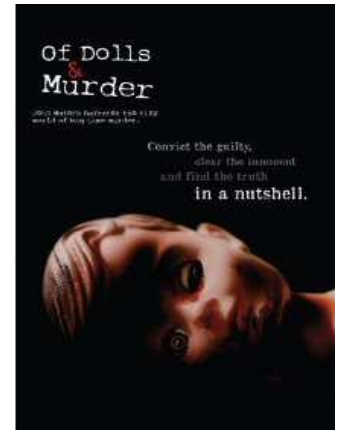


OF DOLLS AND MURDER

"Convict the guilty, clear the innocent, and find the truth in a nutshell" an early onscreen piece of text informs us. This was the aim of the early forensic techniques as pioneered by crime fighting granny Frances Glessner Lee, and as explored in this sombre documentary.

Nutshells, we quickly learn thanks to John Waters' narrative, were re-enactments of murder scenes first employed in the 1930s by the FBI. They utilised dollhouse replicas of scenes, with miniature figurines representing the victims. From these, we're told, early forensics engineers were able to ascertain many previously unclear details of the crimes in question.



Beginning with 'talking head' contributions from the likes of Maryland's Chief medical examiner Jerry Dziecichowicz, who we see holding classes to budding forensic scientists in which his collection of nutshells is put to good educational use, and 'The CSI Effect' author Dr Katherine Ramsland.

A trip to Glessner House Museum in Illinois is perhaps not as spooky as the chiming bells on the soundtrack would suggest it's meant to be. But it does at least introduce curator Corina Carusi, who speaks with a little more authority about the woman who pioneered a deceptively simple technique that is still used on occasion to this day.

Interspersed throughout this short documentary – little over an hour long – are brief details and atmospheric camera journeys through some of the murder cases that inspired the authorities to employ nutshells. "Three Room Dwelling" is the first to be brought to the screen, and perhaps the most resonant as a result. The craftsmanship and detail of the dolls in their mock bedroom is, admittedly, quite eerie.

Contributions from more medical experts, producers of TV's 'CSI' shows and the like crop up during the remainder of this nicely lit, atmospherically scored feature.

I had high hopes for this one. A documentary on the old methods of using doll houses to ascertain forensic details in the wake of murders? Narrated by the Sultan of trash himself, John Waters? Yes, it sounded good to me.

What we get is sadly, aside from the odd re-enactment and the aforementioned merits (score; lighting), very workmanlike. Director Susan Marks has an interesting subject to cover and, to her credit, does it in a very austere, earnest manner. She should be commended for that, at least. But there's little here to prevent the overall film becoming boring long before the end credits roll.

The film is presented uncut in its original aspect ratio, and is enhanced for 16x9 television sets. Images are decent but never excellent, their flatness and general TV-like appearance serving as constant reminders that this is a documentary.

Likewise, the English 2.0 audio track provided is a perfectly serviceable but unremarkable one.

The disc opens to a static main menu page. From there, a static scene-selection menu allows access to the film via 15 chapters. Which, for a 70-minute feature, isn't bad at all.

Curiously, the disc does come with quite a few extra features, despite the back cover neglecting to make mention of them.

First up is "John Waters on The Nutshells", which repeats footage from the film for just under 3 minutes but features the great man's voiceover in more candid fashion, as he ditches his scripted narration in favour of explaining why he's so attracted to these dolls. "These are the types of dolls I'd have played with as a child" he quips, providing one of the few smile-eliciting moments of the disc.

Next are 2 more minutes of doll footage from the film, this time with audio of Marks interviewing Waters about his views on Lee. Again, it's Waters who makes this a mildly diverting listen.

"The Patron Saint of Forensic Medicine" offers 5 minutes of on-screen soundbites from various CSI experts and medical examiners further praising the pioneering ways of Lee. It's basically an extended outtake from the main feature.

"The Case of the Missing Nutshell" is a 1-minute expose on one nutshell that is missing, presumed destroyed, and therefore has not been preserved with the existing 18. This short segment ends with a text appeal for information leading to the recovery of said nutshell.

Finally, and most significantly, we get an audio commentary track from Marks, co-producer John Dehn, cinematographer Matt Ehling and executive producer Susan Greenberg. This improved my opinion of the main feature, explaining the motivations behind making it and the dedication that went into its execution. It's a predictably serious affair, but is nicely detailed and fluent.

OF DOLLS AND MURDER does tackle fascinating subject matter. It looks good, is well shot and edited, and there's something eminently listenable about Waters' tone. But it does sag, even with such a brief running time, and feels as though it would perhaps be best placed not on DVD but on the History Channel.

Seminal Films furnish the disc with an accomplished DVD release. I'm just surprised they didn't see fit to list any disc specifications or extras on their cover art.

Review by Stuart Willis

Released by Seminal Films

Region 1 - NTSC

Not Rated

Extras :

see main review

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