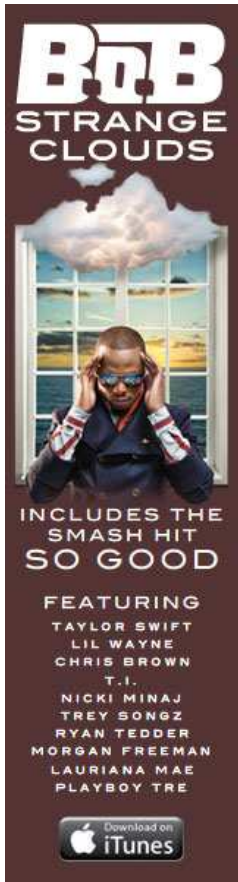


# Of Dolls And Murder Directed by Susan Marks

REVIEWS | DVD | MAY 08 2012



By Mark Carpenter

*Of Dolls And Murder* is a documentary about the work of Baltimore forensics pioneer Frances Glessner Lee. The best parts of the film show her work in detail: her miniature replicas of real-life crime scenes, called Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death, which are still used now to train police officers in homicide detection. These sequences have a pearly eeriness, reinforced by John Waters' typically creepy but avuncular narration, in which he describes the case histories as we observe the tiny furniture, the fake blood spatter and the doll corpses arranged just so. Much is made in the talking head commentary of Lee's status as a woman in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men; we get her bio, then a fairly lengthy section dealing with the public's perception of forensic science as conditioned by *CSI* and other crime shows (with *CSI* producer Naren Shankar appearing as an expert witness). Investigators agree that real-life detectives have a much more limited arsenal at their disposal than what is depicted in labs on TV and so on and so forth. All this takes us further and further away from what would seem to be the crux of the film: Lee's Nutshells. (At times in mid-film, the surfeit of clips from *CSI* could make you believe that you're watching an overextended promo from the show's DVD.) It's frustrating to watch the film's extras, consisting of background material left on the cutting-room floor, which would definitely have enriched our understanding of Lee and her work. You'd be hard-pressed to find a documentary that drifts so far afield of its supposed subject; it's as if the makers felt they needed some television glamour to make the film more commercial. Why? The rather bland filmmakers' commentary doesn't tell you, but a pair of audio-only interviews with Waters suggests the campily entertaining film he could direct on the same subject. (MVD)

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