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May 1, 2012

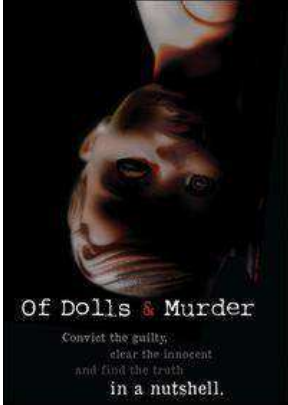
**Movie Review: Of Dolls and Murder (2011)**

Posted by Greg Goodsell

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Movie review by Greg Goodsell

Directed By Susan Marks



Frances Glessner Lee (1878 – 1962), was a dear little old lady born of the Victorian era. A millionaire heiress, her parents sent her brother off to Ivy league schools while she was expected to stay home and marry the right man. Marrying at the age of 20, Lee mothered three children but ultimately divorced her husband. It was during this time she began to indulge her passion for crime and punishment – and murder.

Introduced to George MaGrath, he introduced Lee to the reality that police detectives weren't properly trained to process crime scenes for medical evidence. In the Gay Nineties, forensic crime investigations were still in their infancy. recalling her childhood passion for dolls, dollhouse and miniaturizations, Lee began in earnest a series of ghastly tableaux that were to be later called the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death. Incredibly elaborate and detailed dollhouse scenes, using store-bought dollies – who were then customized to show expressions of alarm and death – these nutshells were used as a training tool that allowed budding detectives to arrive at crime scenes to arrive at their own conclusions about the dolls' demises.

This is ostensibly the documentary film *Of Dolls and Murder*, a project that should be more interesting than it is. The film is heavily flawed. How so, you may ask? I


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was only able to glean the above information from the film's press kit. *Of Dolls and Murder* is woefully unfocused, with the majority of the salient information about Lee being relegated to the DVD's extras!

*Of Dolls and Murder* is all over the place, in the manner of some of the film's murder victims. The film starts out with Lee's nutshells, narrated in all their grisly glory by fellow true crime aficionado and filmmaker John Waters, and then skips to many interviews with modern CSI professionals who bemoan the social ostracism that comes with their chosen profession. This footage is superfluous, as all the forensic technicians are there by choice, and must acknowledge the fact that this is the field they chose to study and work in. Would these people's friends and relatives been more at ease had they taken jobs as short order chefs?

One third of the film's scant running time is spent on a subject that would have been worthy of a documentary all by itself – "The Body Farm." Here, real dead bodies, donated by well wishers, are left to rot and decay in open fields, in the trunks of cars, in pipelines, underneath structures in order to examine the effects of decay on bodies in relation to actual murder scenes! The Body Farm's lead technician beams with pride on all the factual evidence gleaned from what is essentially a science fair project gone grotesquely amok. It will certainly make many people think twice about filling in donor cards on the back of their driver's licenses after watching this section ...

With *Of Dolls and Murder*, we have the name value of cult/camp icon John Waters, the public fascination with murder and violent death and several intriguing theories proffered by modern law enforcement. The result is hit-and-miss. The film examines the nutshell cases, as Waters juicily sets the scene. Detective look at the macabre little dollhouses, but don't offer their opinions. Again, this writer was totally unaware that these nutshell cases DIDN'T have any solid answers – Glessner and her merry band of carpenters deliberately left these scenes without solutions – ONLY after I read the film's press kit!

Director Mary Casey definitely needs to re-edit the film in order to make more sense and cut away the many boring, inconsequential interviews. On a positive note, it does inspire the viewer to learn more about Glessner's Dollhouses of Death and Destruction, and some answers are provided in the DVD extras section – but this film, an obvious labor of love, still needs major work.

Labels: [Frances Glessner Lee](#), [Greg Goodsell](#), [john waters](#), [MVD Visual](#), [Of Dolls and Murder](#), [true crime](#)

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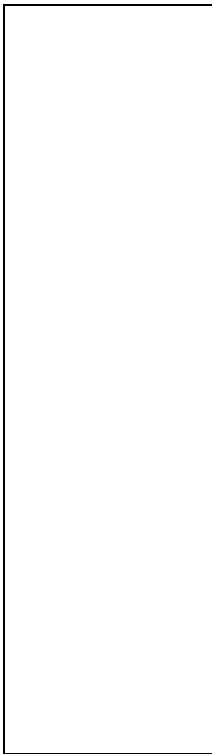
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