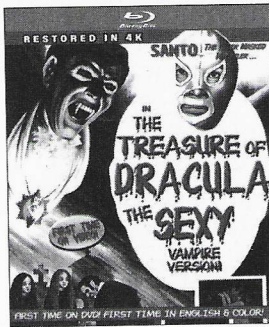


## SANTO IN THE TREASURE OF DRACULA

Directed by René Cardona  
(1968) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray



Between 1961 and 1983, Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta starred in a series of more than 50 outlandish action-adventure films under the name of his masked alter ego El Santo, the most popular Mexican professional wrestler in history. A genuine cultural icon south of the border, El Santo (The Saint) was never, ever seen without his trademark silver luchador mask, which he reportedly wears to this day in his grave. The films were a merchandising offshoot of his decades-long wrestling career and, for the most part, proved reliably profitable at the Mexican box office.

Santo movies usually cast their star as a crime fighter of sorts. They almost always feature one or two wrestling matches, which may or may not be integral to the plot, but spend the majority of their running time pitting Santo against criminal or supernatural threats like a traditional screen hero. Sometimes Santo is more of a detective, other times he's closer to a Bond-style secret agent. But he can usually be found wheeling around the countryside in his sportscar, attired spiffily in a turtleneck or plaid suit jacket, along with that sparkly, silver mask. While many of the pictures feature straight crime plots or evil genius rule-the-world villains, a select bunch pit our masked hero against classic monsters like Dracula, the Wolf man, and Frankenstein's Monster, each of whom returned to menace Santo more than once. Other entries feature witches, generic vampire women, and spooky wax museums. You get the idea.

It seems that the "Santo Meets the Monsters" pictures have proven to be the most popular of the series for English language audiences. In fact, a large portion of the non-supernatural titles have traditionally been difficult, if not impossible to find in English-friendly versions. Spanish speakers, however, can still find many of the films available on various DVD labels. For those of us who still have to rely on dubbing and subtitles, however, finding a hard copy of \*any\* given Santo title can be a challenging proposition. It was a cause for celebration, then, when a U.S. label as prominent as the venerable VCI Entertainment announced the 4K restoration and release of one of the most elusive and controversial of the masked man's monster mashes on Blu-ray.

*Santo in The Treasure of Dracula: The Sexy Vampire Version* provides us with the long unseen "European Cut" of a representative late 60s Santo adventure. This release was rather unusual, as these pictures were largely marketed to family audiences, what with the masked superhero wrestling with Universal Monster knockoffs and all. With *Treasure of Dracula*, however, some canny operator decided that shooting nude versions of several scenes would make the film more marketable overseas, and for some reason, the normally straight-laced Santo agreed. Unfortunately, Santo does not participate in any of the R-rated hijinks (he would have kept his mask on), but Count Dracula (Aldo Monti) definitely does, pawing and squeezing the naked breasts of his vampire brides in several scenes. There is more than one sequence where the brides disrobe almost completely, so if its nudity you're after, you won't be disappointed.

Viewers who simply want another whacko, monster-focused El Santo adventure should also be happy. Director René Cardona (*Night of the Bloody Apes*, *Santa Claus*, other Santo flicks, etc.), a psychotronic specialist, delivers the goods by combining time travel, the classic Dracula story, and professional wrestling into a 90-minute ride rendered in lurid color (although the family-friendly version was reportedly shot in black and white).

The plot is not simple. Santo, you see, is also a part-time scientist and inventor who wants to show off the crazy looking time machine he has just perfected. Unfortunately, it only works for female passengers for some reason, so he decides to send his platonic friend Luisa (Noelia Noel) back in time as guinea pig. The time machine set piece, based visually on Irwin Allen's *Time Tunnel*, is almost worth the price of admission by itself. Santo sends Luisa back randomly and blindly into the past, not exactly physically, but instead setting her up to relive a past life—I think. As luck would have it, she ends up playing the Mina role in an extended retelling of the Dracula story with different character names. They even dust off the Count Alucard alias for this one.

