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MSPIFF: Susan Marks's documentary *Of Dolls And Murder*

Gruesome crime scenes in dollhouses train homicide detectives

By **Ed Huyck** Wednesday, Apr 11 2012

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Scott Anderson

When most of us think of dollhouses, we conjure images of sweet little girls hosting miniature tea parties: cute, but hardly a subject worth making a movie about. But the dollhouses in Twin Cities filmmaker **Susan Marks's** latest project, the documentary *Of Dolls and Murders* (being shown next week at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Film Festival), are a whole other story. The tiny, meticulously crafted rooms shown in her film depict gruesome crime scenes, full of blood-soaked walls and carpets, overturned furniture, and dolls with little knives plunged into their torsos.



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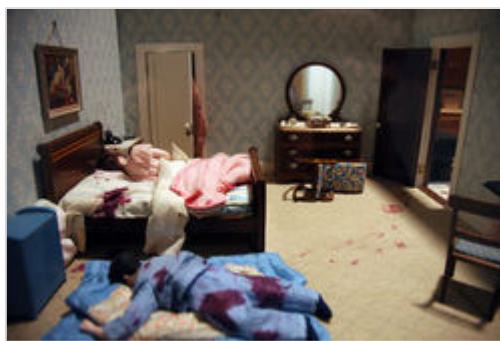
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Of Dolls and Murder explores the "Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death," a series of miniature dioramas, like the rooms of a large dollhouse, that were crafted in the 1930s and '40s. Each one depicts a scene of violent death in extraordinary detail, and they are still used today to train homicide detectives how to look for clues and piece together the events of a crime scene. In a strange historical footnote, they were first created by **Frances Glessner Lee**, a grandmother and the millionaire heir to the International Harvester fortune, who built them using a one-inch-to-one-foot scale, complete with period furniture and Victorian wallpaper.

Marks first learned of the "nutshells," as they came to be known, about a decade ago, while in graduate school and working on a book and film about **Betty Crocker**. "I read about unusual collections and thought that would make an interesting movie," Marks says. "It's shocking, and it made me want to see more."

As Marks explored the subject, however, *Of Dolls and Murder* ended up becoming a wider meditation on violent death in America — and the people who work to be the final advocates for the deceased. Marks's film travels much further afield, including a ride-along to a crime scene with Baltimore detectives and a visit to the "Body Farm," a Tennessee facility where donated corpses are exposed to the elements to determine their rate of decomposition.

Getting the movie made was a story in itself. Armed with a crackling idea, Marks set out to raise money for the film. She found plenty of interest at first — until the economy tanked. The



courtesy of Lazy Susan Productions



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film's savior ended up being a **Jerome Foundation** grant. That \$30,000 kept the movie going for a year, she says.

With her idea and some funding (other investors also eventually joined in), Marks set out to Baltimore to begin her investigations. "Access is a big part of it. You can't just walk into the office of the chief medical examiner of **Maryland** and see them. I had to make a case for it, and show them I wasn't just crazy," Marks says.

What Marks found was far more amazing than she originally thought. "I was blown away," she admits. "They are unbelievably small, and all of the details are there. Every time you look at them, you see something new. It's also pretty mind-blowing how beautiful they are. They are so gorgeous and well done. You know it took a long time to make each one, and most people will never see them."

The nutshells "are connected to forensics today, and our fascination with death and death as entertainment. We are still very uncomfortable with the topic," Marks says. "And the nutshells help us to get closer to some of the real issues."

Glessner Lee "really wanted to challenge people about their prevailing attitudes. You have to check all of that at the door. You have to treat them as death scenes," Marks says.

The film features interviews with medical examiners, detectives, and a producer of the TV show *CSI*. That program used the nutshells as inspiration for a season-long arc centered on a serial killer who left detailed miniatures at each crime scene.

As she widened the film's scope to include police, coroners, and others, Marks found a group of people dedicated to being the final voice of the victims. "They care a lot. They miss a lot of family events that most people take for granted," she says.

As she continued to explore the issues, Marks found herself not just talking to detectives but riding along with one to a death investigation. She also stretched the film into other parts of forensic investigation, including the trip to the Body Farm. "I was surprised so much when I ended up at the Body Farm, but there was a connection. The woman who created the nutshells in the 1930s and '40s was on the cutting edge of forensic medicine, and the Body Farm is doing the exact same thing. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't know as much about the rate of decomposition, and people would be getting away with murder."



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To narrate each of the nutshells depicted in the film, Marks was able to enlist filmmaker **John Waters**, who is not only tightly connected to Baltimore but is a true-crime aficionado. The filmmaker's distinct voice and tone certainly add to the macabre scenes depicted throughout the film.

"He was just a natural fit, and he has been fantastic to work with," she says of Waters.

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Susan Marks 1 day ago

I'm thrilled that Of Dolls & Murder is featured in the City Pages and I hope you can make it to the MSPIFF screening on Wednesday, April 18th at 7pm. It's important to note that I definitely didn't make this film on my own. I have a great filmmaking team that includes my co-producer/editor/composer, John Kurtis Dehn, our cinematographer, Matt Ehling, and our post sound mixer, Carly Zuckweiler. We will all be present for the Q&A following the screening. Also, the Twin Cities post-house HDMG was instrumental in helping us finish Of Dolls & Murder. Both John Gleim and Adam Tow helped us cross the finish line for which we are extremely grateful.

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Wonderful article on Of Dolls & Murder for upcoming screening at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Film... <http://t.co/f92rnPqX>



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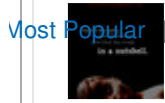
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