

Episode 5 - SMALL TIME CROOKS (2000)

MUSIC: With Plenty Of Money And You, by Hal Kemp and His Orchestra.

Introduction

SMALL TIME CROOKS is the 30th film written and directed by Woody Allen, first released in 2000.

Woody Allen stars as Ray, a small time crook with a big time plan to rob a bank, digging through from the shop next door. His wife Frenchy, played by TRACEY ULLMAN, sells cookies in the store as a cover. But then the cookies start to sell...

SMALL TIME CROOKS was a pure and silly comedy after a run of bitter and dark films. It's not the deepest, and not one of his best. But it's an easy film to love, held down by some loveable losers.

Welcome to the Woody Allen Pages podcast, from me, the creator of the Woody Allen Pages website. This week, episode five, we look at 2000's SMALL TIME CROOKS. We'll look at how the film came to be, what I loved and didn't love and plenty of fun facts and trivia. Of course, spoilers are everywhere, so watch the film first.

Conception and story

By the late 90s, Allen was making some of his most challenging and bitter work. Some of it was great but 1997's DECONSTRUCTING HARRY was angry and rude, 1998's CELEBRITY was bleak and without hope and 1999's SWEET AND LOWDOWN was a downbeat portrait of a self destructive man. So it was with some relief to actually have a bit of fun when SMALL TIME CROOKS came along.

Allen sat on the idea for a long time, at least as far back as 1993, when he presented the idea as one of many to DOUGLAS MCGRATH as one to work on together. McGrath and Allen ultimately wrote and made BULLETS OVER BROADWAY instead, but Allen held onto the idea. Funnily enough, McGrath has a small speaking role in this film.

Actually, he not only held onto the idea, he cleaned house. Around this time, for whatever reason, Allen took a bunch of comedy ideas he had and decided to knock them out one by one. This was kind of new for Allen who usually waits until a film is done before deciding on what to do next. It's also Allen's habit to react against what he's done. He followed the small town period story of THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO with a modern metropolitan tale in HANNAH AND HER SISTERS. He followed Hannah..., which was set in existing apartments and existing spaces, with RADIO DAYS, a hugely ambitious period comedy with many built sets. And then he followed RADIO DAYS, a film with over 100 speaking parts with SEPTEMBER, a film of mainly six characters and one house. And so on and so on and so on.

Maybe Allen was just in a good mood. He was happily married and his films were doing fine. And he just wanted to make people laugh again. Or maybe he was relenting and giving people what he thought they wanted. Whatever the reason, this film begins a run of five sort of romantic comedies in a row, four of which he would star in.

You have to go back to 1980's STARDUST MEMORIES to find another run of Allen starring in four films in a row. It would also be the least acclaimed and least successful run of Allen's entire career. But we'll get that when we get to those films.

Back to SMALL TIME CROOKS. It also happens to be the best film of this early 2000s run. It's not because the concept or premise is that great - it's no better or worse than the next few films that follow. It really comes down to the incredible cast, some lovely characters, a handful of jokes and an overall sense of fun.

RAY: What do you want to play now?

MAY: What about Indian poker? Seven cards. You hold your cards over your head. Nobody sees their hand. We bet on each other's hand. High-low, maybe some wild cards. All the reds.

RAY: Wanna sit down, May?

The spark of the film came from an article Allen read about a failed heist where some criminals tried to tunnel into a bank. For Allen, his mind went straight to where the criminals were tunnelling from, and what if that shop had become a success?

Allen has always had it in for fame and fortune. It's not something he respects, coming from a working class background. He despises it so much that he has said in interviews over the years that if he wasn't a director, he'd be a petty thief.

It wasn't just a line. It seems that those were the sort of characters that he would meet in his working class Brooklyn neighbourhood growing up. Small time bookies, things that fall off the back of a truck and just low level criminal stuff. What Allen calls 'the rackets' in this film. And growing up, as much as he was enamoured by the people he saw on screen who lived in wonderful Manhattan apartments, he also was enamoured by these crooks. Allen of course had played around with this already in TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN, his first film way back in 1969.

SMALL TIME CROOKS allows Allen to look at both sides of the coin. The petty crooks and the high society types. And having that range of characters allowed Allen to play with a couple of his key influences - THE HONEYMOONERS and ERNST LUBITSCH.

