

It doesn't pay

reviewed by [Phil Christman](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

Though it lacks the seriousness and the warmth of some of his best films, *Small Time Crooks* is the first Woody Allen film in roughly ten years to evince anything like a soul. It's fun and funny, with a few perceptive moments and a hilarious performance by Elaine May.

The story, based on a Grimm's fairy tale, is about a dorky, déclassé criminal couple who stumble on a fortune, only to be undone by the wife's ambition. Ray Winkler (Allen) and his wife, Frenchy (Tracy Ullman), operate a cookie store as a front while Ray's gang attempts to tunnel from the store's basement to a bank vault two doors down. Everything falls through but the front: Frenchy, it turns out, bakes a mean cookie, and the store becomes a Starbucks-like overnight success. Ray and Frenchy get rich, but Frenchy, feeling inferior about her background, hires a rich jerk (Hugh Grant) to teach her how to be a cultured intellectual. Everything backfires. The moral of the story: be content with what ya got.

It may sound overly didactic or ironic-didactic; but we frequently forget the folksy charm of a good morality play, which *Small Time Crooks* is. Allen leavens the genre's inherent predictability (we know as soon as she buys her first painting that Frenchy's lust for class will come back on her) with jokes and diverting plot twists. Especially entertaining are Frenchy's malapropisms and her disastrous taste in interior decor—old gags made new by Ullman's comedic skill. Elaine May plays Frenchy's batty sister and Tony Darrow, Michael Rapaport and John Lovitz offer able support as Ray's cohorts. Allen gives himself one great scene, a moment of self-recognition, which seems like a sitcom equivalent of the moments of self-recognition in Sophoclean tragedy.

That each character is two-dimensional at best, obviously hurtling her or his way to a predetermined conclusion, is OK because the movie's tone is kept just light enough that we don't feel like we're being preached to. Unfortunately, Allen has miscast himself; he can't portray the Ralph Kramdenesque, blustering dumbness that Ray is supposed to exhibit (or so we gather from the reactions of other characters). Ray's henchmen are stock Italian mobsters, and their presence

occasionally makes the movie seem like an ethnic joke.

The greatest disappointment is that Allen, even in good films like this one, is not asking very searching questions about life, relationships or character. In taking up the format of the morality play, he has found another way to distance himself from moral seriousness.