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# FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

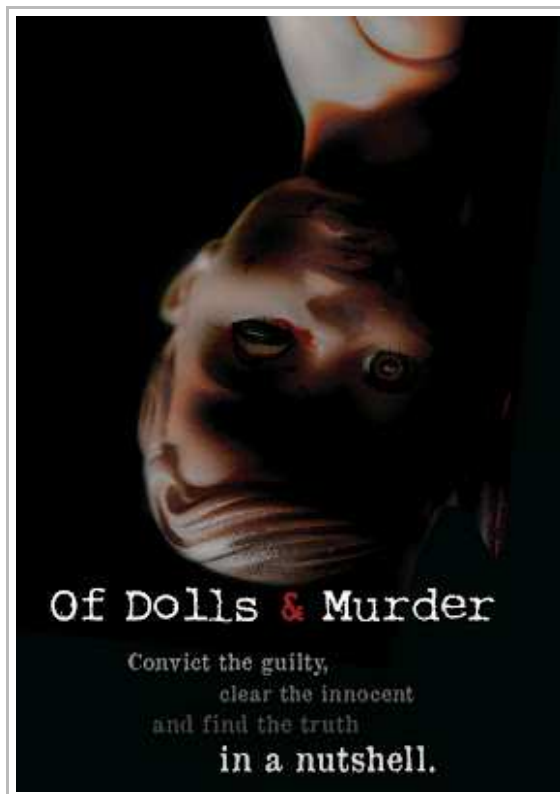
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

FRIDAY, MARCH 30, 2012

## DVD Review: *Of Dolls & Murder*

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Images from the Internet



### Of Dolls & Murder: Extended Version

Written and directed by Susan Marks

I See Dead Dolls Films / Da Silva Pictures / Seminal Films, 2012

70 minutes, USD \$14.95

[Seminalfilms.com](http://Seminalfilms.com)

[OfDollsAndMurder.com](http://OfDollsAndMurder.com)

[MVDvisual.com](http://MVDvisual.com)

At the turn of the century, a woman's "place" was considered to be in the home, especially for an heiress from Chicago. This was the culture into which Frances Glessner Lee was born, locked out of a professional life in those pre-suffrage days.

But Lee was not one to shirk away. After an unhappy marriage, into her 50s, the socialite turned her interest in



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### About Me

Robert Barry Francos

Currently living in Saskatoon (email at RBF55@msn.com for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at jerseybeat (dot) com (slash) quietcorner (dot) html. And the beat goes on.

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forensics (and a talent for textile art) into not only a career, but she revolutionized the science. Before her influence, police work relied more sleuthing, rather than an exact, scientific study. By the time she was done, she also founded Harvard's Legal Medicine department.



Frances Glessner Lee

In 1939, she started the yearly Seminar of Homicide Investigations for State Police, which is still being held, years after her death in 1962, while in her mid-80s. For many of these seminars, she personally created what are known as the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Deaths, a series of 1-foot = 1-inch dioramas of actual death scenes using dolls, which were employed in the colloquium as teaching tools. In fact, 18 of the 20 known Nutshells (one was crushed in transit, one is missing) are still used as teaching tools in Harvard to this day.

This is merely the starting point of this fascinating documentary, about not only Lee and her dioramas, but what cultural outcome has resulted from her work.

Now, the whole dolls-death-diorama thing may sound familiar. If it does, odds are you watched the season of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* where there was a serial killer who did similar dollhouse scenes. This was a nod to Lee, and is discussed in detail in this film. In fact, the whole relationship of the television show to culture is a topic as much as Lee. There are clips from the program, and one of the interviewees is connected to the TV series. There are also plenty of shots of the Nutshells (called that after the expression, "...in a nutshell"), including some fine details.



Along with dissecting the Nutshells as the camera lovingly flows around the scenes, forensic science is compared with the television show, such as the fact that even though all the machinery is real, there is no actual existing single police-related space that is that sophisticated; a producer sadly states that the *CSI* set has *the*

best forensic lab in the world. Also, they tell of the *real* amount of time it takes the police to get pertinent information, such as DNA or fingerprint identification.

A quite shocking focus of the film is what's known colloquially as the Body Farm. Apparently, people donate their bodies to this scientific space, and their corporeal remains are tested for rates of rot by being left exposed to the air, or put into peculiar situations (such as being in a sealed garbage bin or plastic bag), for example. We get to see particular body parts covered with bugs and maggots, skulls, and the like, which is occasionally gruesome; but honestly, there is nothing here that is more gross than the fake *CSI* show.

One aspect I found particularly interesting was the two-sided question

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about evidence. On one hand, thanks to the plethora of sophisticated television cop shows (not to mention how many times they are rerun), jurors are more likely to pay attention during the trial to scientific information, and understand it better. On the other hand, it is becoming harder to get a conviction without DNA evidence. For example, just this week (end of March 2012), a man was found innocent of murdering his wife in a wide-publicized trial because all of the evidence against him - of which the police felt was sufficient and substantial - was circumstantial. One has to wonder if there may have been a different outcome pre-*CSI*.

As a strange choice, the narrator of this very serious documentary is legendary auteur-of-the-outcast-and-bizarre filmmaker John Waters (part of this documentary takes place in his beloved Baltimore, which is the locus of all *his* films). Waters is an admitted crime buff, so his interest in the topic is understandable. It was a brave choice to use him, but he does an outstanding job, without camping it up (and, I am proud to admit that I am a Waters' fan). Each section of this release goes into detail about a particular Nutshell, with Waters describing the real-life circumstances that led to the death depicted in the dollhouse.

There are five extras included: the first is "John Waters on the Nutshells," in which he describes what they mean to him, and how he sees them as a hidden (i.e., not public) art project (2:40). The second is "John Waters on Frances Glessner Lee," where director Susan Marks interviews Waters, who jokingly refers to Lee as possibly having been "...a cop hag," and how he is "intrigued by true crime treatise." (2:30).

The third short is "The Patron Saint of Forensic Medicine," which goes deeper into detail about Lee and her relationship to her Nutshells. For example, she hand-knit all the clothes, and it is explained that she was more interested in them being an aid to investigative thinking in processing evidence than actually solving the crimes they depict (5:30). The last of the films is "The Missing Nutshells," which describes the two missing ones indicated above, and includes still pictures of them (1:00).

The last extra is a full-length film commentary, which is quite interesting, though occasionally frustrating. People who make films, listen up: If there are more than two people talking (there are four here), since we can't see you, it is hard to tell who is saying what. No, we don't necessarily want multiple commentary tracks; just make it as easy for us as possible, okay? Note I am saying this with a smile, and not a finger-point.

This is a film that is fascinating viewing, on a weird topic as its thread. Director Susan Marks keeps the pace steady and the topics interesting. As documentaries go, it never loses the audience's attention while covering many topics, and yet is never obtuse, without talking down to its audience. It's as much a cultural study about forensic science as it pertains to our perceptions as it is about Lee and her Nutshell Studies. Good viewing all the way around.