THE HONEYMOONERS was a sitcom from the black and white days of 1955, **running for just one season** but it has never lost its impact. It starred JACKIE GLEASON, AUDREY MEADOWS and ART CARNEY, three working class folks who basically just bickered at each other. The jokes are still great. It's insult after insult, with no niceties, thick and fast. There's joy in being able to be so rude, especially when the jokes are funny too.

Allen always loved THE HONEYMOONERS and wanted to try his hand at that quick fire dialogue. Watching this in the day and watching it now - the dialogue has dated. For me what is delightful is that speed of the dialogue. There's always jokes coming at you and some land better than others. But the fun is watching Allen and the cast work at this manic pace.

RAY: Hey, Frenchy, I'm home!

FRENCHY: Who's that?

RAY: "Who's that?" It's the pope! I always wanted to see your apartment.

FRENCHY: Shh.

RAY: Who comes home every night? Me.

FRENCHY: I'm watching Princess Diana.

RAY: Not again! How many times you gonna do that?

FRENCHY: Look at those clothes.

RAY: I told you time and again, she got all that stuff discount. You think those kings and queens buy retail? It's a known... Here, I got you some chocolates.

FRENCHY: Chocolates?

RAY: You heard of chocolates? I got you chocolates.

FRENCHY: How come?

RAY: What do you mean, "How come?" These are from Belgium. They're handmade by "Belgiumites."

FRENCHY: Tell it to the marines! You're up to something. You get caught hitting on a waitress?

RAY: In years of marriage, have I ever hit on anybody but you?

FRENCHY: I don't buy it, Ray. You got a scheme. You got a scheme!

RAY: Forget it! Get me dinner. They're not for you. I got you nothing. Just get me dinner.

FRENCHY: Fine.

RAY: I want my dinner right now, and hurry up. Before you make dinner, I gotta talk to you about something.

FRENCHY: What did I tell you? Here comes the commercial.

Another inspiration was the work of ERNST LUBITSCH. I love ERNST LUBITSCH. Allen has talked many times about the brilliant director, praising films like 1942's TO BE OR NOT TO BE. He was renowned for what was called the Lubitsch touch. Lubitsch loved to throw a joke away - so to speak. Instead of showing you a comic mishap that was about to happen, he'd leave the door closed and let the audiences figure it out.

Unlike THE HONEYMOONERS, Lubitsch dealt more with kings and queens, or at least the opulent and debonair. Allen specifically mentioned 1932's TROUBLE IN PARADISE in interviews about SMALL TIME CROOKS. That film is about a high society couple who happen to be a thief and pickpocket. But like the HONEYMOONERS, the dialogue was sharp and every just said the right things all the time. And for me, the dialogue is still pretty funny to this day.

Then of course there are the classic heist films. Quite a few people pointed out that 1942's LARCENY, INC had a similar plot to SMALL TIME CROOKS - another light comedy about a bunch of bank robbers. There's been plenty of these sorts of comic heist films, although it does seem like another throwback to films of the 40s and 50s.

So it's interesting that Allen set the story in the modern day at all, when all his influences were over 50 years earlier. It's not hard to imagine this entire film transported to the 40s or the 50s. Allen apparently played around with turning this story into a stage play as well. Allen doesn't make huge use of the modern New York setting he finally settled on. It's not one of those films that sells New York to the world.

Allen took all those elements and produced a script about Ray and Frenchy and a cookie shop. The heist that inspired the idea initially would only make up the first part of the film. Allen would then move on to deeper matters, and a parable about the perils of getting rich.

FRENCHY: You've got a strange look in your eye like the guy from the book. Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde or Ted Bundy. I can never remember.

DAVID: Think of the time I've put in nurturing an idea that's not gonna happen.

FRENCHY: Is that what it was? The money?

DAVID: I, I need - I need my prescription. I need my little blue pills. So I'm gonna go and get them, and I would very, very much appreciate it if when I came back, you were gone. Thank you.

FRENCHY: David, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like the cigarette case back.

DAVID: I don't think so, my love.

FRENCHY: Wow. I asked you for lessons in life. I guess I really got one, right?

The film is really split into two parts, which I will call the heist and the parable.

The heist was the hook of the film. What was sold in the posters and the trailer. This was a chance for to be out and out funny again. He could go full Honeymooners between Ray and Frenchy, and surround his leads with some great comic talents.