All in the name of science, Santo calmly stands there watching the monitor with his buddies, as Luisa is bitten by Dracula, becomes his thrall with her own coffin, etc., before finally yanking her out of there at the last possible second. And that's just the first half of the picture. Now it becomes a modern-day race to find Dracula's hidden treasure, based on clues from the past. Santo has to contend with a new masked villain (who is not Dracula) and win an important wrestling match to decide the fate of the treasure, before heading into Dracula's lair for one last confrontation with the Prince of Darkness. And there's more nudity.

VCI wraps all of this insanity up in one nice package. The colors are appropriately eye-popping and the image is as clean as I've ever seen on a Santo flick. One source of concern is the fact that the release provides ONLY an English-dubbed version of the film with no Spanish-plus-subtitles option. That's acceptable on a goofy title like this, but the dubbing, recorded recently, sounds a little lackluster and amateurish to this listener. Others have singled it out for praise, so your mileage may vary. Extras include a lengthy comparison of the two versions of the picture and clips from other Santo films that VCI have waiting in the wings.

## ONIBABA

Directed by Kaneto Shindo  
(1964) The Criterion Collection Blu-ray



While an unspecified feudal fourteenth-century older, unnamed Woman and a young, equally unnamed companion (Jitsuko Yoda) exist in an isolated existence in a far from the fighting. But them, they have various means of survival in a territory: as many a samurai traverses the land, have laid a trap in the into which such sojourn

their deaths, the better for the women to sell their ill-gotten swag for valuables and perhaps only the return of soldier Kishi (eventually the son of the older woman and the husband of the younger woman) end to this murderous cycle . . . but such a chance encounter with Kishi's comrade Hachi (who was the news that Kishi met his demise as he and Hachi desert the war. Nor is that all it brings: Hachi is permanently out of the picture, the younger woman for her loneliness and lust in the handsome Hachi's apprehension of her mother-in-law. With Hachi threatened, the Woman resolves to do whatever she can to get her partner in crime from abandoning her for Hachi's stage for the arrival of a mysterious Warrior (Jitsuko). The features are concealed by an elaborate, theatrical mask but did he just happen to show up, or did he have the willpower of the Woman conjure him into being?

The title of *Onibaba*, variously translated as "Demon Hag," gives a strong clue to the direction of the story, but writer/director Kaneto Shindo's viewer in with tense, suffocating atmosphere as well before the traditional "horror" elements come (or, rather, the absence thereof) hanging over the scene, regardless of the on-screen action. The Woman herself grown past such needs and actively ignores the attention she still receives, be it a legitimate compliment from the merchant or the Warrior's tantalizing suggestion to remove the mask because it hides a face too beautiful for a woman. In contrast, only the absence of opportunity has kept the younger woman (Yoshimura was 21 at the time) far. And even though no prurient action is taking place, she is invited to gaze lingeringly on both women as they attempt to sleep in the sweltering environment.

Prior to the advent of home video, the availability of *Onibaba* all but impossible for U.S. viewers to see in schools and repertory screenings, as not even the Akira Kurosawa classics would play this well even those young horror fans with no prayer of seeing a film were more than familiar with the iconic, thanks to the stills which frequently appear in reference books and to which tribute was paid in subsequent genre films (and was it merely a hapless reference to the classic *Twilight Zone* episode "The Mask" (1964)?). The demonic visage remains quite frightful, but its misappropriation for selfish purposes and its illegitimate human nature which defiantly exists in spite of its guilt) leads to true terror and permanent consequence. The final movement of *Onibaba*.

Shindo's classic made its Stateside digital debut with the Criterion Collection with a DVD that did away with the black-and-white photography and the aggressive score which contributes to the film's effect in no small way. It featured a video interview with Shindo, Super 8 footage shot by actor Kei Sato, a theatrical trailer and a much-anticipated (at the time of this writing) feature add a feature commentary with Shindo, Sato and a while Toho reportedly commissioned an English dub of *Onibaba*, that version never played in America. It was recovered as an extra for this brand new Blu-ray.

Chris Herzog