During a particularly fruitful creative period in the early 1970s, director Jess Franco was making somewhere in the neighborhood of 10 films a year all over Europe. There are those who consider these some of his most interesting years as a filmmaker, while others see this as a period of wild excess and slipshod directorial technique that was marred by a tragic misuse of the zoom lens.

I fall squarely in the middle of these two extremes, as I’m not blind to their rushed filming circumstances and threadbare production value, but I also find a lot to admire in Franco’s stubbornness as an artist who continued to make movies under any circumstances necessary. In comparison to much of the film “product” being pushed on us today by not only the major studios but even a lot of the little guys, I’ll take Franco’s reckless abandon and passion over the obvious need for a return on investment that infuses 95 percent of what’s polluting the cineplexes these days. Two of these films, EXORCISM and FEMALE VAMPIRE, are now out on DVD and Blu-ray from Redemption/Kino Lorber.

In terms of visual quality, EXORCISM is a very good video transfer taken from tattered-looking 35mm film elements that have seen much better days. What we’re presented with here is a Frankenstein-like cobbling together of multiple sources in various stages of decay, which have been lovingly combined into a watchable version of the film that appears to come closest to Franco’s original conception. Keep in mind that this particular movie has at least four distinct editorial variants, each containing footage exclusively shot for it.

For example, the discs offer the “extended erotic” version (though not the hardcore one, which exists under another title), as well as the truncated (it’s a half-hour shorter) edition titled DEMONIAC, which was infamously released in an eye-catching super-duper big-box VHS from Wizard Video back in the day. DEMONIAC is not just a cut-down of the longer version, but also contains alternative clothed versions of many (but not all) of the many nude sex and killing scenes—all of which were obviously shot concurrently, as the exact same camera angles are used in both. For the true diehards, the trailer offers up a few unused shots and alternative takes not seen in either of the versions on the discs. And speaking of variant editions, this release of EXORCISM has a listed running time of 97 minutes, unlike the 94-minute version released on DVD by Synapse Films about 10 years ago. So if you’re a committed fan, you might want to hold onto that older release when you pick this one up.

The audio is the biggest disappointment of this package, a very poorly dubbed English-only track (just like on that Synapse disc) that makes one long for an original-language version with subtitles. Interestingly, the opening-credits sequence of DEMONIAC contains the original French dialogue (which is minimal) between the characters performing a satanic ritual for an eager audience—sans subtitles.

Likewise, Redemption/Kino Lorber’s FEMALE VAMPIRE offers up the “extended erotic” feature (but not the hardcore cut, which exists under yet another title…wait, didn’t I just type this two paragraphs ago?!), as well as an alternative version entertainingly entitled EROTIKILL, which replaces sexually explicit footage with Lina Romay ingesting blood plasma to survive, instead of other bodily essences. The former includes a much-appreciated French soundtrack with subtitles, whereas the latter sports the wretched English-language dub. The print is in similarly ragged shape to EXORCISM, but is a more consistent viewing experience, as it does not feature the almost constant switching between various sources the other film suffers. But unfortunately, VAMPIRE also appears to be a generation or two more removed from its source materials than EXORCISM, with a duller color scheme and chunkier contrast. This is a bit disappointing, but it does provide a more visually consistent experience than EXORCISM, and it’s certainly the best this movie has ever looked on home video.

FEMALE VAMPIRE also contains two video-interview featurettes. The first consists of Franco

reminiscing about the circumstances behind the project and, most importantly, his initial love-at-first-sight meeting with the recently deceased Romay (the interview was conducted not long after her passing away). The other chat is with Jean-Pierre Bouyxou (who plays Dr. Orloff in VAMPIRE and has a long history not only with Franco, but in French fantastic cinema in general), remembering Romay as a performer and friend. If you’re a fan of the filmmaker and his collaborations with these people, the memories and observations they share are truly heartbreaking and illuminating. Their reminisces, and this film in particular, stand as a testament to the compelling beauty and natural performing talents of Romay, who succumbed to cancer before turning 60.

Overall, EXORCISM is for die-hard Franco fans first and foremost, but FEMALE VAMPIRE is a strange and compelling semi-classic that gives viewers a point-of-view look from the director’s eyes into the body and soul of his muse—a 100-minute love letter to Romay, and to the creative process that can be ignited by a passion for cinema, earthly pleasures and unearthly beauty.

EXORCISM:

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DISC PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

FEMALE VAMPIRE:

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DISC PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