In a heist film like this, the audience kind of expects things to roll out in a certain way. We expect antics and complications to escalate. And then we expect the heist to go right or wrong towards the end of the film, and then a lesson learnt. Instead, here, we finish our heist about 27 minutes in, and spend another hour learning a lesson.

It's really very strange how disconnected the two parts feel. The first part sets up the plan and sets up the problems. A shop next to a bank is empty and the plan is to tunnel through. The main problem is our gang are idiots. It's adorable as the gang comes together, but they also pick up problems along the way. The success of the cookie shop adds to the a tension - things will come to a head. And then May turns up, adding more complications.

But it's 27 minutes in to the film and it's all over. The heist goes wrong, and the film becomes something else.

It's a really jarring transition as the film pretty much starts again. Everything we saw so far was premise, and now we have to work out what this film even is. The tone of the film changes and we lose characters and we gain new characters.

This sudden key change still feels weird to me on rewatch. Allen does leave a couple of clues. Frenchy loves celebrities like Princess Di, and she does have some horrible decor in her rundown apartment. Allen doesn't shine a light in Frenchy's taste in the earlier part of the film. Either Allen is confident enough that you'll make the connection, or he doesn't care enough if you make the connection. Or maybe something got cut. Or maybe it's just not a very good setup.

I can give Allen the benefit of the doubt that maybe he was trying to up end our expectations. But sadly, that expectation was to spend another hour in this wonderful gang and a great silly premise.

The first part, the heist, is some of Allen's best work for me. Allen's long take and natural shooting style means you really get to watch funny people being funny. More than a few people compared it to Allen's pre-ANNIE HALL stuff, when he's just trying to make you laugh.

DENNY: What if we each get a fourth and she gets like a third?

BENNY: Are you nuts? Then she'd be getting more than us.

DENNY: How do you figure?

BENNY: Where you gonna get four fourths and a third? Can't you add?

DENNY: I don't do fractions.

TOMMY: Let's not get greedy. Remember that movie with Humphrey Bogart when they're diggin' for gold in the mountains? They find the gold and they all get rich.

Then this guy goes nuts and he turns on his friends. Let's not let that happen here.

RAY: That's right. And Then he gets killed by Hispanics.

DENNY: What is it? The Treasure of.

RAY: Treasure Island.

DENNY: Treasure Island! That's right. That was a good movie, right?

RAY: Oh, the best.

After the big twist, we get to what I call the parable part. It's no longer the quick fire Honeymooners slapstick comedy. It's now a different type of humor - it's almost satire. The laughs per minute rate really grinds down.

It's now one joke really. And that joke is Frenchy wants to join the elite and Ray wants to get a cheeseburger. Allen has given fame and fortune this kick many, many times before this, notably in CELEBRITY just two years earlier or 1980's STARDUST MEMORIES. It's always interesting when Allen goes down this road, as audiences don't love it - he comes across ungrateful or bitter.

Here, he kicks the good life, sure, but it's not a very strong kick. One character aside, there's nothing really wrong about the rich people that come into the orbit of Frenchy and Ray. Allen often laments when he makes a film that isn't about anything. And this one certainly feels like a film that has no real bigger insight into the human experience.

PARTY GUEST 1: I can't believe this room. This takes bad taste to new heights.

PARTY GUEST 2: This is excruciating.

PARTY GUEST 1: Can you believe the two of them? I can't keep a straight face.

PARTY GUEST 3: And what she's done with this apartment? The sheer flawless vulgarity of it all!

PARTY GUEST 2: She must've been frightened by a leopard.

PARTY GUEST 1: Don't knock it. They plan on being very generous, and for that we must be thankful.

PARTY GUEST 3: Really? And what about the harp? Not to mention the way she wears her clothes.

PARTY GUEST 1: This is The definition of bad taste.

The biggest crime, so to speak, of the second part is the loss of that amazing supporting cast. They are reduced to a couple of small scenes and by now they are all kind of interchangeable. They don't have anything to do. Allen crafts a small heist at the end of the film, but was it too much for it to be slightly more elaborate so the rest of the cast could join in?

There's still plenty to like about the parable part. Probably the best part of it is the sets. I imagine production designer SANTO LOQUASTO had a lot of fun creating Frenchy's lavish lifestyle. There's lots of leopard prints and huge statues and way too much is gold. To paraphrase DOLLY PARTON, it's quite expensive to look this cheap.

