he set up OT Planning — a company dealing in entertainment promotion and property development.

In the late 1970s the company built a \$21.5 million office building in western Tokyo. Its current projects include a golf course in Tokyo and several commercial buildings.

In 1980 Ose and his wife launched a chain of noodle restaurants called Gonin-bayashi (Five Musicians). They now have 12 restaurants throughout Japan.

Ose said he revisited Australia two years ago when a friend's company bought an office building in Melbourne.

"I was very impressed with the natural lifestyle," he said. "Japanese people live an

inhuman lifestyle when compared with Australia."

But he had no ambition to conduct property business in Australia because he knew that Australians were critical of Japanese investment.

"In my films I was always a defender of justice," he said. "That means that in business, I have to be careful to remember my image."

"I don't want to be involved in business with another country if the contact gives nothing to that country."

Ose's wife was trying to convince him to buy a house in Australia for annual holidays.

But it is unlikely that Ose will become a regular visitor to Australia in the short term.

The man who so bravely dispatched so many hundreds of evil ninja to the afterlife on film and who could leap high in the air with apparently little effort has one phobia.

He is afraid of aeroplanes.

## BEST PICK - WEEKEND FLICKS!



Here's 3 outstanding films to entertain you. If you haven't seen it already you've certainly heard about GHOST, the love-story that is still delighting audiences in it's 17th week. Starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore, GHOST is the perfect Valentine's Day film to see with your loved-one. An action comedy film that is wowing audiences is KINDERGARTEN COP in which Arnold Schwarzenegger shows he's just as adept at comedy as he is in tough-guy roles. Sylvester Stallone needs no introduction as the legendary Rocky Balboa, the world boxing champion who discovers that sometimes the toughest fight is outside the ring.