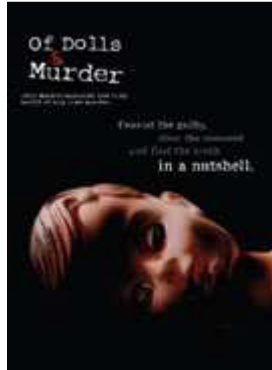



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Case Number 23676: Small Claims Court



Of Dolls and Murder

[MVD Visual](#) // 2012 // 70 Minutes // Not Rated
Reviewed by Judge Daryl Loomis // April 15th, 2012

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Note: This is a pre-release review. **Of Dolls and Murder** will be available for purchase on April 24th

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The Charge

The dead talk; we just don't like what they say.

The Case

Humans are a species obsessed with death. That's come out in many different ways, over and over again, for millennia and cultures. Today, this is as pronounced as ever, with shows like [CSI](#) and [Law and Order](#) topping over decades (heck, even a maritime forensics show gets multiple spinoffs, and that's just crazy), and true crime taking up major shelf space in stores. With all this interest, it seems only natural that somebody would create a documentary looking at the realities of forensics, and director Susan Marks has stepped up to the plate with **Dolls and Murder**.

Marks weaves together two related threads in her film. The first, less interesting part focuses on real life forensics and its relation to people's expectations based on their favorite television shows. She follows around some Boston detectives, who have been immortalized twice on the small screen in *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *The*

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under an hour, the heightened interest is a net positive for forensics.

Recommended

That may not be the most compelling topic in the world for me, but the second thread makes the movie worth watching. It discusses Frances Glessner Lee, a name few have heard of, but who made major contributions to forensic science. She was a heiress who was barred from going to college at the end of the 19th Century, so Lee took to building dollhouses. These weren't ordinary playthings, though; they were obsessively detailed renditions of murder scenes. She called them "nutshells" and, filled with subtle clues that point to who and what caused the crime, they became teaching tools for detectives across the country that are still used to this day for the same purpose. They are amazing pieces of work, but what takes the cake is that, describing the scenes as we view them, with all the flourish he can muster, the narrator, John Waters, is none other than John Waters.

I could listen to John Waters all day and his work is what really makes the movie, because the two parts are together as tightly as I would like. The discussion of real life forensics left me wishing for another nutshell or a reading from Waters. It's a solid, but uneven documentary that is still worth watching for fans of detective stories, especially to see the work of Francis Glessner Lee which, for me, was a first.

Of Dolls and Murder arrives in a nice edition from MVD. The anamorphic image is solid, but not perfect. The picture is strong and the detail, especially in the nutshell displays, is quite fine. Some of the other footage, including the dramatizations, look a little murky, though, but it's never that bad. The sound could certainly be bolder in the channels, which have very little going on, but the mix does its job and the mix sounds clear enough. Extras include an audio commentary with the director and members of the production team and a few short featurettes that give background into the life of Frances Glessner Lee.

Overall, this is a worthy disc for a movie that I can easily recommend. I wish there was a little more detail and a little less discussion of the expectations created by current forensics-based television dramas, but given that it's a genre that generates so much interest and it enlightens viewers on the relatively obscure nutshells, people will likely enjoy it.

The Verdict

Not guilty.

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