The humour is different, but still pretty good. There's laughs to mine in the clash of cultures. There's not enough of them.

Throughout, the journey is pretty predictable. We know that Ray and Frenchy, who are at odds, are bound to break up in some way. We know Frenchy won't get her dream of joining the elite and we know David will not be a good person. There's very little surprises in the parable. Although it's nice to watch it play out.

Probably the biggest part that is in doubt, and what we stay til the end for, is whether Ray and Frenchy get back together. Ok, they likely will get back together, so maybe it's more accurate to say how they get back together.

Allen and Frenchy go through their trials but it's lovely when they get back together. All that Honeymooners stuff actually make it sweeter. They insult each other so much that we don't even know if they like each other. Turns out, they love each other. In the catalogue of Woody Allen films, Ray and Frenchy are actually one of the better, more functional couples. They love each other, are true to each other and stay together.

RAY: So where's David now?

FRENCHY: He split the second I went bust.

RAY: No! I don't believe it.

FRENCHY: He was hustling me for the dough. Sure.

RAY: Oh, jeez. So now we gotta all begin again, you know. And in more ways than one.

FRENCHY: You still want me?

RAY: Still want you? I'm - Frenchy, you gotta ask a question like that? I'm crazy

about you.

FRENCHY: I'm crazy about you too.

RAY: You're a goddess to me. I'm nuts for you. Of course I want you

The sweet final scene culminates in a very good ending. Allen knows how to craft a good ending with a good pay off. The one here is not one of the most amazing he's ever pulled off, but it's finely crafted nonetheless.

It starts with Ray and Frenchy who are back together, but broke. Ray has stolen something - a necklace - which they can fence it for cash. So the idea of what they can fence is in our minds, even when Frenchy reveals that the necklace is made of glass.

We then get a touching last scene and the camera zooms in to Frenchy's. We haven't had any tight close ups in the film this whole time, but we do here. We pan from Frenchy then to Ray, and Frenchy mentions she has something. Because we are in close up, Allen builds the tension because we can't see their hands and we can't see what Frenchy has.

Of course, it's the expensive cigarette case we've seen earlier. We thought we've seen the last of it. It was set up and already paid off in a character point with David. So this ends up being a great double pay off, a pay off that we don't see coming.

FRENCHY: All that matters is that we have each other. We didn't there for a while and it made me realize how much I need you.

RAY: Yeah, but you're married to such a loser, Frenchy.

FRENCHY: No.

RAY: It's glass!

FRENCHY: I'm the luckiest woman in the world.

RAY: And the brokest. I'm topped out. We got nothing. As usual, I come up empty.

FRENCHY: We could pawn this. RAY: What is this? What is this thing? Who? Who-Who? I don't understand. Who's the Duke of Windsor?

FRENCHY: Actually, we could probably auction it.

RAY: Where'd you get this? It looks...

FRENCHY: From David.

RAY: David gave you this?

FRENCHY: Well, he doesn't know it yet.

RAY: I don't get it. What do you mean?

FRENCHY: Hey, it was you who taught me how to open a safe.

RAY: I...That was one of my fondest memories of our time together.

It's is the moment in the film that is most like the Lubitsch touch. Allen doesn't over explain. He under explains. He doesn't show how Frenchy got the case, nor do we need Ray to understand what is happening. Allen leaves it for the audience to fill the gaps, just like ERNST LUBITSCH would.

Production and cast

The script and story had problems but it was still pretty fun. Luckily, Allen had the cast to elevate it. And leading the cast of incredible talents is Tracey Ullman. Although the role features one of the most interesting what if's in the history of Woody Allen casting. Allen offered the role to BARBRA STREISAND, who was interested but had concert commitments.

But I can't imagine anyone but Ullman in the role. Ullman was a star in Britain who has moved to America in the early 90s. She wrote a fan letter to Allen, out of nowhere, but never heard back until she was cast in a small role in BULLETS OVER BROADWAY. Allen knew she was a comic chameleon, and could do broad and silly. She could also hold a whole film. So it is kind of insane that this is pretty much TRACEY ULLMAN's only lead film role.

Frenchy isn't one of Allen's most nuanced creations. She doesn't have a huge journey. The key is we have to like her. Even when she is spitting out insults and holding our adorable gang back from doing their heist we have to like her. Even when she's being garish and she is lying to herself and she breaks up with Ray, we still have to like her.

