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The Movie:

Notice anything a little off about the screen shot above? It's a lovingly crafted doll house scene filled with antique miniatures. The shot conveys a scene of cozy domesticity the way most doll houses do, but the red splotches on the bedroom carpet point to something more sinister. The chair in the bedroom is overturned, with more red on the floor, and the doll in the bed appears too haphazardly arranged to be merely sleeping.

Why would someone make a miniature murder scene? The documentary *Of Dolls and Murder* explores this, and how these unassuming little pieces of carefully arranged dolls and tiny props have had an influence which carries over to the current state of forensic science.

The diorama mentioned above is part of several such mini crime scenes (also known as

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nutshells) created by Frances Glessner Lee (1878-1962) as a teaching tool for police detectives in the '30s and '40s. As *Of Dolls and Murder* tells it, Ms. Lee was an extraordinary woman - an heiress to the International Harvester company, she had a yearning to learn and make a mark when well-to-do women like her were encouraged to marry and raise children. A friendship with a classmate of her brother's sparked an interest in death investigation in her at a young age, but she didn't officially enter the field until she was in her fifties. She eventually became a fixture at the Maryland Medical Examiner's Office, where those insanely detailed crime dioramas (numbering 20 in all) became an essential component of the department's annual conferences. Aspiring detectives would be given a certain amount of time to try and guess the circumstances of the real-life crime scenes depicted in the nutshells, a practice that is still in use to this day.

Although Frances Glessner Lee is considered a legend in the field of forensic science, she's basically unknown in the outside world, even as TV shows like the *CSI* franchise have elevated forensic investigation into something of a glamour profession. *Of Dolls and Murder* doesn't focus so much on the nutshells or the enigmatic woman who created them - it uses them as an excuse to look at the current state of forensic science. In between segments in which filmmaker John Waters narrates evocative close-up scenes from the nutshells, the film examines various aspects of current forensic science in action. We accompany detective students at Baltimore's Forensic Medicine Center as they examine one of the nutshells, housed in a tiny room (they've since been moved to more spacious quarters), visit with the city morgue and tag along with police officers and medical examiners to investigate a found corpse. It's a life far from the glamorously lit, easy-peasy puzzle solving it's portrayed as on TV, but the profession is a perfect fit for a certain breed of person who digs science and problem solving.

In some ways, *Of Dolls and Murder* shares many similarities with the true-crime docs typically seen on the Tru-TV channel; this particular one is more thoughtfully made and willing to see all the angles of its subject. In this case, the project was more tightly directed (by filmmaker Susan Marks) and edited than most crime docs. Also, the lush photography of the nutshells (which uses a combination of video footage and still photos) and other scenes give it more depth than would normally be expected. In a scene visiting the famous "Body Farm" in Knoxville, Tennessee, where donated corpses are laid out in various states of exposure and scientifically studied, a spokeswoman tells of the strange beauty of decomposing bodies while a leathery corpse is seen getting devoured by hundreds of squirming maggots - it is a weirdly beautiful shot. Image vs. reality gets a good workout in this film, never so apparent as when *CSI* producer Naren Shankar discusses the ways in which his show uses both scientific facts and artistic license.

Of Dolls and Murder is, overall, a compelling watch - certainly those who have never heard of Frances Glessner Lee or her amazingly crafted nutshells will get an eyeful here. The film is as nicely crafted as the dioramas themselves. If there's one flaw, it might be with the choice of John Waters as the narrator. His tone comes across as too campy and mocking, but that's a personal opinion. The eerie, foreboding voice of the long-time voice actor employed by TV's *Forensic Files*, Peter Thomas, would have been a far better fit - but that's just me.



The DVD:

Video:

MVD Visual's DVD edition of *Of Dolls and Murder* presents the film in anamorphic widescreen in a good transfer that serves the excellent photography well. Unlike many of

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the crime scenes portrayed, the film is clean looking and easy on the eyes.

Audio:

The single stereo soundtrack available on the film is above-average and cleanly mixed. No subtitle option is present.

Extras:

Given *Of Dolls and Murder's* brevity (this "Extended Version" runs 70 minutes), the disc edition comes with a good amount of bonus material. Featurettes *The Patron Saint of Forensics Medicine* (5:33) and *The Missing Nutshells* (1:04) convey vital info on Frances Gessner Lee and her creations that perhaps should have been included in the final cut. *John Waters on the Nutshells* (2:42) and *John Waters on Frances Glessner Lee* (2:36) serve as mini-commentaries from the funny and eloquent true crime buff, who is chatty and informative on a subject he knows well. There's also, surprisingly, an *audio commentary* with director Susan Marks, producer-editor John Dean, cinematographer Matt Ewing, and audio designer/mixer Carly Zuckweil. The group has a great camaraderie with each other, leading to a fun and lively track.

Final Thoughts:

Of Dolls and Murder delves into Frances Gessner Lee and her intricate miniature crime scenes as a framework for looking at the world of forensic science in general, its often deceptive image and the kind of people who enjoy scrutinizing dead bodies for a living. Beautifully photographed and intriguing (for the most part), this little documentary comes **recommended**.



Matt Hinrichs is a designer, artist and sometime writer who lives in sunny (and usually too hot) Phoenix, Arizona. Among his loves are oranges, going barefoot and blonde 1930s movie comedienne [Joyce Compton](#). Since 2000, he has been scribbling away at Pop Culture weblog [Scrubbles.net](#). One can also follow him on Twitter [@scrubbles](#).

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