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Arts

Not Your Usual Doll House: Tiny 'CSI' Death Scenes Featured in Hollywood Theatre Premiere

Narrated by John Waters, "Of Dolls and Murder" is an award-winning film about an unusual collection at the Maryland medical examiner's office and the growing public fascination with forensic science.

By [Bruce Goldfarb](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 26, 2012

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An award-winning documentary about a unique collection of miniature death scenes and the woman who made them is slated to have its Baltimore-area premiere at the Hollywood Theatre on June 5.

[Of Dolls and Murder](#), by Minneapolis filmmaker Susan Marks, is about the [Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death](#), an unusual set of 19 dollhouse-size crime scene models at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Baltimore.

The Nutshell Studies were hand-crafted in the 1930-40s by Frances Glessner Lee, a wealthy Chicago socialite who founded a program to train police in forensic investigation. The models are still used for training to this day.

Largely based on actual cases, each model depicts death scenes in exquisite detail—with working lights, doors and windows that open and close, sweaters knitted with straight pins, and tiny hand-rolled cigarette butts in ashtrays.

Marks' documentary, narrated by John Waters, traces the emergence of forensic science into the popular mainstream through shows such as *CSI*, visits the Body Farm in Tennessee where researchers study the decomposition of human bodies, and follows Baltimore City cops as they respond to a homicide.

"Because of the generosity of the Baltimore City Police Department, we were able to access so much that the public doesn't get to see," Marks said.

Of Dolls and Murder won first prize at the International Thriller and Spy Film Festival in Washington, D.C., in 2010.

The film, which has never been shown in Baltimore, will make its premiere at the [Hollywood Theatre](#) at 7 p.m. on June 5. Tickets are [available online](#) for \$8, or \$10 at the door.

The showing will be followed by a question and answer session with Marks and others who worked on the film.

"This is like a homecoming for us," Marks said. "I'm so excited to return to Baltimore with my filmmaking team. We were so touched by how wonderfully we were treated."

Since the premiere is scheduled during the training seminar at the medical examiner's office at which the models are used, Marks said that a large number of cops from Baltimore and elsewhere are expected to attend the showing.

"A lot of people in Baltimore have been waiting a long time to see this film," Marks said.

Additional showings of *Of Dolls and Murder* may be scheduled if the 7 p.m. show sells out, she said.

A note of disclosure: The June 5 premiere is being coordinated in collaboration with [Welcome To Baltimore, Hon!](#), a web site maintained by Arbutus Patch editor Bruce Goldfarb.

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