Ullman manages to not just be likeable, but we root for her. We cheer when she is shown to be this incredible talent. We hate it when we're seeing her try to be something she's not when she's rich. And we want her to be loved when she is lonely. We want her to win in the end. Ullman doesn't steal the show - this is her show.

But that's just the start of it - think about what she has to do to make it work. First she has to be funny. And she is - TRACEY ULLMAN is funny. Then she has to be this larger than life loud brash character. Which is also what Ullman kind of does, often dressing up in her various sketch comedy shows. But then she also plays the straight man to Woody Allen. She has to do the harder job of setting up his jokes. And then she does the sad scenes. And the angry scenes. And basically all of the scenes. With those long Woody Allen takes with no cuts.

RAY: They're not bums. Maybe they didn't go to Harvard.

FRENCHY: Harvard? They never completed kindergarten because they were drafted.

Ullman was nominated for a Golden Globe for her role, but she is clearly one of the best female leads Woody Allen has ever had. It's just that bias against comedy. CATE BLANCHETT and DIANNE WUEST are incredible. But I think Ullman has the tougher role. And she makes it look easy.

Then there's May, played by ELAINE MAY. It's an easier role than Ullman's, but is no less memorable. She's the breakout character, and apart from Frenchy and Ray, the only significant character that spans both sections of the film.

Allen wrote the role with ELAINE MAY in mind, hence the name May. They had crossed paths many times, and shared management for a bit. She is also a great writer and director and spent many years on that side, not appearing on screen. This was only her second film role since 1978.

Her role is one that Allen has written before - the comic foil who is kind of so dumb you wonder how they even live. Which is funny because MICHAEL RAPAPORT usually plays that kind of role, and he's also in the film.

Her timing is great and her jokes are great. Allen is obviously having fun just being funny. Something he hadn't done in a while.

MAY: I met a wonderful man downstairs. He seemed to like me. He said I reminded him of his wife who's dead. But I assume he meant when she was alive.

RAY: May, can you stop talking to me while I'm doing this?

GEORGE GRIZZARD is billed as a star in the film. But he gets like a line and a half. You don't even see his whole face. He is set up to be May's love interest right at the end. Perhaps something was cut from the final film, which is a shame. I would have loved to see as much of May as possible.

May is the best of the side characters who are pretty much just there to make you laugh, and what's wrong with that. Each has killer lines. TONY DARROW and MICHAEL RAPAPORT had worked with Allen before and knew what to do.

STEVE KROFT: Was it you who came up with the idea to advertise baked goods in Playboy, Penthouse and Hustler Magazine?

DENNY: I figured if a guy's staring at a naked piece of tail, and he sees the breasts and legs, he's gonna start to salivate. It's human nature. So if he's salivating, he turns the page and comes across a picture of, say, our pistachio cream cookies. He thinks maybe that's why he's drooling. You understand? It's psychology. It's science. It's like Pablo's Theory, you know, with the dog when he feeds him?

And it's not just the one liners - there's plenty of silly slapstick comedy, like all the water stuff in the basement. It's worth noting that the basement was actually a studio.

JOHN LOVITZ rules - perfectly cast as a bumbling idiot who is slightly less an idiot than the others. He was a big Allen fan and super nervous to work with him for the first time. But it doesn't show at all. You can just tell in scenes him and Allen are just sparking off each other.

RAY: Benny, you gotta come in with us.

BENNY: Who's "us"?

RAY: "Who's us"? What are you so suspicious for? You don't trust me? It's me, Ray.

Remember my nickname in the joint?

BENNY: The Brain?

RAY: The Brain. That's what the guys used to call me.

BENNY: But, Ray, that was sarcastic.

RAY: That wasn't sarcastic, that was real.

BENNY: No, it was sarcastic.

RAY: There was nothing sarcastic about it!

BENNY: No, really, it was.

RAY: It was real. I was The Brain.

BENNY: No, it was sarcastic.

RAY: It wasn't sarcastic.

BENNY: Oh, my God! Oh, my God! It was sarcastic!

Then there's HUGH GRANT who is great as David. Allen was a fan of Grant in his 90s breakout roles in films like *FOUR WEDDINGS AND FUNERAL* and *NOTTING HILL*. Allen actually looked at Grant to play the lead in *CELEBRITY* in 1998. It's another example of Allen (and casting director JULIET TAYLOR) being able to get massive stars in their prime. He's the only person not being outrageous, but he has the comic timing and the stumbling dialogue delivery that is so natural in Allen's films, and delivers Allen's dialogue effortlessly.

