

Small Time Crooks

William Shakespeare, at best count, wrote some 38 plays, more or less; with his latest effort, *Small Time Crooks*, Woody Allen has directed 30 movies, with presumably at least one annual production to come for some time. This may be a flippant comparison but it probably is not a stretch to call Allen our Bard of Manhattan's Upper West Side. With his new farce, long-time Woodiphiles will recognize a simpler, tossed-off humor he has not displayed for some years.

Woody is small time doofus Ray Winkler whose misbegotten plans to rob a bank with three idiot friends go haywire but inadvertently launch his sardonic wife Frenchy (Tracey Ullman) into the money with her wildly successful recipe for cookies. Now in the dough (heh-heh), Frenchy wants to improve herself and move up in class through tutoring from the smooth but ultimately smarmy David (Hugh Grant), while Ray just aches to get to Florida and lounge. Since the Winklers have no class or wit, they are duly defrauded and reduced to their old status; small timers who, at least, still have each other.

Small Time Crooks is not replete with great one-liners (there's a decent one about the members of a Polish carpool: they meet at work). It's mostly character comedy and it's mostly fun. Ray and Frenchy ring changes on the kinds of verbal duels Fred and Ethel Mertz and Ralph and Alice Kramden used to engage in, but, if anything, more gently. The collection of idiots, played by Michael Rapaport, Jon Lovitz, and Tony Darrow, are all satisfyingly dumb, and Hugh Grant, for once, puts his halting, vulnerable style at the service of a real swine.

What is best about *Small Time Crooks* though (unless, for some, it's feeling that Woody is returning to old form) is the performance of Elaine May playing May, Frenchy's dithering cousin with a 40-watt filament in a 100-watt bulb who gets sucked into the gang's plans. She's a wonderfully literal ditz, who can never be other than utterly honest and cannot understand why anyone would laugh at her but, with her trusting poker face, you just can't help it. It's heartening to see this great comic talent back on the big screen.

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