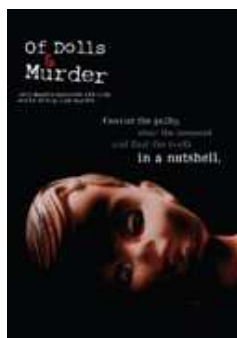


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Of Dolls and Murder

2012

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The art of forensic science has grown in popularity in recent years. In part this had been thanks to what movies and television have portrayed in a fictionalized account with series such as *CSI* gaining huge numbers in terms of ratings. Although *CSI* may actually have science behind it's fantasy there are those who are looking for something a little more realistic and down to Earth which is where a network like True TV can come into the picture, at least when they aren't too busy showing poorly crafted shows that are outside the general premise of crime. What many aren't aware of however is that while forensics itself may be considered a modern science, just like anything there were those that came before it was generally accepted to help pave the way for how things are done today.

Of Dolls and Murder is a documentary which examines the idea of forensic science and in particular the subject of focus is Frances Glessner Lee. Most have probably never heard of her which isn't a surprise but it was Frances who in fact help to push the idea of forensic science into a very different realm. A gifted and skilled artisan in the ways of both doll and miniature making, Frances began to construct what have become known as the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death. She would meticulously recreate the scene of the crime down to virtually every detail which would later be used by investigators. It wasn't always necessarily just to solve this particular murder but often to help them with their powers of observation and many later would thank her for her contributions.

The Nutshell Studies have survived Lee's passing and are still used today by those who have entered the field of law enforcement, in particular on the investigative end of homicide. The documentary features many who are now preparing to possibly take forensic science into a new direction but no matter what they might accomplish, they are still given the chance to see the Nutshell Studies and examine them for themselves in order to put together the clues found at the crime scenes. The film takes time of course to also show the Studies themselves, displaying the meticulous detail that went into each and every one of them. You could think of them as being something of a macabre dollhouse, a place that normally should be

filled with a happy atmosphere but has now been shattered by the reality of the world having come crashing through.

John Waters, director of cult classics such as *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, provides narration during the documentary although it's not nearly as frequent as you'd might assume. Generally he is heard reading the details on the Nutshell Studies which adds to both the unique and often strange appearance of each of

them. What viewers will find is that *Of Dolls and Murders* tends to focus a bit more on those who are working in investigative work with an occasional appearance by one of the producers of CSI who might shatter the illusion that some have. Television it seems still is an active force when it comes to separating fact and fiction in many people's lives meaning that for some, they are under the impression that detective work can be done just as quickly as it can in a 45-minute drama. The reality is that this isn't the case at all as many of the other interviewees will attest to.

One aspect that I found slightly disappointing is that while the film really gives viewers a great look into the displays, there are never really any solutions given as to how and why the murders happened. We're almost expected to do our own investigative work but with no possible solution to the crime. I also don't recall if there was mention about the true outcome; were they solved or were some of them perhaps left as cold case files when nothing substantial could be found?

Of Dolls and Murder includes a commentary track featuring Susan Marks, the director of the film, as well as John Dean, Matt Ehling and Carly Zuckweile. There are also a number of features about Lee as well as the Nutshells, all of which are quite interesting and add tremendously to the information already included in the documentary.

Some might find the documentary a little on the morbid side but I found this to be a quite interesting look at how inventiveness could help to push forward what we see today being used in law enforcement. *Of Dolls and Murder* truly is a inimitable, one of a kind exploration into a world that most of us know little about aside from what we think we know and understand on television. While some of this might very well be close to reality, it's still much farther from the truth than we may ever know.

-mike

Directed by:
Susan Marks

Narrated by:
John Waters

DVD Features:
Aspect Ratio: 1.78:1
Audio: English Dolby Digital 2.0
Commentary with Susan Marks, John Dean,
Matt Ehling and Carly Zuckweile
John Waters on The Nutshells
John Waters on Frances Glessner Lee
The Patron Saint of Forensic Science
The Missing Nutshells

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