Grant also plays against type. He usually plays hapless nice guys - very similar to the Woody Allen on screen persona. It's interesting to think what he would have done with the lead role in films like *MIDNIGHT IN PARIS* or *BROADWAY DANNY ROSE*. That said, over the years he turned out to be a much more interesting than his 90s lead roles suggested. And it's actually not weird to see him play such a bastard as David these days, after films like *PADDINGTON 2*.

DAVID: Interesting fact. This is where Henry James lived.

RAY: Who?

FRENCHY: The bandleader, stupid.

RAY: Married to Betty Grable? I knew that.

DAVID: No, you're thinking of Harry James the trumpeter.

RAY: Henry James married to Grable.

DAVID: Henry James, the author. Yeah? Well, this is where he lived and where he worked, and...

RAY: Where did he eat? I'm hungry. I don't care where he lived, I want to know where he ate.

FRENCHY: I remember. The Hair-ess, right?

DAVID: The "H" is silent.

FRENCHY: Oh, did he write that too?

And let's not forget about Allen, as Ray. Allen has never claimed to be an actor with a wide range, but he's crafted Ray into someone who is probably very close to Woody Allen. He's never played someone so laid back. All he wants is the easy life - cheeseburgers and sports. Ray spits out his disdain for the rich and I'm sure its very close to real words that Allen has said in his real life.

FRENCHY: Our accountants want us to expand. We're gonna be twice as big next year.

RAY: What good is being twice as big if I can't get a cheeseburger? What's it all mean?

Cinematographer here is ZHAO FEI, the non English speaking Chinese director of photography who worked on SWEET AND LOWDOWN, and would return for THE CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION. Of the three films Zhao made with Allen, this is probably the strangest on a cinematography level. It's such a street level film with a lot of interiors. Zhao is so wonderful playing with light and mood. It's not that it doesn't work fine, it just doesn't seem to give this film much identity.

It's especially jarring when you consider there is randomly one of the most beautiful shots in the Woody Allen filmography in this film. It's near the start, Ray and Frenchy are on the roof looking at the sunset as they talk. It is so gorgeous. I want to see a film that exclusively features characters talking on rooftops at sunset. It is such a spectacular joy of colour that it outshines the rest of the film. Otherwise, it's hardly a cinematic showcase. You can see why Allen thought this could work as a play.

The long takes also makes it feel like it could have been a play. There's so much dialogue and one liners flying around at pace. It's that Honeymooners thing, but the Honeymooners was a single locked off camera like many 50s sitcoms. Here the cast have to know the words, track the blocking and the camera has to follow. And they do it for long unbroken takes. It's not easy.

But there's some lazy filmmaking going on here. Allen doesn't make New York look like anything. There's a long TV news segment that explains away what happened to our characters in a year in such a lazy way with very little

jokes and very little character work. There's even one bit, when the cookie shop gets busy, that the extras are actually holding and waving money. No one does that in real life.

It doesn't feel like Allen put that much into the music. It lacks any real character - just a hodgepodge of various jazz recordings from all different eras and artists. At one point Allen actually uses TEQUILA by THE CHAMPS. I mean, its a great track that is all fun. But in a Woody Allen film? The man who loves jazz so much? Seems like an odd choice.

The opening credits song is WITH PLENTY OF MONEY AND YOU, performed by HAL KEMP AND HIS ORCHESTRA in a 1936 recording. Pretty obvious why Allen chose the song. The music feels pretty obvious all round. No commercial soundtrack was released.

Release and reception

SMALL TIME CROOKS was released on 19th May 2000 by DREAMWORKS, with a red carpet screening held a few days earlier. SMALL TIME CROOKS was the first film as part of a new deal. It's actually not incredibly clear what happened, but here's what I know.

This was Woody Allen's last film for SWEETLAND FILMS. The studio was set up for Allen by his best friend, JEAN DOUMANIAN, in 1994 and was an outlet for Allen. I don't think it was ever supposed to be a studio that just made Woody Allen films, but that's what it ended up being.

I say the end because this is the end. SWEETLAND FILMS was a production studio that had to work with other distributors to get their films out. In 2000, the company signed a new deal with DREAMWORKS, leaving SONY PICTURES CLASSICS. But sometime around then, Allen's lawyers suggested that Allen look into the finances of his deal, because it looked like he was owed millions. Allen allowed his lawyers to look into it, and it destroyed his friendship with Doumanian.

The end result was SMALL TIME CROOKS was finished, but so was Sweetland. Then there was some sort of settlement, but ultimately DREAMWORKS released the film as if it was one of their own. DreamWorks also signed Allen for three more films.

DREAMWORKS was still pretty new at this point, and it was the brainchild of three very rich, very powerful entertainment moguls. They were director STEPHEN SPIELBERG, music maverick DAVID GEFFEN and ex Walt Disney Chairman JEFFREY KATZENBERG, who would one day invent the failed QUIBI. All three were Woody Allen fans, but Katzenberg was the biggest Allen fan - he

was the driving force in Woody Allen appearing in the early DreamWorks success that was the film ANTZ. Katzenberg always wanted Woody Allen and finally got him.

In part of playing nice with a new studio, Allen conceded to doing some interviews. He even toured a number of universities, making appearances. In fact, Allen would become much more open to such things over the next decade. He was very private in the late 80s and 90s, in times of deep personal turmoil it's since turned out. In 2000, he was happy, married and happy to work.

DREAMWORKS also sent out promotional SMALL TIME CROOKS cookie jars, that was branded and shaped like a safe. It is the most elaborate promotional Woody Allen product that I know of.

SMALL TIME CROOKS was one of Allen's most successful in a long time and its pretty simple to see why. DREAMWORKS marketed the film, and the film was an easy pleasing comedy. It wasn't too hard to explain the premise to the audience. It just worked as a way of getting bums into seats.

The film really feels out of time. In 2000, the big stars of American independent cinemas were making big budget masterpieces like TRAFFIC or ALMOST FAMOUS. Allen was riffing on the forties and fifties in a very light comedy. With his same old budget and same old production values. For a while American cinema caught up to his style but by 2000, it was leaving him behind.

For me, this film is enjoyable, but not anywhere near Allen's best work. The best part is the characters and we just want to hang out with them. Again, that Honeymooners thing. Sitcoms work because you want come back to these characters every week.

The two films in one still seems strange to me. Allen sets us up for this buddy heist film and it doesn't deliver. In the end the cookie shop stuff is an extended sketch, and the parable was a one act play stretched out. Maybe Allen decide neither idea was strong enough to stand on their own and just welded them together.

There's always been a part of Allen's audience that just want to laugh and wish that Allen would leave those big ideas at the door. Well be careful what you wish for.

Still, there's a joy to watching these funny people be funny. I could watch MICHAEL RAPAPORT all day. I could watch JON LOVITZ all day. And then there's the wonder Ullman and May. Allen doesn't get enough credit for casting two women over 40 in these lead roles. And to ask them to be funny.

The best bits are the jokes, the funny set pieces and some of the outrageous sets. It's still mostly fun, and I don't mind revisiting it every so often. In amongst all the heavy films Allen would make after this, it's nice to get something so silly, but still kind of good. This is comfort food Woody Allen. It's cheeseburgers and sports. And if you can't get that, what's the point?

Fun facts

Some fun facts about SMALL TIME CROOKS.

This was the first film Allen directed for DREAMWORKS and we talked about Katzenberg. DAVID GEFEN was a friend of Allen's in the 70s and 80s, and Spielberg has had various times when he was going to collaborate with Woody Allen too. He was most notably signed up for contributing a short film to the anthology film NEW YORK STORIES but couldn't make it in the end.

That Faberge cigarette case was a real one. It was rented to the film from JOHN TRAINA, a San Francisco business magnate and Faberge collector. It's not the first time Traina has lent something to an Allen production. Traina's son Trevor appeared over 30 years earlier, as a 5 month old baby, in TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN in 1969. The cigarette case, and not the baby, was actually insured to the tune of \$1m. It was sold at auction in 2013 for \$87k. Which is a shame because Traina said that he wished that it got stolen, so he could have gotten the million bucks.

Next week - we look at a film that is one of Woody Allen's best, and full of jokes and about jokes themselves.

FRENCHY: I saw a beautiful painting of fruit at the, uh, Met or the Whitney. It might have been the Holocaust.